



TRAPPING ZERO

AN AGENT ZERO SPY THRILLER—BOOK 4

JACK MARS

An Agent Zero Spy Thriller

Jack Mars
Trapping Zero

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“You will not sleep until you are finished with AGENT ZERO. A superb job creating a set of characters who are fully developed and very much enjoyable. The description of the action scenes transport us into a reality that is almost like sitting in a movie theater with surround sound and 3D (it would make an incredible Hollywood movie). I can hardly wait for the sequel.” --Roberto Mattos, Books and Movie Reviews In TRAPPING ZERO (Book #4), a terrorist cell in the Mideast gains a new, fanatic leader, one intent on orchestrating what would be the deadliest attack on American soil. Can Agent Zero uncover the plot and stop him in time? Although Agent Zero’s daughters are home safely, the mental anguish from their experience weighs heavy on their small family. Zero, working to be a good father and to repair the damage, decides the time has come to undergo surgery to regain all of his memories. But will it work? In the midst of it all, he is again thrust into the line of duty as a U.S. embassy is destroyed in the Mideast and as an experimental new weapon is uncovered. But without his memories, with some of his own CIA allies intent on his destruction, who can he really trust? TRAPPING ZERO (Book #4) is an un-putdownable espionage thriller that will keep you turning pages late into the night. “Thriller writing at its best.” --Midwest Book Review (re Any Means Necessary) “One of the best thrillers I have read this year.” --Books and Movie Reviews (re Any Means Necessary) Also available is Jack Mars’ #1 bestselling LUKE STONE THRILLER series (7 books), which begins with Any Means Necessary (Book #1), a free download with over 800 five star reviews!

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Содержание

PROLOGUE	8
CHAPTER ONE	14
CHAPTER TWO	17
CHAPTER THREE	20
CHAPTER FOUR	24
CHAPTER FIVE	29
CHAPTER SIX	32
CHAPTER SEVEN	36
CHAPTER EIGHT	41
CHAPTER NINE	45
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	48

Jack Mars

Trapping Zero (An Agent Zero Spy Thriller—Book #4)

Jack Mars

Jack Mars is the USA Today bestselling author of the LUKE STONE thriller series, which includes seven books. He is also the author of the new FORGING OF LUKE STONE prequel series, comprising three books (and counting); and of the AGENT ZERO spy thriller series, comprising six books (and counting).

Jack loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.Jackmarsauthor.com to join the email list, receive a free book, receive free giveaways, connect on Facebook and Twitter, and stay in touch!

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Agent Zero – Book 3 Summary (recap)

When his daughters are kidnapped by a shadow from his past, Agent Zero must do anything and everything to get them back—even if it means defying direct orders from the CIA and being disavowed by his own government

Agent Zero: Though he successfully killed the assassin Rais and rescued his daughters from the hands of human traffickers, he has been disavowed by the CIA and was last seen being escorted by three agents to an unknown fate.

Maya and Sara Lawson: After their harrowing ordeal in Eastern Europe and the ensuing rescue by their father, Agent Zero's teenage daughters are physically and mentally traumatized. Though they are awestruck at his determination to find them, they now realize that he is something more than what he claims to be.

Kate Lawson: During his final fight with Rais, Agent Zero recalled a memory that his wife did not die of natural causes, but was murdered by a deadly poison. Rais' last words alleged that her killer was CIA.

Agent Alan Reidigger: In a letter he wrote to Zero before his death, Reidigger divulged the name of the Swiss neurologist who installed the memory suppressor in Zero's head—who is also his best possibility of ever restoring his full memory.

Agent Maria Johansson: Maria revealed that she is working two sides—not only the CIA but also the Ukrainian FIS, though she claims to be manipulating both in the hopes of uncovering a conspiracy about an alleged soon-to-be war.

Agent John Watson: After being discovered for helping Agent Zero recover his daughters, Watson has been detained by the CIA—along with Maria Johansson.

Agent Todd Strickland: A young CIA agent and former Army Ranger, Strickland was initially sent after Agent Zero but instead ended up helping him and his daughters, forging a strange friendship in the wake of their incident.

Deputy Director Shawn Cartwright: It is still unclear whose side he is on, if he has a side. Cartwright helped Zero indirectly, but also disavowed him while on the rampage in Eastern Europe. Zero believes he is simply a diplomat, playing along with whatever side will benefit him.

PROLOGUE

Reid Lawson was exhausted, aching, and anxious.

But above all else, he was confused.

Less than twenty-four hours prior, he had succeeded in rescuing his two teenage daughters from the hands of Slovakian traffickers. In the process he had stopped two freight trains, inadvertently destroyed a very expensive prototype helicopter, killed eighteen men and severely injured more than a dozen others.

Was it eighteen? He had lost count.

Now he found himself handcuffed to a steel table in a small, windowless detention room, awaiting the news of what his fate would be.

The CIA had warned him. The deputy directors told him what would happen if he defied their orders and struck out on his own. They were desperate to avoid another rampage like the one that had happened two years earlier. That's what they called it—a "rampage." A violent, bloody tear across Europe and the Middle East. This time it had been Eastern Europe, across Croatia and Slovakia and Poland.

They had warned him, threatened him with what would happen. But Reid saw no other recourse. They were his daughters, his little girls. Now they were safe, and Reid had resigned himself to accept whatever end might be in store for him.

In addition to the activity of the past several days and a severe lack of sleep, he'd been given painkillers after having his injuries treated. He had sustained a shallow stab wound in his abdomen from his fight with Rais, as well as thorough bruising, some superficial cuts and scrapes, a gash across one bicep where a bullet grazed him, and a mild concussion. Nothing serious enough to keep him from being detained.

He wasn't told his destination. He wasn't told anything at all as three CIA agents, none of which he recognized, silently escorted him from the hospital in Poland to an airfield and onto a plane. He was, however, somewhat astonished when he arrived at Dulles International Airport in Virginia instead of the CIA black site Hell-Six in Morocco.

A police cruiser had carried him from the airport to agency headquarters, the George Bush Center for Intelligence in the unincorporated community of Langley, Virginia. From there he was ushered into the steel-walled detention room on a lower level and handcuffed to a table that was bolted to the floor—all without any explanation whatsoever from anyone.

Reid didn't like the way the painkillers made him feel; his mind wasn't fully alert. But he couldn't sleep, not yet. Especially not in the uncomfortable position at the steel table, the handcuff chain threaded through a metal loop and tight around both his wrists.

He'd been sitting in the room for forty-five minutes, wondering just what the hell was going on and why he hadn't yet been tossed into a hole in the ground, when the door finally swung open.

Reid stood immediately, or as much as he could while being handcuffed to the table. "How are my girls?" he asked quickly.

"They're fine," said Deputy Director Shawn Cartwright. "Sit." Cartwright was Reid's boss—or rather, he had been Agent Zero's boss, right up until Reid was disavowed for striking out to find his girls. In his mid-forties, Cartwright was relatively young to be a CIA director, though his thick, dark hair had begun to gray slightly. It was surely coincidence that it started right around the same time that Kent Steele had returned from the dead.

Reid slowly lowered himself back into the seat as Cartwright took the chair across from him and cleared his throat. "Agent Strickland stayed with your daughters until Sara was discharged from the hospital," the director explained. "They're on a plane, the three of them, on their way home as we speak."

Reid breathed a short-lived sigh of relief—very short-lived, since he knew the proverbial hammer was about to fall.

The door opened again, and anger spontaneously swelled in Reid's chest as Deputy Director Ashleigh Riker entered the small room, wearing a gray pencil skirt and matching blazer. Riker was head of Special Operations Group, a faction of Cartwright's Special Activities Division that handled covert international operations.

"What's she doing here?" Reid asked pointedly. His tone was not friendly. Riker, in his book, was not to be trusted.

She took a seat beside Cartwright and smiled warmly. "I, Mr. Steele, have the distinct pleasure of telling you where you'll be going now."

A knot of dread formed in his stomach. Of course Riker would take pleasure in doling his punishment; her disdain for Agent Zero and his tactics was hardly masked. Reid reminded himself that he had gotten his girls to safety, and he knew this was coming.

It still didn't make it any easier. "Okay," he said calmly. "Then tell me. Where will I be going?"

"Home," Riker said simply.

Reid's gaze flitted from Riker to Cartwright and back again, unsure he had heard her correctly. "I'm sorry?"

"Home. You're going home, Kent." She pushed something across the table. A small silver key slid over the polished surface to just within his grasp.

It was a handcuff key. But he didn't take it. "Why?"

"I'm afraid I can't say," Riker shrugged. "The decision came from above our pay grade."

Reid scoffed. He was relieved, to say the least, to hear that he wouldn't be thrown into a miserable pit like H-6, but this didn't feel right to him. They had threatened him, disavowed him, and even sent two other field agents after him... only to set him loose again? *Why?*

The painkillers he'd been given were numbing his thought process; his brain was unable to work out the kinks in what they were telling him. "I don't understand..."

"You've been away for the last five days," Cartwright interrupted. "Conducting interviews, researching a history textbook you're editing. We have names and contact information for several people that can corroborate the story."

"The man that committed the atrocities in Eastern Europe was confronted by Agent Strickland in Grodkow," said Riker. "He was discovered to be a Russian expatriate masquerading as an American in an attempt to cause international strife between us and the Eastern Bloc nations. He drew on a CIA agent and was shot dead."

Reid blinked at the flood of false information. He knew what this was; they were giving him a cover story, the same one that would be issued to governments and law enforcement agencies around the world.

But it couldn't be that easy. Something was certainly amiss—starting with Riker's bizarre smile. "I was disavowed," he said. "I was threatened. I was ignored. I think I'm owed a little bit of an explanation here."

"Agent Zero..." Riker began. Then she chuckled slightly. "Sorry, old habit. You're not an agent; not anymore. Kent, this wasn't our decision to make. As I said, this comes from higher up. But the truth of the matter is, if we look at the sum and not the parts, that you eliminated an international human trafficking ring that has plagued the CIA and Interpol for six years now."

"You took out Rais and, presumably, the last of Amun with him," Cartwright added.

"Yes, you killed people," Riker said. "But every one of them has been confirmed to have been a criminal—some of the worst of the worst. Murderers, rapists, pedophiles. As much as I hate to admit it, I have to agree with the decision that you did more good than harm."

Reid nodded slowly—not because he agreed with the logic, but because he realized his best course of action at the moment was to stop arguing, accept the pardon, and figure it out later.

But he still had questions. “What do you mean I’m not an agent anymore?”

Riker and Cartwright exchanged a glance. “You’re being transferred,” Cartwright told him. “That is, if you accept the job.”

“The National Resources Division,” Riker chimed in, “is the CIA’s domestic wing. It’s still within the agency, but doesn’t require any field work. You’ll never have to leave the country, or your girls. You’ll recruit assets. Handle debriefs. Meet with diplomats.”

“Why?” Reid asked.

“Simply put—we don’t want to lose you,” Cartwright told him. “We’d rather have you onboard in another function than not with us at all.”

“What about Agent Watson?” Reid asked. Watson had helped him find his girls; he had gathered equipment for him and gotten Reid out of the country when he needed to. As a result, Watson had been caught and detained for it.

“Watson is on an eight-week medical leave for his shoulder,” Riker said. “I imagine he’ll be back as soon as he’s adequately healed up.”

Reid raised an eyebrow. “And Maria?” She had helped him as well—even when her orders from the CIA were to apprehend Agent Zero.

“Johansson is stateside,” said Cartwright. “She’s taking a few days’ respite before reassignment. But she’ll be heading back into the field.”

Reid had to keep himself from visibly shaking his head. Something was *definitely* wrong with this—it wasn’t just him being pardoned. It was everyone associated with his latest rampage. But he also had the instinct that told him it wasn’t the time or place to argue about going home.

There would be time for that later, when his brain wasn’t bogged down with sleep deprivation and painkillers.

“So... that’s it then?” he asked. “I’m free to go?”

“Free to go.” Riker smiled again. He didn’t at all like the look of it on her face.

Cartwright looked at his watch. “Your daughters should be arriving at Dulles in about... two hours or so. There’s a car waiting for you if you want it. You can get yourself cleaned up, changed, and be there to greet them.”

The two deputy directors rose from their seats and headed for the door.

“Good to have you back, Zero.” Cartwright winked at him before he left.

Alone in the room, Reid looked down at the silver handcuff key before him. He glanced up at the cameras mounted in the corners of the room.

He was going home—but something was very, very wrong about that.

*

Reid hurried towards the parking garage at Langley, free of the cuffs and detention room—free of being a field agent. Free of fear of repercussion against those he loved. Free of a dirt hole in the ground at H-6.

A startling notion struck him as he navigated through the gates and out onto the street. They *could* have simply thrown him in Hell-Six. They could have at least threatened him with it, held that black cloud of never seeing his family again over his head. But they didn’t.

Because if they did, I would have every reason to talk, Reid reasoned. *There’d be nothing to keep me from spilling everything if I thought I’d be spending the rest of my life in a hole.*

Though it felt like weeks ago, it had only been four days prior that a fragmented memory had returned to him; before the memory suppressor, Kent Steele had gathered intel about a pre-planned war that the US government was designing. He hadn’t told anyone about it, though he did disclose to Maria that he had remembered something that could spell a lot of trouble for a lot of people.

Her advice had been simple and straightforward: *You can’t trust anyone but yourself.*

He didn't see it earlier, in the detention room with his fate in question and the painkillers addling his brain. But he saw it now. The agency knew that he knew something, but they didn't know how much he knew—or how much he might remember. *He* wasn't even sure how much he truly knew.

He shook the thought from his head. Now that the questionable outcome of his future had been resolved, all of the tension drained from his shoulders and he found himself fatigued and aching, beneath which brewed a bubbling excitement at the thought of seeing his girls again.

He had two hours before the girls' plane landed. Two hours was more than enough time to go home, shower, get changed, and meet them. But he decided to forego all that and went straight to the airport instead.

He didn't really want to go back to the empty house alone.

Instead he parked in the short-term lot at Dulles and entered through arrivals. He bought a coffee at a newsstand and sat in a plastic chair, sipping it slowly while a thousand thoughts spun in his head, none snagging long enough to be considered a conscious impression but each passing fleetingly before cycling back around like a whirlwind.

He needed to call Maria, he decided. He needed to hear her voice. She would know what to say, and even if she didn't there was something about talking to her that always seemed to remedy his ailing mind. Reid did not have his cell phone, but thankfully there were payphones in the airport, a growing rarity in the twenty-first century. Then he had no change to drop into the machine, so he dialed zero first and then the cell phone number that he knew by heart.

There was no answer. The line rang four times before going to voicemail. He didn't leave one. He wasn't sure what to say.

At long last the plane arrived and a procession of quick-walking passengers strode down the long corridor, past the gates and security checkpoint and either into the waiting arms of loved ones or hurrying on to baggage claim.

Strickland saw him first. Agent Todd Strickland was young, twenty-seven, with a military-style fade cut and a thick neck. He carried himself with a gentle swagger that was somehow approachable yet authoritarian at the same time. Most importantly, Strickland did not appear at all surprised to see Reid; the CIA undoubtedly would have told him that Kent Steele had been released. He merely nodded once to Reid as he led the two teenage girls down the lengthy walkway.

It seemed that Strickland had not told either of his daughters that he would be there upon their arrival, and for that Reid was grateful. Maya spotted him next, and though her legs kept moving her jaw fell slack in astonishment. Sara blinked twice, and then her lips spread wide in a genuinely elated smile. Despite her arm being in a cast and sling—she had broken her arm after taking a tumble out of a moving train—she ran to him. “Daddy!”

Reid dropped to one knee and caught her in a tight embrace. Maya hurried over right after her younger sister, and the three of them held each other for a long moment.

“How?” Maya whispered hoarsely in his ear. Both of the girls had been given plenty of reason to believe they wouldn't see their father again for what might have been a long time.

“We'll talk later,” Reid promised. He released his grip on them and stood to face Strickland. “Thank you, for getting them home safely.”

Strickland nodded and shook Reid's hand. “Just keeping my word.” In Eastern Europe, Strickland and Reid had reached a strange sort of mutual understanding, and the younger agent had made the promise to keep the two girls safe, whether Reid was around or not. “I suppose I'll get going,” he told them. “You two be good.” He grinned at the girls, and strode away from the small family.

The ride home was short, only half an hour, and Sara made it feel even shorter with her uncharacteristic chatter. She told him how well Agent Strickland had treated them, and how the doctors in Poland let her pick her own color of cast for her arm, but she still chose the ordinary beige so that she could color it herself with markers. Maya sat oddly quiet in the passenger seat, every now and then glancing over her shoulder at her little sister and smiling briefly.

Then they arrived at their home in Alexandria, and it was as if the front door was a vacuum for any cheerful or joyous thoughts. The mood turned on a dime; the last time any of them had stepped foot into the foyer there had been a dead man lying just before the kitchen. Dave Thompson, their neighbor, was a retired CIA agent who had been killed by the assassin who had kidnapped Maya and Sara.

No one spoke as Reid closed the door and punched in the code to activate the alarm system. The girls seemed hesitant to even take a step further into the house.

"It's okay," he told them quietly, and though he hardly believed it himself he led the way towards the kitchen in an effort to prove that there was nothing to be afraid of. The crime scene clean-up crew had done a thorough job, but it was still plainly evident from the strong scent of ammonia and the spotless grout between the tiles that someone had been here, mopping up blood and eliminating any trace that a murder had occurred.

"Is anyone hungry?" Reid asked, trying to sound untroubled but very much coming off as loud and theatrical.

"No," Maya said quietly. Sara shook her head.

"Okay." The pregnant pause that followed was palpable, like an invisible balloon inflating to impossible volume in the span between them. "Well," Reid said finally, hoping to burst it, "I don't know about you two, but I'm exhausted. I think we should all get some rest."

The girls nodded again. Reid kissed the top of Sara's head and she trudged back down the foyer—edging close to one wall, he noticed, though there was nothing blocking her path—and up the stairs.

Maya waited, saying nothing but listening intently for the footfalls on the stairs to reach the carpeted top. She tugged off her shoes using the toes of each opposite foot, and then asked very suddenly, "Is he dead?"

Reid blinked twice. "Is who dead?"

Maya did not look up. "The man who took us. The one who killed Mr. Thompson. Rais."

"Yes," Reid said quietly.

"Did you kill him?" Her gaze was hard, but not angry. She wanted the truth, not another cover or another lie.

"Yes," he admitted after a long moment.

"Good," she said in nearly a whisper.

"Did he tell you his name?" Reid asked.

Maya nodded, and then she looked up at him unflinchingly. "There was another name he wanted me to know. Kent Steele."

Reid closed his eyes and sighed. Somehow Rais continued to plague him, even from beyond the grave. "I'm done with that now."

"You promise?" She raised both eyebrows, hoping he was sincere.

"Yes. I promise."

Maya nodded. Reid knew all too well that it wouldn't be the end of it; she was far too smart and inquisitive to let things lie. But for the moment, his answers seemed to satisfy her and she headed up the stairs.

He hated lying to his daughters. He hated even more lying to himself. He wasn't done with field work—maybe paid field work, but he still had a lot to do if he was going to get to the bottom of the conspiracy he had only begun to unearth. He had no choice; as long as he knew anything, he was still in danger. His girls could still be in danger.

He wished for a moment that he didn't know anything, that he could forget what he knew about the agency, about conspiracies, and just be a college professor and a father to his daughters.

But you can't. So you need to do the opposite.

He didn't need fewer memories; he had tried that before and it hadn't worked out so well. He needed more memories. The more he could recall about what he knew two years ago, the less work he would have to do to uncover the truth. And maybe he wouldn't have to worry for long.

Standing there in the kitchen mere feet from where Thompson was killed, Reid made his decision. He would find the old letter from Alan Reidigger—and the name of the Swiss neurologist that had implanted the memory suppressor in his head.

CHAPTER ONE

Abdallah bin Mohammed was dead.

The old man's body lay upon a slab of granite in the courtyard of the compound, a walled cluster of boxy beige structures located roughly fifty miles to the west of Albaghdadi in the desert of Iraq. It was there that the Brotherhood had survived the expulsion from Hamas, as well as the scrutiny of American forces during the occupation and subsequent democratizing of the country. To anyone outside the Brotherhood, the compound was merely a commune of orthodox Shiites; raids and forced inspections of the property had yielded nothing. Their caches were well hidden.

The old man had seen personally to their survival, spending his own fortune in service of the perpetuation of their ideology. But now, bin Mohammed was dead.

Awad stood stoically beside the slab that held the old man's ashen corpse. Bin Mohammed's four wives had already given *ghusl*, washing his body three times before shrouding him in white. His eyes were closed peacefully, his hands crossed on his chest, right over left. There was not a mark or scratch on him; for the last six years he had lived and died in the compound, not outside its walls. He had not been killed by mortar fire or drone strikes as so many other *mujahideen* had.

"How?" Awad asked in Arabic. "How did he die?"

"He had a seizure in the night," said Tarek. The shorter man stood on the opposite side of the stone slab, facing Awad. Many in the Brotherhood considered Tarek to be the second in command to bin Mohammed, but Awad knew his capacity had been little more than messenger and caretaker as the old man's health declined. "The seizure brought on a heart attack. It was instant; he did not suffer."

Awad laid a hand on the old man's unmoving chest. Bin Mohammed had taught him much, not only of belief but also of the world, its many plights, and what it meant to lead.

And he, Awad, saw before him not just a corpse but an opportunity. Three nights earlier Allah had gifted him with a dream, though now it was difficult to call it just that. It was prognostic. In it he saw bin Mohammed's death, and a voice told him that he would rise up and lead the Brotherhood. The voice, he was certain, had belonged to the Prophet, speaking on behalf of the One True God.

"Hassan is on a munitions raid," Tarek said quietly. "He does not yet know that his father has passed. He returns today; soon he will know the mantle of leading the Brotherhood falls to him—"

"Hassan is weak," Awad said suddenly, more harshly than he intended. "As bin Mohammed's health declined, Hassan did nothing to keep us from weakening commensurately."

"But..." Tarek hesitated; he was well aware of Awad's flaring temper. "The duties of leadership fall to the eldest son—"

"This is not a dynasty," Awad contended.

"Then who..." Tarek trailed off as he realized what Awad was suggesting.

The younger man narrowed his eyes but said nothing. He did not need to; a glare was more than enough of a threat. Awad was young, not yet even thirty, but he was tall and strong, his jaw as rigid and unyielding as his belief. Few would speak against him.

"Bin Mohammed wanted me to lead," Awad told Tarek. "He said so himself." That was not entirely true; the old man had said on several occasions that he saw the potential for greatness in Awad, and that he was a natural leader of men. Awad interpreted the statements as a declaration of the old man's intentions.

"He said nothing of the sort to me," Tarek dared to say, however quietly he uttered it. His gaze was cast downward, not meeting Awad's dark eyes.

"Because he knew you are weak as well," Awad challenged. "Tell me, Tarek, how long has it been since you ventured outside these walls? How long have you lived off the charity and safety of bin Mohammed, unconcerned with bullets and bombs?" Awad leaned forward, over the old man's

body, as he quietly added, “How long do you think you would last with only the clothes on your back when I take power and cast you out?”

Tarek’s lower lip moved, but no sound escaped his throat. Awad smirked; the short, jowled Tarek was afraid.

“Go on,” Awad prodded. “Speak your mind.”

“How long...” Tarek gulped. “How long do you think you will last within these walls without the funding of Hassan bin Abdallah? We will be in the same position. Just different places.”

Awad grinned. “Yes. You are astute, Tarek. But I have a solution.” He leaned over the slab and lowered his voice. “Corroborate my claim.”

Tarek looked up sharply, surprised by Awad’s words.

“Tell them you heard what I heard,” he continued. “Tell them that Abdallah bin Mohammed named me leader in the wake of his passing, and I swear that you will always have a place in the Brotherhood. We will reclaim our strength. We will make our name known. And the will of Allah, peace be upon Him, *will* be done.”

Before Tarek could reply, a sentry shouted across the courtyard. Two men heaved open the heavy iron gates just in time for two trucks to rumble through, the treads of their tires thick with wet sand and mud from recent rain.

Eight men emerged—all that had left had returned—but even from his vantage point Awad could tell that the raid had gone poorly. There were no munitions gained.

Of the eight, one stepped forward, his eyes wide in shock as he stared at the stone slab between Awad and Tarek. Hassan bin Abdallah bin Mohammed was thirty-four years old, but he still had the gaunt aspect of a teenager, his cheeks shallow and his beard patchy.

A soft moan escaped Hassan’s lips as he recognized the figure lying still on the slab. He ran to it, his shoes kicking up sand behind him. Awad and Tarek stepped back, giving him space as Hassan flung himself over the body of his father and sobbed loudly.

Weak. Awad sneered at the scene before him. *Taking over the Brotherhood will be easy.*

That evening in the courtyard, the Brotherhood performed the *Salat-al-Janazah*, the funeral prayers for Abdallah bin Mohammed. Each person present knelt in three rows facing Mecca, with his son Hassan closest to his body and his wives tailing the end of the third row.

Awad knew that immediately following the rites, the body would be interred; Muslim tradition dictated that a body be buried as soon as possible following death. He was the first to rise from prayer, and he summoned his most fervent voice as he spoke. “My brothers,” he began. “It is with great sorrow that we commit Abdallah bin Mohammed to the earth.”

All eyes turned his way, some in confusion at his sudden disruption, but no one rose or spoke against him.

“Six years have passed since the hypocrisy of Hamas saw us exiled from Gaza,” Awad continued. “Six years we have been banished to the desert, living off the charity of bin Mohammed, scavenging and raiding what we can. Six years now we have lived a lie and dwelled in the shadows of Hamas. Of Al-Qaeda. Of ISIS. Of Amun.”

He paused as he met each pair of eyes in turn. “No more. No more will the Brotherhood hide. I have devised a plan and before Abdallah’s death, I detailed my plan to him and received his blessing. We, brothers, will enact this plan and assert our faith. We will perish the heretics, and the entire world will know the Brotherhood. I promise you.”

Many, even most heads nodded in the courtyard. One man stood up, a tough and somewhat cynical brother called Usama. “And what is this plan, Awad?” he asked, his voice challenging. “What great plot do you have in mind?”

Awad smiled. “We are going to orchestrate the most holy *jihad* ever committed on American soil. One that will make Al-Qaeda’s attack on New York fruitless.”

“How?” Usama demanded. “How will we accomplish this?”

“All will be revealed,” Awad said patiently. “But not this night. This is an evening for reverence.”

Awad did have a plan. It was one that had been building in his mind for some time now. He knew it was possible; he had spoken with the Libyan, and had learned of the Israeli journalists, and of the congressional attaché from New York who would soon be in Baghdad. It was serendipitous, the way in which everything had seemed to fallen in place—including the death of Abdallah. Awad had even gone so far as to broker a preliminary agreement with the arms dealer who had access to the necessary equipment for the attack on the US city, but he had lied about sharing it with Abdallah. The old man was a leader, a friend and a benefactor to the Brotherhood—and for that Awad was grateful—but he never would have agreed to it. It required substantial funding, resources that could threaten to bankrupt their resources if it went awry.

And because of that requirement, Awad knew he would have to ingratiate himself to Hassan bin Abdallah. The duty of burial usually fell to the closest male kin, but Awad could hardly imagine Hassan’s thin, lanky arms managing to dig a hole deep enough. Besides, helping Hassan would give them an opportunity to bond—and to discuss Awad’s plans.

“Brother Hassan,” said Awad. “I hope that you will honor me by allowing me to help you bury Abdallah.”

The anemic Hassan gazed back at him and nodded once. Awad could see in the young man’s eyes that he was petrified at the thought of leading the Brotherhood. The two of them broke rank from the three prayer lines to retrieve shovels.

Once they were out of earshot of the others, bathed in the moonlight of the open courtyard, Hassan cleared his throat and asked, “What is this plan of yours, Awad?”

Awad bin Saddam held back a grin. “It begins,” he said, “with the kidnapping of three men, tomorrow, not far from here. It ends with a direct attack on the city of New York.” He paused and put a heavy hand on Hassan’s shoulder. “But I cannot orchestrate this alone. I need your help, Hassan.”

Hassan’s throat flexed, and he nodded.

“I promise you,” said Awad, “that sin-ravaged nation of greedy apostates will suffer incalculable loss. The Brotherhood will at last be recognized as a force of Islam.”

And, he kept to himself, the name Awad bin Saddam will find its place in history.

CHAPTER TWO

“Remember, remember, the fifth of November,” said Professor Lawson as he paced before a classroom of forty-seven students in Healy Hall of Georgetown University. “What does that mean?”

“That you don’t realize it’s only April?” joked a brown-haired kid in the first row.

A few students chuckled. Reid grinned; this was his element, the classroom, and it felt very good to be back. Almost like things were back to normal. “Not quite. That’s actually the first line of a poem that commemorates an important event—or a near-event, if you will—in English history. November fifth, anybody?”

A young brunette woman a few rows back politely raised her hand and offered, “Guy Fawkes Day?”

“Yes, thank you.” Reid glanced quickly at his watch. It had become a habit recently, almost an idiosyncratic tic to check the digital display for updates. “Uh, though it’s not celebrated quite as widely as it once was, November fifth marks the day of a failed assassination plot. You’ve all heard the name Guy Fawkes, I’m sure.”

Heads nodded and murmurs of assent rose from the classroom.

“Good. So in 1605, Fawkes and twelve other co-conspirators devised a plan to blow up the House of Lords, the upper house of Parliament, during an assembly. But the members of the House of Lords were not their real target; their goal was to assassinate King James I, who was Protestant. Fawkes and his pals wanted to restore a Catholic monarch to the throne.”

He glanced at his watch again. He didn’t even mean to; it was reflexive.

“Um...” Reid cleared his throat. “Their plan was quite simple. Over the course of some months, they stowed thirty-six barrels of gunpowder in an undercroft—that’s basically a wine cellar—directly under Parliament. Fawkes was the trigger man; he was to light a long fuse and then run like hell to the Thames.”

“Like a Wile E. Coyote cartoon,” said the comedian in the front.

“Pretty much,” Reid agreed. “Which is also why their assassination attempt is known as the Gunpowder Plot today. But they never did get to light the fuse. Someone tipped off a member of the House of Lords anonymously, and the undercrofts were searched. The gunpowder and Fawkes were discovered...”

He glanced at his watch. It showed nothing but the time.

“And, uh...” Reid chuckled softly at himself. “Sorry, folks, I’m just a little distracted today. Fawkes was discovered, but he refused to give up his co-conspirators—at first. He was sent to the Tower of London, and for three days he was tortured...”

A vision flashed suddenly through his mind; not a vision so much as a memory, intrusively elbowing and shoving its way into his head at the mention of torture.

A CIA black site in Morocco. Code name H-6. Known to most by its alias—Hell-Six.

A captive Iranian is bound to a table on a slight incline. He has a hood over his head. You press a towel over his face.

Reid shuddered as a chill ran down his spine. The memory was one he’d had before. In his other life as CIA Agent Kent Steele, he had performed “interrogation techniques” on captured terrorists for information. That’s what the agency called them—techniques. Things like waterboarding and thumbscrews and tugging off fingernails.

But they weren’t techniques. It was torture, plain and simple. Not unlike Guy Fawkes in the Tower of London.

You don’t do that anymore, he reminded himself. That’s not who you are.

He cleared his throat again. “For three days he was, uh, interrogated. Eventually he gave up the names of six others and all of them were sentenced to death. The plot to blow up Parliament and

King James I from underground was thwarted, and the fifth of November became a day to celebrate the failed assassination attempt...”

A hood over his head. A towel over his face.

Water, pouring. Not stopping. The captive thrashes so hard he breaks his own arm.

“Tell me the truth!”

“Professor Lawson?” It was the brown-haired kid in the front row. He was staring at Reid—they all were. *Did I just say that out loud?* He didn’t think he had, but the memory had forced its way into his brain and possibly all the way to his mouth. All eyes were on him, some students murmuring to each other as he stood there awkwardly and his face reddened.

He glanced at his watch for the fourth time in less than as many minutes.

“Uh, sorry,” he chuckled nervously. “Looks like that’s about all the time we have today. I want you all to read up on Fawkes and the motivations behind the Gunpowder Plot, and on Monday we’ll pick up with the rest of the Protestant Reformation and start in on the Thirty Years’ War.”

The lecture hall filled with the sounds of shuffling and rustling as students gathered their books and bags and began filing out of the classroom. Reid rubbed his forehead; he felt a headache coming on, which was growing more and more frequent these days.

The memory of the tortured dissident lingered like a heavy fog. That too had been happening more often lately; few new memories had returned to him, but those that had been restored previously came back stronger, more visceral. Like *déjà vu*, except he knew that he had been there. It wasn’t just a feeling; he had done all of those things and then some.

“Professor Lawson.” Reid looked up sharply, jarred from his thoughts as a young blonde woman approached him, slinging a bag over her shoulder. “You got a date tonight or something?”

“Sorry?” Reid frowned, thrown by the question.

The young woman smiled. “I noticed you were looking at your watch like every thirty seconds. Figured you must have a hot date tonight.”

Reid forced a smile. “No, nothing like that. Just, uh, looking forward to the weekend.”

She nodded appreciably. “Me too. Have a good one, Professor.” She turned to head out of the classroom but paused, threw a glance over her shoulder and asked, “Would you like to sometime?”

“Sorry?” he asked dimly.

“Have a date. With me.”

Reid blinked, stunned into silence. “I, uh...”

“Think about it.” She smiled again and walked off.

He stood there for a long moment, trying to process what had just happened. Any memories of torture or black sites that might have been lingering were shoved away by the unexpected request. He knew the student fairly well; she had met with him a few times during his office hours to review coursework. Her name was Karen; she was twenty-three and one of the brightest in his class. She’d taken a couple years off after high school before going to college and traveled, mostly around Europe.

He nearly smacked himself in the forehead with the sudden realization that he knew more than he should about the young woman. Those office visits hadn’t been for assignment help; she had a crush on the professor. And she was undeniably beautiful, if Reid allowed himself for even a moment to think like that—which usually he did not, having long since grown adept at compartmentalizing the physical and mental attributes of his students and focusing on education.

But the girl, Karen, was very attractive, blonde-haired and green-eyed, slender but athletic, and...

“Oh,” he said aloud to the empty classroom.

She reminded him of Maria.

It had been four weeks since Reid and his girls had returned from Eastern Europe. Two days later Maria had been sent off on another op, and despite his texts and calls to her personal cell, he hadn’t heard from her since. He wondered where she was, if she was okay... and if she still felt the

same way about him. Their relationship had grown so complex that it was hard to say where they stood. A friendship that had very nearly turned romantic became temporarily soured by distrust and, eventually, to alienated allies on the wrong side of a government cover-up.

But now wasn't the time to dwell on how Maria felt about him. He had vowed to return to the conspiracy, to try to discover more of what he knew back then, but with returning to teaching, his new position in the agency, and taking care of his girls he hardly had the time to think about it.

Reid sighed and checked his watch again. Recently he had splurged and purchased a smart-watch that linked to his cell phone via Bluetooth. Even when his phone was in his desk or in another room he would still be alerted to text messages or calls. And looking at it frequently had become as instinctive as blinking. As compulsive as scratching an itch.

He had sent Maya a text right before the lecture started. Usually his texts were seemingly innocuous questions, like "What do you want for dinner?" or "Do you need me to pick anything up on the way home?" But Maya wasn't dumb; she knew that he was checking in on them, no matter how he tried to present it. Especially since he tended to send a message or make a call every hour or so.

He was smart enough to recognize what this was. The neurosis about his girls' safety, his compulsion to check in and the subsequent anxiety waiting for a response; even the strength and impact of the flashbacks he endured. Whether he was willing to admit it or not, all signs pointed toward some degree of post-traumatic stress disorder from the ordeals he had gone through.

Still, his challenge to overcome the trauma, his road to return to a life that resembled normalcy and trying to conquer the angst and consternation of what had happened was nothing compared to what his two teenage daughters were going through.

CHAPTER THREE

Reid unlocked the door to their home in the suburbs of Alexandria, Virginia, balancing a pizza box on the flat of his palm, and punched the six-digit alarm code into the panel near the front door. He had upgraded the system just a few weeks earlier. This new one would send an emergency alert to both 911 and the CIA if the code wasn't properly entered within thirty seconds of any point of egress opening.

It was one of several precautions that Reid had taken ever since the incident. There were cameras now, three of them in all; one mounted over the garage and directed towards the driveway and front door, another hidden in the floodlight over the back door, and a third outside the panic room door in the basement, all of which were on a twenty-four hour recording loop. He had changed every single lock in the house as well; their former neighbor, the now-deceased Mr. Thompson, had a key to their front and back doors and his keys were taken when the assassin Rais stole his truck.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, was the tracking device implanted in each of his daughters. Neither of them was aware of it, but both had been given an injection under the guise of a flu shot that implanted a subcutaneous GPS tracker, small than a grain of rice, in their upper arms. No matter where they were in the world, a satellite would know it. It had been Agent Strickland's idea, and Reid agreed without question. Most bizarre was that despite the high cost of outfitting two civilians with CIA tech, Deputy Director Cartwright signed off on it seemingly without a second thought.

Reid entered the kitchen and found Maya lying in the adjacent living room, watching a movie on TV. She lounged on her side on the sofa, still in her pajamas, with both legs hanging off the far end.

"Hey." Reid set the pizza box on the counter and shrugged out of his tweed jacket. "I texted you. You didn't answer."

"Phone's upstairs charging," Maya said lazily.

"It can't be charging down here?" he asked pointedly.

She merely shrugged in return.

"Where's your sister?"

"Upstairs," she yawned. "I think."

Reid sighed. "Maya—"

"She's upstairs, Dad. Jeez."

As much as he wanted to scold her for her petulant attitude of late, Reid held his tongue. He still didn't know the full extent of what either of them had gone through during the incident. That was how he referred to it in his mind—as "the incident." It was a suggestion from Sara's psychologist that he give it a name, a way for them to reference the events in conversation, although he'd never actually said it aloud.

The truth was that they barely talked about it.

He knew from the hospital reports, both in Poland and a secondary assessment stateside, that while both of his daughters had sustained minor injuries neither of them had been raped. Yet he had seen firsthand what had happened to some of the other trafficked victims. He wasn't sure he was ready to know the details of the horrific ordeal they had experienced because of him.

Reid headed upstairs and paused for a moment outside of Sara's bedroom. The door was ajar a few inches; he peered in and saw her lying on top of her blankets, facing the wall. Her right arm rested on her thigh, still wrapped in a beige cast from the elbow down. Tomorrow she had an appointment with the doctor to see if the cast was ready to come off.

Reid pushed the door open gently, but still it squeaked on its hinges. Sara, however, did not stir.

"You asleep?" he asked softly.

"No," she murmured.

"I, um... I brought a pizza home."

“Not hungry,” she said flatly.

She hadn’t been eating much since the incident; in fact, Reid had to constantly remind her to drink water, or else she would hardly consume anything. He understood the difficulties of surviving trauma better than most, but this felt different. More severe.

The psychologist Sara had been seeing, Dr. Branson, was a patient and compassionate woman who came highly recommended and CIA-certified. Yet according to her reports, Sara spoke little during their therapy sessions and answered questions with as few words as possible.

He sat on the edge of her bed and brushed the hair away from her forehead. She flinched slightly at his touch.

“Is there anything I can do?” he asked quietly.

“I just want to be alone,” she murmured.

He sighed and rose from the bed. “I understand,” he said empathetically. “Even so, I’d really like it if you came down and sat with us, as a family. Maybe try to eat a few bites.”

She didn’t say anything in response.

Reid sighed again as he headed back downstairs. Sara was clearly traumatized; she was much harder to get through to than even before, back in February when the girls had had a run-in with two members of the terrorist organization Amun on a New Jersey boardwalk. He’d thought it was bad then, but now his youngest daughter was downright joyless, often sleeping or lying in bed and staring at nothing in particular. Even when she was there physically it felt like she was hardly really there.

In Croatia, and Slovakia, and Poland, all he’d wanted was to have his girls back. Now that he had safely returned them home, all he wanted was to have his girls back—though in a much different capacity. He wanted things to be the way they were before all of this.

In the dining room, Maya was setting out three paper plates and cups around the table. He watched as she poured herself some soda, took a slice of pepperoni from the box, and bit off the tip.

As she chewed he asked, “So. Have you given any more thought to going back to school?”

Her jaw worked in circles as she regarded him evenly. “I just don’t think I’m ready yet,” she said after a while.

Reid nodded as if he agreed, though he thought that four weeks off was plenty of time and that a return to habit would be good for them. Neither of them had gone back to school in the wake of the incident; Sara clearly wasn’t ready, but Maya seemed fit to resume her studies. She was smart, almost dangerously so; even as a high school junior, she had been taking a few courses a week at Georgetown. They would look good on a college application and would give her a jumpstart on a degree—but only if she finished them.

She had been going to the library a few times a week for study sessions, which was at least a start. It was her intention to try and pass the final so that she didn’t flunk out. But even as smart as she was, Reid had his doubts that it would be enough.

He chose his words carefully as he said, “There’s less than two months of classes left, but I think you’re smart enough to catch up if you went back.”

“You’re right,” she said as she tore off another mouthful of pizza. “I am smart enough.”

He gave her a sidelong glance. “That’s *not* what I meant, Maya—”

“Oh, hey Squeak,” she said suddenly.

Reid looked up in surprise as Sara entered the dining room. Her gaze swept the floor as she inched her way to a chair like a timid squirrel. He wanted to say something, to offer some words of encouragement or to simply tell her that he was glad she decided to join them, but he held back. It was the first time in at least two weeks, maybe more, that she had come down for dinner.

Maya scooped a slice of pizza onto a plate and handed it to her sister. Sara took a tiny, almost imperceptible bite of the tip, not looking up at either of them.

Reid’s mind raced, seeking something to say, something that might make this seem like any usual family dinner and not the tense, silent, painfully uncomfortable situation that it was.

“Anything interesting happen today?” he said at last, immediately scolding himself for the lame attempt.

Sara shook her head a little, staring at the tablecloth.

“I watched a documentary about penguins,” Maya offered.

“Learn anything cool?” he asked.

“Not really.”

And so it went, returning to silence and tension.

Say something meaningful, his mind shouted at him. *Offer them support. Let them know they can open up to you about what happened. You all survived a trauma. Survive it together.*

“Listen,” he said. “I know that it hasn’t been easy lately. But I want you both to know that it’s okay to talk to me about what happened. You can ask me questions. I’ll be honest.”

“Dad...” Maya started, but he put up a hand.

“Please, this is important to me,” he said. “I’m here for you, and I always will be. We survived this together, the three of us, and that proves there’s nothing that can keep us apart...”

He trailed off, his heart breaking anew when he saw tears spilling down Sara’s cheeks. She continued to stare downward at the table as she cried, saying nothing, with a faraway gaze that suggested she was somewhere other than mentally present with her sister and father.

“Honey, I’m sorry.” Reid rose to hug her, but Maya got there first. She wrapped her arms around her younger sister as Sara sobbed into her shoulder. There was little Reid could do but stand there awkwardly and watch. No words of sympathy came; any expression of endearment he might offer would be little more than putting a band-aid on a bullet hole.

Maya grabbed a napkin from the table and dabbed gently at her sister’s cheeks, smoothed her blonde hair from off her forehead. “Hey,” she said in a whisper. “Why don’t you go upstairs and lie down for a bit, huh? I’ll come and check on you soon.”

Sara nodded and sniffled. She rose wordlessly from the table and shuffled out of the dining room towards the stairs.

“I didn’t mean to upset her...”

Maya spun on him with her hands on her hips. “Then why did you go and bring that up?”

“Because she’s hardly said two words to me about it!” Reid said defensively. “I want her to know that she can talk to me.”

“She doesn’t want to talk to you about it,” Maya shot back. “She doesn’t want to talk to anyone about it!”

“Dr. Branson said that opening up about a past trauma is therapeutic...”

Maya scoffed loudly. “And do you think that Dr. Branson has ever been through anything like what Sara went through?”

Reid took a breath, forcing himself to calm and not argue. “Probably not. But she treats CIA operatives, military personnel, all manner of trauma and PTSD—”

“Sara is not a CIA agent,” said Maya harshly. “She’s not a Green Beret or a Navy Seal. She’s a fourteen-year-old girl.” She ran her fingers through her hair and sighed. “You want to know? You want to talk about what happened? Here it is: we saw Mr. Thompson’s body before we were kidnapped. It was lying right there in the foyer. We watched that maniac cut the throat of the woman from the rest stop. Some of her blood was on my shoes. We were there when the traffickers shot another girl and left her body lying in the gravel. She was trying to help me free Sara. I was drugged. We were both nearly raped. And Sara, somehow she found the strength to fight off two grown men, one of whom had a gun, and she threw herself out of the window of a speeding train.” Maya’s chest was heaving by the time she was finished, but no tears came.

She wasn’t upset reliving the events of last month. She was angry.

Reid lowered himself slowly into a chair. He knew about most of what she told him by virtue of having followed the trail to find the girls, but he had no idea about another girl being gunned

down in front of them. Maya was right; Sara was not trained to deal with any such things. She wasn't even an adult. She was a teenager who had experienced things that anyone, trained or not, would find traumatizing.

"When you showed up," Maya continued, her voice lower now, "when you actually came for us, it was like you were a superhero or something. At first. But then... when we had some time to think about it... we realized that we don't know what else you're hiding. We're not sure who you really are. Do you know how frightening that is?"

"Maya," he said gently, "you don't ever have to be afraid of me—"

"You've killed people." She shrugged one shoulder. "Plenty of them. Right?"

"I..." Reid had to remind himself not to lie to her. He had promised he wouldn't anymore, as long as he could help it. Instead he only nodded.

"Then you're not the person that we thought you were. That's going to take time to get used to. You need to accept that."

"You keep saying 'we,'" Reid murmured. "She talks to you?"

"Yeah. Sometimes. She's been sleeping in my bed the past week or so. Nightmares."

Reid sighed dolefully. Gone was the untroubled, content dynamic their small family had once enjoyed. He realized now that things had changed for all of them and between all of them—maybe forever.

"I don't know what to do," he admitted softly. "I want to be there for her, for both of you. I want to be your support when you need it. But I can't do that if she won't talk to me about what's going on in her head." He glanced up at Maya and added, "She's always looked up to you. Maybe you can be a role model for her now. I think that getting back into a routine, a shot at normal life, would be good for both of you. At least finish your Georgetown classes. Besides, they're not likely to let you in if you flunked an entire semester."

Maya was silent for a long moment. At last she said, "I don't think I want to go to Georgetown anymore."

Reid frowned. Georgetown had been her top choice of colleges since they'd moved to Virginia. "Then where? NYU?"

She shook her head. "No. I want to go West Point."

"West Point," he repeated blankly, completely thrown by her statement. "You want to go to a military academy?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm going to become a CIA agent."

CHAPTER FOUR

Reid balked. He was certain he had heard her right, but the combination of words that came from her mouth made little sense to him.

She's winding me up, he thought. *She was expecting an argument and I resisted*. This was just youthful angst. It had to be.

"You... want to be a CIA agent," he said slowly.

"Yes," said Maya. "More specifically, I want to attend the National Intelligence University in Bethesda. But in order to do that, I would first have to be a member of the armed forces. If I go to West Point instead of enlisting, I would graduate as a second lieutenant and be eligible to attend NIU. There I can get a master's in strategic intelligence, and by that point I'd be over twenty-one, so I could enroll in the agency's field-training program."

Reid's legs felt numb. Not only was she very obviously serious, but she had already done some thorough research to find her best course of action and education.

But there was no way in hell that he would ever let his daughter choose that path.

"No," he said simply. All other words seemed to fail him. "No. No way. That's not happening."

Maya's eyebrows shot up in unison. "Excuse me?" she said sharply.

Reid took a deep breath. She was headstrong, so he would have to deny her more carefully than that. But his answer was an unequivocal and emphatic "no." Not after everything he had seen and everything he had done.

"It hasn't been all that long since... the incident," he said. "It's still fresh in your mind. Before you make a decision like this, you need to consider all angles. Finish your classes. Graduate high school. Apply to colleges. And we can revisit all of this later." He smiled as pleasantly as he could muster.

Maya did not. "You don't get to dictate my life like that," she said heatedly.

"Actually, I do," Reid countered. He was quickly growing irritated himself. "You're still a minor."

"Not for long," she shot back. "Let me tell *you* what's going to happen. I'm *not* going back to those classes at Georgetown. In fact, I'm not going back to school until September. I'll flunk my spring semester and I'll have to take all those courses over again. I'll be seventeen next month, which means by the time I graduate I'll be eighteen. And then you don't get to tell me where I can go or what I can do anymore." She folded her arms to punctuate her point.

Reid pinched the bridge of his nose. "You cannot just skip three months of school. And what about all these study sessions you've been doing? All that time would be wasted."

"I haven't been going to study sessions," she admitted.

He looked up at her sharply. "So you've been lying to me? After everything?" He scoffed in dismay. "Then where have you been going?"

"After you drop me off, I go to the rec center," she told him matter-of-factly. "There's a self-defense class there a few times a week. It's taught by a former Marine. I've also been reading up on counterintelligence and espionage tactics."

He shook his head. "I can't believe this. I thought we weren't going to have any more secrets between us." Even as he said it, a painful memory flashed through his mind—Kate's murder, the truth about their mother. He still hadn't told them, despite his promise to himself to cease the lying and guile. It killed him to keep it from them, but in the wake of the incident it had been too soon to reveal something so horrible. Now, four weeks later, he was afraid it was too late and that they would be angry at him for keeping it to himself for so long.

"I knew you'd react like this," Maya said. "That's why I didn't tell you the truth. But I'm telling you now. That's what I want to do. That's what I'm *going* to do."

“When you were seven you wanted to be a ballet dancer,” Reid told her. “Remember that? When you were ten you wanted to be a veterinarian. At thirteen you wanted to be a lawyer, all because we watched a movie about a murder trial—”

“Do *not* patronize me!” Maya leapt up from her seat, standing in front of him with a pointed finger of warning and a glare on her face.

Reid leaned back in his seat, shocked by her outburst. He could hardly even be angry at her, as surprised as he was at the strength her reaction.

“This is not some little girl’s fairytale pipe dream,” she said quickly, her voice low. “This is what I want. I know that now. Just like I know what keeps Sara awake at night. She has nightmares about her experience, what she went through. What she survived. But that’s not what traumatizes me. What keeps me awake is knowing that it’s still happening out there right now. What I saw and what I went through is someone’s life. While I’m in my warm bed, or eating pizza, or going to classes, there are women and children out there living every single day like that—until they’re dead.”

Maya put one foot up onto the chair and yanked the leg of her pajamas pants up to the knee. There on her calf were thin, ruddy-brown scars spelling out three words: *RED. 23. POLA*. It was the message that she had carved into her own leg in the moments before the traffickers’ drugs took hold of her; the message that provided a clue as to where they had taken Sara.

“You can pretend this is just a phase if you want,” Maya pressed on. “But these scars aren’t going anywhere. I’ll have them for the rest of my life, and every time I see them I’m reminded that what happened to me is still happening to others. All I did was figure out that if I want it to end, the best way to do it is to be part of the people trying to stop it.” She pulled down the pajama leg again.

Reid’s throat felt dry. He couldn’t counter her argument any more than he could consent to it. Something Maria had once said to him flashed through his mind: *You can’t save everyone*. But he could save his daughter from living the kind of life he had been thrust back into. “I’m sorry,” he said at last. “But no matter how noble your intentions might be, I can’t support this. And I won’t.”

“I don’t need your support,” Maya declared. “I just thought you should know the truth.” She stormed out of the dining room, her bare feet stomping up the stairs. A moment later a door slammed shut.

Reid slumped in his chair and sighed. The pizza was cold. One daughter was disturbed into silence and the other was determined to take on the underworld. The psychologist, Dr. Branson, had told him to be patient with Sara; she had said that time heals all things, but instead he had pressed the issue and upset her anew. On top of all that, Maya’s intention of joining the CIA was the very last thing he had expected to hear.

In a strange way, he admired her ability to channel the trauma she’d experienced into a cause. But he simply could not agree with the means she’d chosen. He thought back to everything he had seen and the injuries he had sustained. The things he had to do and the threats he had to stop. The people he had helped, and all of those he’d left broken or dead along the way.

Reid realized suddenly that he had no idea what had inspired him to join the CIA in the first place. His own motivations had been long lost, shoved into the darkest recesses of his mind by the experimental memory suppressor. It was possible that he would never remember why he became CIA Agent Kent Steele.

You know that’s not true, he told himself. *There might be a way.*

*

Reid’s office was on the second floor of the house, the smallest of the bedrooms that he had outfitted with his desk, shelves, and impressive book collection. He should have been preparing his lecture for Monday on the Protestant Reformation and the Thirty Years’ War. As an adjunct professor of European history at Georgetown University, Reid’s commitment was hardly more than part-time,

but still he craved the classroom. It represented a return to normalcy, much like he wanted for his girls. But that task would wait.

Instead, Reid reverently laid a dark disc on the spindle of an old phonograph in the corner and lowered the needle. He closed his eyes as Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 21* began, slow and melodic, like a springtime thaw after the long winter's freeze. He smiled. The machine was more than seventy-five years old but still worked perfectly. It had been a gift to him from Kate on their fifth wedding anniversary; she had found the ramshackle phonograph at a flea market for an asking price of six dollars, and then paid more than two hundred to have it refurbished to nearly its former glory.

Kate. His smile faded to a grimace.

You're at the black site in Morocco, nicknamed Hell-Six. Interrogating a known terrorist.

There's a call for you. It's Deputy Director Cartwright. Your boss.

He doesn't mince words. Your wife, Kate, was killed.

It happened as she was leaving work, walking to her car. Kate had been given a powerful dose of tetrodotoxin, also known as TTX, a potent poison that caused sudden paralysis of the diaphragm. She suffocated on the street and was dead in less than a minute.

In the weeks since Eastern Europe, Reid had revisited the memory many times—or rather, the memory had revisited him, forcing its way into the forefront of his mind when least expected. Everything reminded him of Kate, from the furniture in their living room to the scent that somehow still lingered on his pillow; from the color of Sara's eyes to Maya's angled chin. She was everywhere... and so was the lie that he withheld from his girls.

He had tried several times to remember more, but he wasn't actually certain that he knew any more than that. After his wife's murder, Kent Steele had gone on a dangerous rampage across Europe and the Middle East, killing dozens that were associated with the terrorist organization Amun. Then came the memory suppressor, and the subsequent two years of oddly blissful ignorance.

Reid went to the closet in the far corner of the room. Inside it was a small black duffel bag, what CIA agents called a bug-out bag. In it was everything that an operative would need to go dark for an indeterminate amount of time, should the situation call for it. This particular bag had belonged to his former best friend, the now-deceased Agent Alan Reidigger. Reid had few memories of the man, but he knew enough to know that Reidigger had helped him in a time of need—and had paid for it with his life.

Most importantly, in the bag was a letter. He pulled it out, the third-length creases well worn with time and rereading.

Hey Zero, the letter began prophetically. *If you're reading this, I'm probably dead.*

He skipped a couple of paragraphs down the sheet.

The CIA wanted to bring you in, but you wouldn't listen. It wasn't just because of your warpath. There was something else, something you were close to finding—too close. I can't tell you what it was because even I don't know. You wouldn't tell me, so it must have been heavy.

Reid believed he knew what Reidigger was referring to—the conspiracy. A brief flash of memory he had recovered while tracking down Imam Khalil and the smallpox virus had shown him that he knew something before the suppressor was implanted in his head.

He closed his eyes and returned to the memory:

The CIA black site in Morocco. Designation H-6, aka Hell Six. An interrogation. You pull the fingernails from an Arab man for information about the whereabouts of a bomb maker.

Between screams and whimpers and insistences that he doesn't know, something else emerges—a pending war. Something big coming. A conspiracy, designed by the US government.

You don't believe him. Not at first. But you couldn't just let it go.

He knew something back then. Like a jigsaw puzzle, he had started to put it together. Then Amun happened. Kate's murder happened. He got distracted, and while he vowed to return to it, he never got the chance.

He read over the rest of Alan's letter:

Whatever it was, it's still there, locked away in your brain somewhere. If you ever need it, there is a way. The neurosurgeon that installed the implant, his name is Dr. Guyer. He was last practicing in Zurich. He could bring back everything, if you choose. Or he could suppress them all again, if you wanted to do that. The choice is yours. Godspeed, Zero. —Alan

Reid could not recall how many times he had sat in front of the computer or on his phone and tried to motivate his fingers to type Dr. Guyer's name into a search bar. His desire to have his memory restored—no, his *necessity* to have it back was growing more intense with every passing week, to the point that it felt urgent that he know just how much he didn't know. He needed to be able to recall his own past.

But I can't leave the girls. In the wake of the incident, there was no way he could just up and go to Switzerland. He would be downright neurotic about their safety, even with the tracking implants. Even with Agent Strickland watching over them. Besides, what would they think? Maya would never believe it was for a medical procedure. She would think he was doing field work again.

So bring them. The thought entered his head so easily that he nearly laughed at himself for not thinking of it before. But then he discounted it just as quickly. What about his job? What about Sara's therapy sessions? Hadn't he just tried to convince Maya to return to school?

Don't overthink it, he told himself. Wasn't the simplest solution usually the right one? It wasn't like anything else had worked to snap Sara out of her funk, and Maya seemed intent on being headstrong, as usual.

Reid pushed Reidigger's bug-out bag back into the closet and scrambled to his feet. Before he could convince himself to change his mind he strode down the hall to Maya's room and knocked rapidly on her door.

She opened it and folded her arms, clearly still unhappy with him. "Yeah?"

"Let's go on a trip."

She blinked at him. "What?"

"Let's go on a trip, the three of us," he said again, pushing past her into the bedroom. "Look, I was wrong to bring up the incident. I see that now. Sara doesn't need to be reminded of it; she needs the opposite." He was ranting, gesticulating with his hands, but he pressed on. "This past month all she's done is lie around and dwell on what happened. Maybe what she needs is a distraction. Maybe she just needs to make some pleasant memories to be reminded of how good things can be."

Maya frowned as if struggling to follow his logic. "So you want to go on a trip. To where?"

"Let's go skiing," he replied. "Remember when we went to Vermont, about four or five years ago? Remember how much Sara loved the bunny slope?"

"I remember," Maya said, "but Dad, it's April. Ski season is over."

"Not in the Alps, it's not."

She stared at him as if he had lost his mind. "You want to go to the Alps?"

"Yes. Switzerland, to be specific. And I know you think this is crazy, but I'm thinking clearly here. We're not doing ourselves any favors stagnating around here. We need a change of scenery—especially Sara."

"But... what about your work?"

Reid shrugged. "I'll play hooky."

"No one says that anymore."

"I'll worry about what to tell the university," he said. *And the agency.* "Family comes first." Reid was mostly certain the CIA wasn't going to fire him over demanding some time off to be with his girls. In fact, he was fairly certain they wouldn't let him quit even if he tried. "Sara's cast comes off tomorrow. We can go this week. What do you say?"

Maya pursed her lips tightly. He knew that look; she was trying her best to hold back a smirk. She still wasn't exactly pleased with how he had handled her news from earlier. But she nodded. "Alright. It makes sense. Yeah, let's go on a trip."

"Great." Reid grabbed her by the shoulders and planted a kiss on his daughter's forehead before she could squirm away. As he left her bedroom, he glanced back and definitely caught her smiling.

He crept into Sara's room and found her lying on her back, staring up at the ceiling. She didn't look at him as he entered and knelt beside her bed.

"Hey," he said in a near-whisper. "I'm sorry about what happened at dinner. But I have an idea. What would you say about us going on a little trip? Just me and you and Maya, and we'll go somewhere nice, somewhere far away. Would you like that?"

Sara tilted her head towards him, just enough so that her gaze met his. Then she nodded slightly.

"Yeah? Good. Then that's what we'll do." He reached over and took her hand in his, and he was pretty sure he felt a slight squeeze from her fingers.

This will work, he told himself. For the first time in a while he felt good about something.

And the girls didn't need to know about his ulterior motive.

CHAPTER FIVE

Maria Johansson walked the concourse at Istanbul Atatürk Airport in Turkey and pushed open the door to the women's restroom. She had spent the last few days on the trail of three Israeli journalists who had gone missing while covering the story of Imam Khalil's sect of zealots, the ones who had nearly unleashed a deadly smallpox virus on the developed world. It was suspected that the journalists' disappearance might have had something to do with surviving followers of Khalil, but their trail had gone cold in Iraq, short of their destination of Baghdad.

She very much doubted that they would ever be found, not unless whoever was responsible for their disappearance claimed responsibility. Her orders currently were to follow up on an alleged source that the journalist had here in Istanbul, and then return to CIA regional headquarters in Zurich where she would be debriefed and possibly reassigned, if the op was deemed dead.

But in the meantime, she had another meeting to attend.

In a bathroom stall, Maria opened her purse and took out a waterproof bag of thick plastic. Before she sealed her CIA-issued phone inside it she called the voicemail of her private line.

There were no new messages. It seemed that Kent had given up trying to reach her. He had left her several voicemails in the past weeks, one every few days. In the short, one-sided snippets he told her about his girls, how Sara was still dealing with the trauma of the events she'd endured. He mentioned his work for the National Resources Division and how bland it was compared to field work. He told her he missed her.

It was a small relief that he'd given up. At least she wouldn't have to listen to the sound of his voice and realize how much she missed him too.

Maria sealed the phone into the plastic bag and carefully lowered it into the toilet tank before replacing the lid. She did not want to risk any prying ears to listen in on her conversation.

Then she left the bathroom and headed down the terminal to a gate with a couple dozen people milling about. The flight board announced that the plane to Kiev would be leaving in an hour and a half.

She sat in a rigid plastic chair in a row of six. The man was already behind her, seated in the opposite row facing the other direction with an automobile magazine open in front of his face.

"Calendula," he said, his voice husky but low. "Report."

"There is nothing to report," she replied in Ukrainian. "Agent Zero is back at home with his family. He has been avoiding me ever since."

"Oh?" said the Ukrainian curiously. "Has he? Or have you been avoiding him?"

Maria scowled, but did not turn to face the man. He would only say such a thing if he knew it was true. "You've tapped my private cell?"

"Of course," the Ukrainian said candidly. "It seems that Agent Zero very much wants to speak with you. Why have you not contacted him?"

Not that it was any of the Ukrainian's business, but Maria had been ducking Kent for the simple reason that she had, again, lied to him—not once, but twice. She had told him that the Ukrainians she was working with were members of the Foreign Intelligence Service. While a few of their faction might have been, at one time, they were about as loyal to the FIS as she was to the CIA.

The second lie was that she would stop working with them. Kent had made clear his distrust of the Ukrainians while they were en route to rescuing his daughters, and Maria had agreed, halfheartedly, that she would put an end to the relationship.

She hadn't. Not yet. But that was part of the reason for the meeting in Istanbul; it wasn't too late to make good on her word.

“We’re done,” she said simply. “I’m through working with you. You know what I know, and I know what you know. We can swap intel for the sake of building a case, but I’m finished doing your errands. And I’m leaving Zero out of this.”

The Ukrainian was silent for a long moment. He casually flicked the page of his auto magazine as if he was actually reading it. “Are you certain?” he asked. “New information has recently come to light.”

Maria’s eyebrow rose instinctively, though she was sure this was just a ruse to keep her in their employ. “What kind of new information?”

“Information you want,” the man said cryptically. Maria could not see his face but she got the impression, based on his tone, he was smirking.

“You’re bluffing,” she said bluntly.

“I am not,” he assured her. “We know his position. And we know what might happen if he remains in his stance.”

Maria’s pulse quickened. She didn’t want to believe him, but she had little choice. Her involvement in uncovering the conspiracy, her decision to work with them and attempt to obtain information from the CIA, was more than just a matter of doing the right thing. Of course she wanted to avoid war, to keep the perpetrators from their would-be ill-gotten gains, to keep innocent people from being hurt. But more than that, she had a vested personal interest in the plot.

Her father was a member of the National Security Council, a high-ranking official in international matters. And though it shamed her to even think it, her biggest priority, bigger than saving lives or keeping the United States from initiating war, was finding out if he was in on this, if he was a coconspirator—and if he wasn’t, to keep him safe from those that would have their way by any means necessary.

It wasn’t as if Maria could simply call him up and ask him. Their relationship was somewhat strained, limited mostly to professional banter, talk of legislation, and the occasional short-lived catching-up of personal lives. Besides, if he was aware of the plot, he would have no reason to openly admit it to her. If he wasn’t, he would want to take action; he was a decisive man who believed in justice and the legal system. Maria tended to lean towards the cynical, and as a result, cautious.

“What do you mean, ‘what might happen’?” she demanded. The Ukrainian’s cryptic statement seemed to suggest that her father was none the wiser, while also carrying a certain weight of threat with it.

“We don’t know,” he replied simply.

“How did you find this out?”

“Emails,” said the Ukrainian, “obtained from a private server. His name was mentioned, along with others who... may not comply.”

“Like a hit list?” she asked plainly.

“Unclear.”

Frustration roiled in her chest. “I want to read these emails. I want to see them for myself.”

“And you can,” the Ukrainian assured her. “But not if you’re insistent on breaking ties with us. We need you, Calendula. You need us. And we all need Agent Zero.”

She sighed. “No. Leave him out of this. He’s home with his family. That’s where his focus needs to be right now. He’s not even an agent anymore—”

“Yet he still works for the CIA.”

“He has no allegiance to them—”

“But he has an allegiance to you.”

Maria scoffed. “He doesn’t even remember enough to make sense of the little that he does know.”

“The memories are still there, in his head. Eventually he will remember, and when he does, you need to be there. Don’t you see? When that information returns to him he won’t have a choice

but to act. He will need you there to guide him, and he will need our resources if he wants to do anything meaningful about it.” The Ukrainian man paused before adding, “The intel in Agent Zero’s mind could provide the pieces that we are missing, or at least lead to proof. A way to stop this. That is the whole point, is it not?”

“Of course it is,” Maria murmured. While not the only reason she had agreed to work with the Ukrainians, stopping the war and unnecessary slaughter before it began, and to keep the wrong people from gaining the type of power that historically led to much bigger conflicts was paramount. Still, she shook her head. “Regardless of what I want, you only want to use him.”

“Having the CIA’s top agent turn against his government would indeed be useful,” the man admitted. “But that is not our goal.” He dared to turn slightly in her direction, just enough to murmur, “We are not your enemy here.”

She wanted to believe that. But continuing to work with them when she had promised Kent she would cut ties made it feel like she was, as he had once accused, a double-agent—but against him, not the CIA.

“I’ll deal with Zero,” she said, “but I want those emails, and any other information you have on my father.”

“And you’ll get it, as soon as you bring something new and useful to the table.” The man made a show of looking down at his watch. “Speaking of which, I believe you’re soon due back at CIA regional headquarters? That is in Zurich, right? You may want to inquire as to the whereabouts of Agent Zero. If I’m not mistaken, he won’t be far.”

“He’s in Europe?” Maria was so taken aback that she twisted halfway in her seat. “Are you spying on him?”

He shrugged. “His recent credit card activity showed three plane tickets to Switzerland.”

Three? Maria thought. It wasn’t fieldwork; it was a trip. Kent and his two girls, most likely. *But why Switzerland?* she wondered. A notion came to her... *Would he try to do that? Is he ready?*

The Ukrainian man stood, buttoned his overcoat, and stuck his magazine under one arm. “Go to him. Get us something useful. Time is running out; if you don’t do it, we will.”

“Don’t you dare send anyone near him or his girls,” Maria threatened.

He smirked. “Then don’t force our hand. Goodbye, Calendula.” He nodded once and strode away across the terminal.

Maria sank into the chair and sighed defeatedly. She knew all too well that a single renewed memory could trigger Kent’s obsessive nature, and he’d plunge back down the rabbit hole of conspiracy and deception in search of answers. She had seen firsthand how Kent had gone through hell to get his family back... but she also knew that the knowledge he once had would tear them apart again.

There in the terminal of Istanbul Atatürk Airport, she made a resolution to herself: she was personally responsible for bringing him into this, so she would make sure to be there if, or when, he remembered. And to stop him if she needed to.

CHAPTER SIX

“Maya, look.” Sara poked her older sister in the arm and gestured out the window as the airplane drifted through a cloud on its descent into Zurich Airport. The sky opened up and the white-capped crests of the Swiss Alps were visible in the distance.

“It’s cool, right?” Maya said with a smile. Reid, in the aisle seat, could hardly believe his eyes—a thin smile lit on Sara’s face too.

In the three days since he had first announced the trip, Sara had agreed but hardly seemed excited to go. She had slept for most of the eight-hour flight and barely spoke in the brief interims she was awake. But as they descended to land and Sara could see the jagged peaks of the Alps and the sprawling city of Zurich below them, some life seemed to seep into her. There was a smile on her face and color in her cheeks for the first time in a while, and Reid couldn’t have been more pleased.

After they disembarked and got through customs, they waited beside the baggage carousel for their luggage. Reid felt Sara’s hand slip into his. He was astonished, but tried not to show it.

“Can we ski today?” she asked.

“Yeah. Of course,” he told her. “We can do whatever you want to do, sweetheart.”

She nodded somberly, as if the thought had been weighing heavily on her mind. Her fingers squeezed his as their bags made a lazy rotation towards them.

From Zurich they took a train south, less than two hours’ ride to the alpine town of Engelberg. There were no fewer than twenty-six hotels and ski lodges on the nearby mountain of Titlis, the largest peak of the Uri Alps at more than three thousand feet above sea level.

Naturally, Reid shared all of this with the girls.

“...And home to the world’s first cable car, too,” he told them as they trekked from the train station to their lodge. “Oh, and in town there’s a twelfth-century monastery called Kloster Engelberg, one of the oldest Swiss monasteries still standing...”

“Wow,” Maya interrupted. “Is this the place?”

Reid had chosen one of the more rustic lodges for their accommodations; a bit dated, to be sure, but charming and cozy, unlike some of the larger American-style hotels that had cropped up in recent years. They checked in and settled into their room, which had two beds, a fireplace with two armchairs facing it, and a breathtaking view of Titlis’ southern face.

“Hey, uh, there’s one thing I want to say before we go out there,” Reid said as they unpacked and prepared for the slopes. “I don’t want you two wandering off on your own.”

“Dad...” Maya rolled her eyes.

“It’s not about that,” he said quickly. “This trip is supposed to be about us spending some quality time and enjoying ourselves, and that means staying together. Okay?”

Sara nodded.

“Yeah, alright,” Maya agreed.

“Good. Then let’s get changed.” It wasn’t a lie, not really; he did want them to have a good time together, and he didn’t want them wandering around by themselves for safety reasons that had nothing to do with the incident. At least that’s what he told himself.

He still had no idea how he was going to accomplish his other task, the ulterior reason for coming to Switzerland and staying at a place so close to Zurich. But he had time to figure that part out.

Thirty minutes later the three of them were on a ski lift, heading up one of the dozens of crisscrossing trails of Titlis. Reid had chosen a green beginners’ slope for them to get started on; none of them had been skiing in years, ever since the family trip to Vermont.

Guilt stabbed at Reid’s chest at the thought of that vacation. Kate had been alive then. That trip had felt perfect, like nothing bad could ever happen between them. He wished he could go back to

that time, enjoy it all over again, maybe even warn his past self about what was coming—or change the outcome so that it never happened at all.

He shook the thought from his head. There was no point in dwelling on it. It *had* happened, and now he needed to be there for his daughters to make sure that the past didn't repeat itself.

At the top of the gentle slope, a bearded ski instructor gave them some refresher tips about how to slow down, how to stop, and how to turn. The girls took their time, unsteady on the ski boots locked in at the heels.

But as soon as Reid pushed off with the poles and began sliding over the powder, his body reacted as if he had done it a thousand times. The only time in memory that he had ever been skiing was the family trip five years earlier, but the way he simply knew how to move without thinking, his legs and torso subtly adjusting to weave left and right, told him that he had done this many more times than once. After the first run he had little doubt that he could handle a black diamond trail without much difficulty.

Even so, he did his best to hide it and kept pace with the girls. They seemed to be having a great time, Maya laughing at every wobble and near-fall, and Sara with an omnipresent smile on her face.

On their third run down the beginner's slope, Reid started in between the two of them. Then he bent his legs slightly, leaning into the descent, and tucked the poles under his armpits. "Race you to the bottom!" he called out as he picked up speed.

"You're on, old man!" Maya laughed behind him.

"Old man? We'll see who's laughing when I kick your butt..." Reid glanced over his shoulder just in time to see Sara's left ski hit a small berm of packed snow. It slipped out from under her and both arms flailed out as she flopped face-first into the slope.

"Sara!" Reid skidded to a halt. He unclasped his boots in seconds and ran over the powder to her. "Sara, are you okay?" She had just gotten her cast off; the last thing she needed was another injury to ruin her vacation.

He knelt and turned her over. Her face was red and there were tears in her eyes—but she was laughing.

"Are you okay?" he asked again.

"Yeah," she said between giggling fits. "I'm fine."

He helped her to her feet and she wiped tears from her eyes. He was more than just relieved that she was okay—the sound of her laughter was like music to his soul.

"You sure you're okay?" he asked a third time.

"Yes, Dad." She sighed happily and steadied herself on her skis. "I promise I'm okay. Nothing broken. By the way..." She pushed off with both poles and sent herself careening quickly down the slope. "We're still racing, right?"

From nearby, Maya laughed too and set off after her sister.

"Not fair!" Reid called after them as he scrambled back to his skis.

After three hours of riding the slopes, they returned to the lodge and found seats in the large common area, in front of a roaring fireplace large enough to park a motorcycle in. Reid ordered three mugs of Swiss hot chocolate, and they sipped contentedly before the fire.

"I want to try a blue trail tomorrow," Sara announced.

"Are you sure, Squeak? You just got that cast off your arm," Maya taunted.

"Maybe in the afternoon we can check out the town," Reid offered. "Find a place to have dinner?"

"That sounds fun," Sara agreed.

"Sure, you say that now," Maya said, "but you know he's going to make us check out that monastery."

“Hey, it’s important to get to know the history of a place,” said Reid. “That monastery was what started this town. Well, up until the 1850s, when it became a vacation spot for tourists seeking what they called ‘fresh air cures.’ You see, back then...”

Maya leaned back in her chair and pretended to snore loudly.

“Ha-ha,” Reid mocked. “Fine, I’ll stop lecturing. Who needs a refill? Be right back.” He scooped up the three mugs and headed towards the counter for more.

As he waited, he couldn’t help but mentally pat himself on the back. For the first time in a while, maybe even since the memory suppressor was removed, he felt that he’d done right by his girls. They were all having a great time; the events of the month prior already seemed to be becoming distant memory. He hoped it was more than just temporary, and that the creation of new, happy memories would shove out the anxiety and anguish of what had happened.

Of course, he wasn’t so naïve to believe that the girls would simply forget about the incident. It was important not to forget; just like history, he didn’t want the opportunity for it to repeat itself. But if it got Sara out of her melancholy funk and Maya back on track with school and her future, then he would feel he did his job as a parent.

He returned to their sofa to find Maya jabbing away at her cell phone and Sara’s seat empty.

“Went to the bathroom,” Maya said before he could even ask.

“I wasn’t going to ask,” he said as nonchalantly as he could, setting down the three mugs.

“Yeah, right,” Maya teased.

Reid straightened and looked around anyway. Of course he was going to ask; if it was up to him, neither of the girls would leave his sight. He glanced about, past the other tourists and skiers, the locals enjoying a hot drink, the staff serving patrons...

A knot of panic tightened in his stomach as he spotted the back of Sara’s blonde head across the lodge floor. Behind her was a man in a black parka, following her—or perhaps guiding her away.

He strode over quickly, fists balling at his side. His first thought was immediately of the Slovakian traffickers. *They found us*. His tense muscles were ready for a fight, ready to take this man apart in front of everyone. *Somehow they found us here, in the mountains*.

“Sara,” he said sharply.

She stopped and turned, her eyes wide at his commanding tone.

“You okay?” He looked from her to the man following her. He had dark eyes, a five o’clock shadow, ski goggles perched on his forehead. He didn’t look Slovakian, but Reid was not taking any chances.

“Fine, Dad. This man asked me where the bathrooms were,” Sara told him.

The man put up both hands defensively, palms out. “I’m very sorry,” he said, his accent sounding German. “I did not mean any harm—”

“You couldn’t have asked an adult?” Reid said forcefully, staring the man down.

“I asked the first person I saw,” the man protested.

“And that was a fourteen-year-old girl?” Reid shook his head. “Who are you with?”

“With?” the man asked in bewilderment. “I’m... with my family here.”

“Yeah? Where are they? Point them out,” Reid demanded.

“I-I don’t want any trouble.”

“Dad.” Reid felt an arm tug at his. “That’s enough, Dad.” Maya tugged at him again. “He’s just a tourist.”

Reid narrowed his eyes. “I’d better not see you around my girls again,” he warned, “or there *will* be trouble.” He turned away from the frightened man as Sara, bewildered, headed back towards the sofa.

But Maya stood in his path with her hands on her hips. “Just what the hell was that?”

He frowned. “Maya, you watch your language—”

“No, you watch yours,” she shot back. “Dad, you were speaking German just now.”

Reid blinked in surprise. “I was?” He hadn’t even realized it, but the man in the black parka had apologized in German—and Reid had simply picked it up without thinking.

“You’re going to freak Sara out again, doing things like that,” Maya accused.

His shoulders slackened. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I just thought...” *You thought the Slovakian traffickers had followed you and your girls to Switzerland.* Suddenly he recognized how ridiculous that sounded.

It was clear that Maya and Sara were not the only ones that needed to recover from their shared experience. *Maybe I need to schedule a few sessions with Dr. Branson,* he thought as he rejoined his daughters.

“I’m sorry about that,” he told Sara. “I guess I’m just a little overprotective right now.”

She said nothing in response, but stared at the floor with a faraway look in her eye, both hands wrapped around a mug as it grew cold.

Seeing his reaction and hearing him bark angrily at the man in German had reminded her of the incident and, if he had to guess, just how little she knew about her own father.

Great, he thought bitterly. *Not even one day in and I’ve already ruined it. How am I going to fix this?* He took a seat between the girls and desperately tried to think of something he could say or do to return to the cheerful atmosphere of only moments ago.

But before he had the chance, Sara spoke up. Her gaze lifted to meet his as she murmured, and despite the conversations around them Reid heard her words clearly.

“I want to know,” his youngest daughter said. “I want to know the truth.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Yosef Bachar had spent the last eight years of his career in perilous situations. As an investigative journalist, he had accompanied armed troops into the Gaza Strip. He had trekked across deserts in search of hidden compounds and caves during the long hunt for Osama bin Laden. He had reported from the midst of firefights and air raids. Not two years earlier, he had broken the story of Hamas smuggling drone parts across borders and forcing a kidnapped Saudi engineer to reconstruct them so they could be used for bombings. His exposé had inspired higher security at borders and increased awareness of insurgents seeking better technology.

Despite all he had done to risk life and limb, he had never found himself in more danger than he was in now. He and two Israeli colleagues had been covering the story of Imam Khalil and his small sect of followers, who had unleashed a mutated smallpox virus on Barcelona and attempted to do the same on the United States. A source in Istanbul told them that the last few of Khalil's zealots had fled to Iraq, hiding somewhere near Albaghdadi.

But Yosef Bachar and his two compatriots did not find Khalil's people; they had not even reached the city before their car was run off the road by another group, and the three journalists were taken hostage.

For three days they had been kept in the basement of a desert compound, bound at the wrists and kept in the dark, both literally and figuratively.

Bachar had spent those three days waiting for their inevitable fate. These men were most likely Hamas, he realized, or some offshoot thereof. They would torture and eventually murder him. They would record the ordeal on video and send it to the Israeli government. Three days of waiting and wondering, dozens of horrid scenarios playing out in Bachar's head, felt just as tortuous as whatever plans these men had for them.

But when they finally did come for him, it was not with weapons or implements. It was with words.

A young man, not twenty-five if he was a day, entered the subterranean level of the compound alone and turned on the light, a single bare bulb in the ceiling. He had dark eyes, a beard trimmed short, and broad shoulders. The young man paced before the three of them, on their knees with hands bound in front of them.

"My name is Awad bin Saddam," he told them, "and I am the leader of the Brotherhood. The three of you have been conscripted into a most glorious purpose. Of you, one will deliver for me a message. Another will document our holy *jihad*. And the third... the third is unnecessary. The third will die at our hands." The young man, this bin Saddam, paused his pacing and reached into his pocket.

"You may decide who will carry out which task between yourselves if you wish," he said. "Or, you may leave it to chance." He bent at the waist and placed three thin lengths of twine on the floor before them.

Two of them were approximately six inches long. The third was trimmed a couple inches shorter than the others.

"I will return in half an hour." The young terrorist left the basement and locked the door behind him.

The three journalists stared at the trimmed, fraying lengths of rope on the stone floor.

"This is monstrous," said Avi quietly. He was a stout man of forty-eight years, older than most still working in the field.

"I will volunteer," Yosef told them. The words spilled from his mouth before he thought them through—because if he did, he would likely hold them behind his tongue.

“No, Yosef.” Idan, the youngest of them, shook his head firmly. “It is noble of you, but we couldn’t live with ourselves knowing that we allowed you to volunteer for death.”

“You would leave it up to chance?” Yosef countered.

“Chance is fair,” said Avi. “Chance is unbiased. Besides...” He lowered his voice as he added, “This may be a ruse. They may still yet kill all of us anyhow.”

Idan reached down with both bound hands and scooped the three spans of rope in his fist, gripping them so that the exposed ends appeared to be the same length. “Yosef,” he said, “you choose first.” He held them out.

Yosef’s throat was too dry for words as he reached for an end and slowly pulled it from Idan’s fist. A prayer ran through his head as an inch, then two, then three unfurled from his enclosed fingers.

The other end fell free after only a few short inches. He had drawn the short rope.

Avi heaved a sigh, but it was one of despair, not of relief.

“There you have it,” said Yosef simply.

“Yosef...” Idan began.

“The two of you can decide between yourselves which task you will take,” Yosef said, cutting off the younger man. “But... if either of you make it out of this and return home, please tell me wife and son...” He trailed off. Final words seemed to fail him. There was nothing he could convey in a message that they would not already know.

“We will tell them you boldly faced your fate in face of terror and iniquity,” Avi offered.

“Thank you.” Yosef dropped the short length to the ground.

Bin Saddam returned a short time later, as he had promised, and again paced before the three of them. “I trust you have come to a decision?” he asked.

“We have,” said Avi, looking up into the face of the terrorist. “We have decided to adopt your Islamic concept of hell just so that we have a place to believe you and your bastard lot will end up.”

Awad bin Saddam smirked. “But which of you will go before me?”

Yosef’s throat still felt parched, too dry for words. He opened his mouth to accept his fate.

“I will.”

“Idan!” Yosef’s eyes bulged wide. Before he could say anything, the younger man had spoken up. “No, it is not him,” he told bin Saddam quickly. “I drew the short rope.”

Bin Saddam looked from Yosef to Idan, seemingly amused. “I suppose I will just have to kill the one who opened his mouth first.” He reached for his belt and unsheathed an ugly, curved knife with a handle made from a goat’s horn.

Yosef’s stomach turned at the mere sight of it. “Wait, not him—”

Awad flicked his knife out and across Avi’s throat. The older man’s mouth fell open in surprise, but no sound came forth as blood cascaded down from his open neck and spilled onto the floor.

“No!” Yosef shouted. Idan squeezed his eyes shut as a piteous sob burst from him.

Avi fell forward onto his stomach, faced away from Yosef as a pool of dark blood seeped across the stones.

Without another word, bin Saddam left them there once again.

The two remaining endured that night without sleep and not a single word passing between them, though Yosef could hear the soft sobs of Idan as he mourned the loss of his mentor, Avi, whose body laid mere feet from them, growing ever colder.

In the morning three Arabic men entered the basement wordlessly and removed Avi’s body. Two more came immediately after, followed by bin Saddam.

“Him.” He pointed to Yosef, and the two insurgents roughly hauled him to his feet by the shoulders. As he was dragged towards the door he realized that he might never see Idan again.

“Be strong,” he called over his shoulder. “God be with you.”

Yosef squinted in the harsh sunlight as he was dragged into a courtyard surrounded by a high stone wall and thrown unceremoniously into the back of a truck, the bed covered by a dome of canvas. A burlap bag was yanked over his head, and once again he found himself plunged into darkness.

The truck rumbled to life and out of the compound. Which direction they were traveling in, Yosef could not tell. He lost track of how long they had been driving and the voices from the cab were hardly distinguishable.

After a while—two hours, perhaps three—he could hear the sounds of other vehicles, engines roaring, horns honking. Beyond that were street vendors hawking and civilians shouting, laughing, conversing. *A city*, Yosef realized. *We are in a city. What city? And why?*

The truck slowed and suddenly a harsh, deep voice was directly in his ear. “You are my messenger.” There was no mistaking it; the voice belonged to bin Saddam. “We are in Baghdad. Two blocks to the east is the American embassy. I am going to release you, and you are going to go there. Do not stop for anything. Do not speak to anyone until you arrive. I want you to tell them what happened to you and your countrymen. I want you to tell them that it was the Brotherhood that did this, and their leader, Awad bin Saddam. Do this and you will have earned your freedom. Do you understand?”

Yosef nodded. He was confused at the content of such a simple message and why he had to deliver it, yet eager to be free of this Brotherhood.

The burlap bag was torn from over his head, and at the same time he was shoved roughly from the back of the truck. Yosef grunted as he hit the pavement and rolled. An object sailed out behind him and landed nearby, something small and brown and rectangular.

It was his wallet.

He blinked in the sudden daylight, passers-by pausing in astonishment to see a man bound at the wrists thrown from the back of a moving vehicle. But the truck did not stop; it rolled on and vanished into the thick afternoon traffic.

Yosef grabbed his wallet and got to his feet. His clothes were filthy and soiled; his limbs ached. His heart broke for Avi and for Idan. But he was free.

He staggered down the block, ignoring stares from citizens of Baghdad as he headed towards the US embassy. A large American flag guided his way from high upon a pole.

Yosef was about twenty-five yards from the tall chain-link fence that surrounded the embassy, topped in barbed wire, when an American soldier called out to him. There were four of them posted at the gate, each armed with an automatic rifle and in full tactical gear.

“Halt!” the soldier ordered. Two of his comrades leveled their guns in his direction as the dirty, bound Yosef, half-dehydrated and sweating, stopped in his tracks. “Identify yourself!”

“My name is Yosef Bachar,” he called back in English. “I am one of three Israeli journalists that were kidnapped by Islamic insurgents near Albaghdadi.”

“Call this in,” the commanding soldier told another. With two guns still trained on Yosef, the soldier approached him warily, his rifle cradled in both arms and a finger on the trigger. “Put your hands on your head.”

Yosef was frisked thoroughly for weapons, but the only thing the soldier found was his wallet—and inside it, his identification. Calls were made, and fifteen minutes later Yosef Bachar was admitted entrance to the US embassy.

The ropes were cut away from his wrists and he was ushered into a small and windowless office, though not uncomfortable. A young man brought him a bottle of water, which he chugged gratefully.

A few minutes later, a man in a black suit and matching combed hair entered. “Mr. Bachar,” he said, “my name is Agent Cayhill. We’ve been aware of your situation, and we’re very glad to see you alive and well.”

“Thank you,” said Yosef. “My friend Avi was not so fortunate.”

“I’m sorry,” said the American agent. “Your government has been notified of your presence here, as has your family. We’re going to arrange transportation for you to get home as soon as possible, but first we’d like to talk about what happened to you.” He pointed upwards where the wall met the ceiling. A black camera was directed downwards, towards Yosef. “Our exchange is being recorded, and the audio of our conversation is being fed live to Washington, D.C. It is your right to refuse being recorded. You may have an ambassador or other representative from your country present if you wish—”

Yosef waved a tired hand. “That’s not necessary. I want to speak.”

“Whenever you’re ready then, Mr. Bachar.”

So he did. Yosef detailed the three-day ordeal, starting with the trek towards Albaghdadi and their car being stopped on a desert road. The three of them, he and Avi and Idan, had been forced into the back of a truck with bags over their heads. The bags were not removed until they were in the basement of the compound, where they spent three days in darkness. He told them what had happened to Avi, his voice quavering slightly. He told them of Idan, still there in the compound and at the mercy of those reprobates.

“They claimed to have released me to deliver a message,” Yosef concluded. “They wanted you to know who was responsible for this. They wanted you to know the name of their organization, the Brotherhood, and that of their leader, Awad bin Saddam.” Yosef sighed. “That is all I know.”

Agent Cayhill nodded deeply. “Thank you, Mr. Bachar. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated. Before we see about getting you home, I have one follow-up question. Why would they send you to us? Why not your own government, your people?”

Yosef shook his head. He had been asking himself that ever since he had entered the embassy. “I do not know. All they said was that they wanted you, the Americans, to know who was responsible.”

Cayhill’s brow furrowed deeply. There was a knock at the door to the small office, and then a young woman peered in. “Sorry sir,” she said quietly, “but the delegation is here. They’re waiting in conference room C.”

“Just one minute, thank you,” said Cayhill.

In the same instant that the door closed again, the floor beneath them exploded. Yosef Bachar and Agent Cayhill, along with sixty-three other souls, were incinerated instantly.

*

Just short of two blocks due south, a truck with a dome of canvas stretched over the bed was parked at the curb, a direct line of sight to the American embassy through its windshield.

Awad watched, not blinking, as the windows of the embassy exploded, sending fireballs into the sky. The truck beneath him shuddered with the blast, even from this distance. Black smoke roiled into the air as the walls buckled and caved, and the American embassy collapsed in on itself.

Procuring nearly his own weight in plastic explosives had been the easy part, now that he had unquestioned access to Hassan’s fortune. Even kidnapping the journalists had been simple enough. No, the difficulty had been obtaining falsified credentials that were realistic enough for he and three others to pose as maintenance workers. It had required hiring a Tunisian skilled enough to create fake background checks and to hack into the database to enter them as approved contractors allowed access to the embassy.

Only then could Awad and the Brotherhood stow the explosives in a maintenance corridor underneath the Americans’ feet, as they had done two days prior, posing as plumbers repairing a burst pipe.

That part had not been simple or inexpensive, but all well worth it to meet Awad’s ends. No, the easy part had been slipping the high-tech detonation chip into the journalist’s wallet and sending him

on his way towards what the foolish man thought was freedom. The bomb would not have detonated without the chip in range.

The Israeli had, essentially, blown up the embassy for them.

“Let’s go,” he told Usama, who directed the truck back onto the road. They skirted around parked vehicles, the drivers stopping right in the middle of the street in awe of the explosion. Pedestrians ran screaming from the blast site as parts of the building’s outer walls continued to collapse.

“I don’t understand,” Usama grumbled as he attempted to navigate the choked streets full of panicking people. “Hassan told me how much was spent on this endeavor. All for what? To kill a journalist and a handful of Americans?”

“Yes,” Awad said pensively. “A *select* handful of Americans. It came to my attention recently that a congressional delegation from the United States was visiting Baghdad as part of a goodwill mission.”

“What sort of delegation?” Usama asked.

Awad smirked; his simpleminded brother did not, or simply could not, understand—which was why Awad had not yet shared the full extent of his plan with the rest of the Brotherhood. “A congressional delegation,” he repeated. “A group of American political leaders; more specifically, leaders from New York.”

Usama nodded as if he understood, but his furrowed brow said that he still was far from comprehension. “And that was your plan? To kill them?”

“Yes,” said Awad. “And to make the Americans aware of us.” *As well as aware of me.* “Now we must get back to the compound and prepare for the next part of the plan. We have to hurry. They will be coming for us.”

“Who will?” Usama asked.

Awad smirked as he glanced through the windshield at the burning wreckage of the embassy. “Everyone.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Alright,” said Reid. “Ask me whatever you’d like, and I’ll be honest. Take as long as you need.”

He sat across from his daughters in a corner booth of a fondue restaurant in one of Engelberg-Titlis’ higher-end hotels. After Sara had told him in the lodge that she wanted to know the truth, Reid had suggested they go elsewhere, away from the common room of the ski lodge. Their own room felt like too quiet a place for such intense subject matter, so he took them to dinner in the hopes of providing something of a casual atmosphere while they talked. He had chosen this place specifically because each booth was separated by glass partitions, giving them some modicum of privacy.

Even so, he kept his voice low.

Sara stared at the table for a long while, thinking. “I don’t want to talk about what happened,” she said at last.

“We don’t have to,” Reid agreed. “We’ll only talk about what you want, and I promise the truth, just like with your sister.”

Sara glanced over at Maya. “You... know things?”

“Some,” she admitted. “Sorry, Squeak. I didn’t think you were ready to hear it.”

If Sara was angry or upset at all by this news, she didn’t show it. Instead she chewed her bottom lip for a moment, forming a question in her head, and then asked. “You’re not just a teacher, are you?”

“No.” Reid had assumed that clarifying what he was and what he did would be among her top concerns. “I’m not. I am—rather, I *was*—an agent with the CIA. Do you know what that means?”

“Like... a spy?”

He shrugged. “Sort of. There was some spying involved. But it’s more about stopping bad people from doing worse things.”

“What do you mean, ‘was’?” she asked.

“Well, I’m not doing that anymore. I did for a while, and then when...” He cleared his throat. “When Mom died, I stopped. For two years I wasn’t with them. Then, back in February, I was asked to come back.” *That’s a mild way of putting it*, he chided himself. “That thing on the news, with the Winter Olympics and the bombing at the economic forum? I was there. I helped stop it.”

“So you’re a good guy?”

Reid blinked in surprise at the question. “Of course I am. Did you think I wasn’t?”

This time Sara shrugged, not meeting his gaze. “Don’t know,” she said quietly. “Hearing all this, it’s like... like...”

“Like getting to know a stranger,” Maya murmured. “A stranger that looks like you.” Sara nodded her agreement.

Reid sighed. “I’m not a stranger,” he insisted. “I’m still your dad. I’m the same person I’ve always been. Everything you know about me, everything we’ve done together, that was all real. This... all of this stuff, it was a job. Now it’s not anymore.”

Was that the truth? he wondered. He wanted to believe it was—that Kent Steele was nothing but an alias and not a personality.

“So,” Sara started, “those two men that chased us on the boardwalk...?”

He hesitated, unsure if this was too much for her to hear. But he had promised honesty. “They were terrorists,” he told her. “They were men that were trying to get to you to hurt me. Just like...” He caught himself before saying anything about Rais or the Slovakian traffickers.

“Look,” he started again, “for a long time I thought that I was the only one who could get hurt by doing this. But now I see how wrong I was. So I’m done. I still work for them, but I do administrative stuff. No more fieldwork.”

“So we’re safe?”

Reid's heart broke anew at not only the question, but the hope in his youngest daughter's eyes. *The truth*, he reminded himself. "No," he told her. "The truth is that no one ever really is. As wonderful and beautiful as this world can be, there will always be wicked people that want to do harm to others. Now I know firsthand that there are a lot of good people out there that are making sure there are fewer wicked people every day. But no matter what they do, or what I do, I can't ever guarantee that you'll be safe from everything."

He didn't know where these words were coming from, but it felt like they were just as much for his own benefit as for his girls. It was a lesson that he very much needed to learn. "That doesn't mean I won't try," he added. "I will never stop trying to keep you two safe. Just like you should always try to keep yourselves safe too."

"How?" Sara asked. The faraway look was back in her eye. Reid knew exactly what she was thinking: how could she, a fourteen-year-old weighing eighty pounds soaking wet, keep something like the incident from happening again?

"Well," said Reid, "apparently your sister's been sneaking off to a self-defense class."

Sara looked sharply over at her sister. "Really?"

Maya rolled her eyes. "Thanks for selling me out, Dad."

Sara glanced back over at him. "I want to learn to shoot a gun."

"Whoa." Reid held up a hand. "Pump the brakes, kiddo. That's a pretty serious request..."

"Why not?" Maya chimed in. "Don't you think we're responsible enough?"

"Of course, I do," he replied flatly, "I just—"

"You said we should keep ourselves safe too," Sara added.

"I did say that, but there are other ways to—"

"My friend Brent has been going hunting with his dad since he was twelve," Maya cut in. "He knows how to shoot a gun. Why shouldn't we?"

"Because that's different," Reid said forcefully. "And no ganging up on me. That's unfair." Up until then, he had thought this was going quite well, but now they were using his own words against him. He pointed at Sara. "You want to learn to shoot? You can. But only with me. And first, I want you caught up with school and I want positive reports from Dr. Branson. And you." He pointed at Maya. "No more secret self-defense classes, okay? I don't know what that guy is teaching you. You want to learn to fight, to defend yourself, you ask me."

"Really? You'll teach me?" Maya seemed buoyant at the prospect.

"Yes, I will." He picked up his menu and opened it. "If you have more questions, I'll answer them. But I think that's about good for one evening, yeah?"

He considered himself lucky that Sara hadn't asked him anything that he couldn't answer. He didn't want to have to explain the memory suppressor—that might complicate matters and reinforce their doubt about who he was—but he also didn't want to have to answer that he didn't know something. They would immediately suspect he was keeping it from them.

That clinches it, he thought. He had to get it done, and soon. No more waiting or excuses.

"Hey," he said over his menu, "what do you say we check out Zurich tomorrow? It's a beautiful city. Tons of history and shopping and culture."

"Sure," Maya agreed. But Sara said nothing. When Reid looked over his menu again, her face was scrunched into a pensive frown. "Sara?" he asked.

She looked up at him. "Did Mom know?"

The question had been a curveball once before when Maya had asked, not much more than a month earlier, and it took him by surprise again hearing it from Sara.

He shook his head. "No. She didn't."

"Isn't that..." She hesitated, but then took a breath and asked, "Isn't that kind of like lying?"

Reid folded his menu and set it down on the table. Suddenly he wasn't very hungry anymore. "Yeah, sweetheart. It's exactly like lying."

*

The next morning Reid and the girls took the train north from Engelberg to Zurich. They didn't talk any further about his past, or about the incident; if Sara had any more questions, she held them back, at least for now.

Instead they enjoyed the scenic views of the Swiss Alps on the two-hour train ride, snapping photos through the window. They spent the late morning enjoying the breathtaking medieval architecture of Old Town and walked the shores of the Limmat River. Despite not claiming to enjoy history as much as he did, both girls were stunned by the beauty of the twelfth-century Grossmünster cathedral (though they groaned when Reid began to lecture them about Huldrych Zwingli and his sixteenth-century religious reforms that took place there).

Though Reid was having a great time with his daughters, his smile was at least partially forced. He was anxious about what was coming.

"What's next?" Maya asked after a lunch at a small café with views of the river.

"You know what would be really great after a meal like that?" Reid said. "A movie."

"A movie," his eldest repeated flatly. "Yeah, we definitely should have come all the way to Switzerland to do something we can do at home."

Reid grinned. "Not just any movie. The Swiss National Museum isn't far, and they're showing a documentary on the history of Zurich from the Middle Ages to the present. Doesn't that sound neat?"

"No," said Maya.

"Not really," Sara agreed.

"Huh. Well, I'm the dad, and I say we go see it. Then we can do whatever you two want to do and I won't complain. I promise."

Maya sighed. "Fair is fair. Lead the way."

Less than ten minutes later they arrived at the Swiss National Museum, which really was showing a documentary about the history of Zurich. And Reid genuinely was interested in seeing it. And even though he bought three tickets, he only intended on using two of them.

"Sara, do you need to use the restroom before we go in?" he asked.

"Good idea." She ducked into the bathroom. Maya started to follow, but Reid quickly grabbed her by the arm.

"Wait. Maya... I have to go."

She blinked at him. "What?"

"There's something I have to do," he said quickly. "I have an appointment."

Maya raised an eyebrow warily. "Doing what?"

"It has nothing to do with the CIA. At least, not directly."

She scoffed. "I can't believe this."

"Maya, please," he pleaded. "This is important to me. I promise you, I swear, it's not fieldwork or anything dangerous. I just have to talk to someone. Privately."

His daughter's nostrils flared. She didn't like it one bit, and worse, she didn't truly believe him. "What do I tell Sara?"

Reid had already thought of that. "Tell her there was a problem with my credit card. Someone back home trying to use it, and I have to get that cleared up so that we don't have to leave the ski lodge. Tell her I'm right outside, making phone calls."

"Oh, okay," Maya said mockingly. "You want me to lie to her."

"Maya..." Reid groaned. Sara would be exiting the bathroom at any moment. "I promise you I will tell you all about it afterward, but I just don't have the time right now. Please, go in there, have a seat, and watch the movie with her. I'll be back before it's over."

"Fine," she agreed reluctantly. "But I want a full explanation when you're back."

“You’ll get one,” he promised. “And don’t leave that theater.” He kissed her forehead and hurried away before Sara came out of the bathroom.

It felt awful, once again lying to his girls—or at least keeping the truth from them, which as Sara had astutely pointed out the night before, was pretty much the same as lying.

Is that how it’s always going to be? he wondered as he hurried out of the museum. *Will there ever be a time that honesty is really the best policy?*

He hadn’t just lied to Sara. He had lied to Maya as well. He had no appointment. He knew where Dr. Guyer’s practice was located (conveniently close to the Swiss National Museum, which Reid had considered in his plan) and he knew from an anonymous call that the doctor would be in today, but he did not dare leave his name or make a formal appointment. He didn’t know who this Guyer was at all, other than the man that had implanted the memory suppressor in Kent Steele’s head two years earlier. Reidigger had trusted the doctor, but that didn’t mean Guyer didn’t have some kind of link to the agency. Or worse, they could be watching him.

What if they knew about the doctor? he worried. *What if they’ve been keeping tabs on him all this time?*

It was too late to concern himself with that now. His plan was simply to go there, meet the man, and find out what, if anything, he could do about Reid’s memory loss. *Consider it a consultation*, he joked to himself as he walked briskly down Löwenstrasse, parallel to the Limmat River and towards the address he had found online. He had about two hours before the documentary at the museum was over. Plenty of time, or so he assumed.

Dr. Guyer’s neurosurgery practice was located in a wide, four-story professional building right off a main boulevard and across a courtyard from a cathedral. The structure was medieval in architecture, a far cry from the bland sort of American medical buildings he was accustomed to; it was nicer than most hotels Reid had stayed in.

He took the stairs up to the third floor and found an oak door with a bronze knocker and the name GUYER inscribed on a brass plate. He paused for a moment, unsure of what he would find on the other side. He wasn’t even certain of how common it was for neurosurgeons to have private practices in upscale buildings in Old Town Zurich—but then again, he couldn’t recall ever needing to visit one before.

He tried the knob; it was unlocked.

The Swiss doctor’s taste and affluence was immediately apparent. The paintings on the walls were mostly Impressionist, colorful open compositions in ornate frames that looked as if they cost as much as some cars. The van Gogh was most definitely a print, but if he wasn’t mistaken the lanky sculpture in the corner appeared to be an original Giacometti.

I wouldn’t even know that if it wasn’t for Kate, he thought, reinforcing his reason for being here as he crossed the small room towards a desk on the opposite side.

There were two things that immediately caught his eye on the other side of the reception area. The first was the desk itself, carved from a single irregularly-shaped piece of rosewood with dark, swirling patterns in the grain. *Cocobolo*, he realized. *That’s easily a six-thousand dollar desk.*

He refused to let himself be impressed by the art or the desk—but the woman behind it was another matter. She regarded Reid evenly with one perfect eyebrow arched and a smiled on her pouting lips. Her blonde hair framed the contours of an exquisitely shaped face and porcelain skin. Her eyes appeared too crystalline blue to be real.

“Good afternoon,” she said in English with only a slight Swiss-German accent. “Please have a seat, Agent Zero.”

CHAPTER NINE

Reid's fight-or-flight instinct kicked in immediately at the receptionist's words. And since it was clear to him that he wasn't going to fight this woman—mostly clear, anyway—he decided to run. But halfway back to the door he heard a loud click.

The doorknob rattled, but did not move.

He spun and saw the woman's hand beneath her expensive desk. *There must be a button. A remote locking mechanism.*

This is a trap.

"Let me out," he warned. "You don't know what I'm capable of."

"I do," she replied. "And I assure you, you are in no danger. Would you like some tea?" Her tone was pacifying, as if she was dealing with a schizophrenic that had skipped their meds.

Words nearly failed him. "Tea? No, I don't want tea. I want to leave." He slammed his shoulder against the heavy door, but it would not budge.

"That won't work," the woman said. "Please don't hurt yourself."

He turned back to her. She had stood from her desk and held her hands out in a non-threatening manner. *But she locked you in here,* he reminded himself. *So maybe you will fight this woman.*

"My name is Alina Guyer," she said. "Do you remember me?"

Guyer? But Reidigger's letter said the doctor was a "he." Besides, Reid was fairly sure he wouldn't forget a face like that. She was downright stunning.

"No," he said. "I don't remember you. I don't remember ever being here and it was a mistake to come here. If you don't let me out, bad things are going to happen..."

"My god," said a hushed male voice. "It's you."

Reid immediately put up his fists as he turned towards the new threat.

The doctor—presumably, since he wore a white coat—stood in the threshold of a door to the left of the cocobolo desk. He had to be in his late fifties, if not sixty, though his green eyes were keen and sharp. His entirely white hair was trimmed neatly and impeccably parted. His tie, Reid noted, was Ermenegildo Zegna, though he wasn't sure how he knew that.

Most important of all, however, was that the doctor looked entirely awestruck by Reid's presence.

"Dr. Guyer, I presume?" he said breathlessly.

"I always thought you might come back," the doctor said, a wide smile breaking upon his face. He had a similar Swiss-German accent as his receptionist, who he turned to as he said, "Alina, darling, cancel my appointments. Hold my calls. Keep the lock on. We are closed for today."

"Of course," said Alina as she slowly sank back to her chair, her lake-like eyes not leaving Reid.

"Come!" Guyer motioned for Reid to follow. "Please, come. I promise you are in the company of friends here."

Reid hesitated. "You understand I might be a little distrusting."

Guyer nodded appreciably. "I understand we have a lot to discuss." He turned and vanished through the doorway.

This feels wrong. They had a remote door lock, no patients present, and a small fortune in furniture. But he wanted answers, so Reid ignored his instinct to flee and followed the doctor.

Before he went through the doorway the receptionist—who Reid had surmised was Guyer's wife—glanced up at him with a thin smile and asked, "About that tea?"

"Maybe something stronger, if you've got it," Reid muttered.

The walls of Guyer's office held an impressive number of framed certifications and diplomas, as well as an array of photographs of various travels and achievements. But Reid barely glanced at

them. He didn't care about anything this doctor had done other than the single procedure Guyer had performed on his head.

The doctor pulled open a desk drawer and took out a notebook and pen, and then sat heavily in his chair, beaming at Reid like he was Christmas morning.

"Please," he said. "Have a seat, Agent Zero." Guyer sighed. "I always suspected you might return here. I just didn't know when. I assumed the implant would eventually fail—if you survived—but only two years? That is simply shoddy craftsmanship." He chuckled as if he had told a joke. "Now that you're here, I have a thousand questions. But I'm afraid I don't know where to start."

Reid lowered himself into a chair opposite Guyer's desk, keeping his guard up and his periphery on the door behind him. He glanced down at his watch and saw a message from Maya: *Sara bought it. You'd better be here when the movie is over.*

Right, he thought. No matter what happened here, he couldn't forget that he was on a schedule. "I know where to start," Reid said. "What do you mean the implant would eventually fail?"

"You know where this technology was acquired, yes?" the doctor asked.

Reid did. Alan Reidigger had stolen it from the CIA; in fact, the eccentric tech engineer Bixby was a co-inventor of the memory suppressor. "Yes," he answered.

"Well, your friend Mr. Reidigger made me a deal," said Guyer. "He did not only bring me the memory suppressor, but also the schematic upon which it was built so that I might attempt to copy its technology. However, upon studying it, I saw the flaw in its design. It was, after all, just a prototype. I estimated that it would begin to fail after five or six years."

"Begin to fail?" Reid repeated. "So these memories would have come back to me eventually anyway?"

"Well... yes," the doctor said blankly. "Is that not why you're here? You have started to recover the memories that were suppressed?"

"Not quite. Iranian terrorists tore the implant out of my head."

Dr. Guyer's expression fell slack. "Oh," he said empathetically, "that is most unfortunate. You poor man... Your mind must be a jumbled mess."

"It is. Thanks," Reid said flatly. "What about the other part? You said 'if I survived.' What does that mean?"

Guyer looked at his desk as if there was something very interesting there. "I think that question would be best answered by your colleague Mr. Reidigger."

"He can't answer," Reid told him. "He's dead."

Guyer seemed extremely troubled by the news. He folded his hands reverently on the desk with his brow furrowed, the creases in his forehead aging him several years. "I am very sorry to hear that," he said quietly. "He seemed a good man. He went to great lengths to help a friend."

"That may be so, but he's not here," Reid said simply. "I am. And you didn't answer my question."

The doctor nodded. "Yes. Well. It is no simple answer, nor one you may want to hear..."

"Try me."

Guyer sighed. "You and Mr. Reidigger wanted your memories suppressed so that you might live out your days with your family, blissfully unaware of the hardships you had faced. But both of you thought that your agency would find you eventually and... and silence you."

What? Reid could not believe what he was hearing. This entire time he had thought that the purpose of the suppressor was for him to return to a normal life, away from the CIA and everything that had come with it. "You're suggesting that I knew, or thought, I would be killed? And I still agreed to this?"

"That is correct, Agent Zero."

Reid shook his head. *Why would I do that? Why would I take away anything that would have given me a fighting chance?* It felt as if he had condemned himself to some sort of memory hospice.

He never imagined he would ever think it, but the Iranians' intrusion into his home on that night in February was suddenly welcome. Without it, he never would have remembered his sordid past, or the truth about his wife's death, or anything about the conspiracy...

Then he realized. That was exactly why he did it—so that whatever time he had remaining wouldn't be lived in heavy secrets and lies. Everything he knew, everything he had shared with his girls and everything he still kept from them, felt as if it was slowly eating away at him. If he had truly believed that the agency would eventually take him out anyway, then the suppressor would have allowed him to live without the weight of his past on his shoulders.

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