



JACK MARS

HUNTING

ZERO

AN AGENT ZERO SPY THRILLER—BOOK 3

An Agent Zero Spy Thriller

Jack Mars
Hunting Zero

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Mars J.

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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 HUNTING ZERO (Book #3), when CIA operative Agent Zero finds out his two teenage girls have been kidnapped and are bound for a trafficking ring in Eastern Europe, he embarks on a high-octane chase across Europe, leaving a trail of devastation in his wake as he breaks all rules, risks his own life, and does everything he can to get his daughters back. Kent, ordered by the CIA to stand down, refuses. Without the backing of the agency, with moles and assassins on all sides, with a lover he can barely trust, and being targeted himself, Agent Zero must fight multiple foes to get his girls back. Up against the most deadly trafficking ring in Europe, with political connections reaching all the way to the top, it is an unlikely battle—one man against an army—and one that only Agent Zero can wage. And yet, his own identity, he realizes, may be the most perilous secret of all. HUNTING ZERO (Book #3) 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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Jack Mars

Hunting Zero (An Agent Zero Spy Thriller—Book #3)

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 2 Summary (recap sheet to be included in book 3)

Samples of an ancient, deadly virus are stolen from Siberia and unleashed in Spain, killing hundreds in hours. Though his memory as a CIA agent is still fragmented, Agent Zero is reinstated to help find and secure the virus before a terrorist organization can release it in the United States

Agent Zero: More memories of his former life as a CIA agent have returned to him, most notably that of a clandestine plot by the American government to initiate a pre-planned war for insidious motivations. The details of what he knew two years ago are muddled and faded, but before he had the chance to dig further he returned home to discover that his two daughters had been kidnapped from their home.

Maya and Sara Lawson: While their father was away, the girls were under the watchful eye of Mr. Thompson, their neighbor and a retired CIA operative. When the assassin Rais broke in, Thompson did his best to fend him off but was ultimately killed, and Maya and Sara were taken.

Agent Maria Johansson: Once again Maria proved an indispensable ally when she helped to secure the smallpox virus from being released. Though her newfound relationship with Kent borders on the romantic, she has secrets of her own, having met with a mysterious Ukrainian operative in the airport at Kiev to discuss where Agent Zero's allegiances lie.

Rais: After being beaten and left for dead in Switzerland, Rais recovered for several weeks in a hospital under guard and handcuffs. With nothing but time on his hands, he engineered not only a daring and bloody escape, but also managed to abscond to the US before international borders were shut down due to the virus. From there it was not difficult to find the Lawson home, kill the old man, and kidnap Agent Zero's two teenage daughters.

Agent John Watson: As part of the team sent to secure the smallpox virus, Watson made it abundantly clear that he has a distaste for Agent Zero's daredevil tactics. Nevertheless, after their success in stopping Imam Khalil, the two reached an understanding and a mutual respect.

Assistant Director Ashleigh Riker: A former intelligence officer who has worked her way up the chain to Special Operations Group, Riker works directly under Deputy Director Shawn Cartwright on the op to secure the virus. She does not mask her disdain for Agent Zero and the license the agency gives him. After another agent attacked Zero unprovoked, he began to suspect that Riker might be in on the conspiracy—and therefore not to be trusted.

CHAPTER ONE

At age sixteen, Maya Lawson was mostly certain she was going to die soon.

She sat in the backseat of a large-cabbed pickup truck as it barreled down I-95, heading south through Virginia. Her legs still felt weak from the trauma and terror of what she had experienced barely more than an hour earlier. She stared straight ahead impassively, her mouth slightly open in a shell-shocked, blank gaze.

The truck had belonged to her neighbor, Mr. Thompson. He was dead now, likely still lying in the tiled foyer of the Lawson home in Alexandria. The truck's current driver was his murderer.

Seated beside Maya was her younger sister, Sara, only fourteen. Her legs were drawn up beneath her and her body curled into Maya's. Sara had stopped sobbing, at least for now, but each breath escaped her open mouth with a soft moan.

Sara had no idea what was going on. She knew only what she had seen—the man in their house. Mr. Thompson dead. The assailant threatening to break her sister's limbs to get Sara to open the door to their basement panic room. She didn't know any of what Maya knew, and even Maya knew only a small part of the whole truth.

But the elder Lawson girl did know one thing, or at least she was mostly certain of it: she was going to die soon. She did not know what the driver of the truck was planning to do with them—he had made the promise that he wouldn't hurt them as long as they did what he asked—but that didn't matter.

Despite her slack-jawed expression, Maya's mind was working a mile a minute. Only one thing was important now, and that was keeping Sara safe. The man behind the wheel was alert and capable, but at some point he would falter. As long as they did what he asked, he would get complacent, even for just a second, and in that moment she would act. She did not know yet what she would do, but it would have to be direct, ruthless, and debilitating. Give Sara the opportunity to flee, to get to safety, to other people, to a phone.

It would likely cost Maya her life. But she was already very much aware of that.

Another soft moan escaped her sister's lips. *She's in shock*, Maya thought. But the moan became a murmur, and she realized that Sara was trying to speak. She bent her head close to Sara's lips to hear her quiet question.

"Why is this happening to us?"

"Shh." Maya cradled Sara's head against her chest and gently stroked her hair. "It's going to be okay."

She regretted it as soon as she said it; it was an empty sentiment, something that people say when they have nothing else to offer. Clearly it was not okay, and she could not promise that it would be.

"Sins of the father." The man behind the wheel spoke for the first time since he had forced them into the truck. He said it casually, eerily calmly. Then louder he said, "This is happening to you because of the decisions made and actions taken by one Reid Lawson, known to others as Kent Steele, known to many more as Agent Zero."

Kent Steele? Agent Zero? Maya had no idea what this man, the assassin who called himself Rais, was talking about. But she knew some things, enough to know that her father was an agent of some government group—FBI, possibly CIA.

"He took everything from me." Rais stared straight ahead at the highway beyond them, but he spoke with a tone of unadulterated hatred. "Now I've taken everything from him."

"He's going to find us," Maya said. Her tone was hushed, not defiant, as if she were simply stating a fact. "He's going to come for us, and he's going to kill you."

Rais nodded as if he agreed with her. “He will come for you; that is true. And he will try to kill me. Twice he has made attempts and left me for dead... once in Denmark, and again in Switzerland. Did you know that?”

Maya said nothing. She had suspected that her dad had something to do with the terrorist plot that unfolded a month earlier in February, when a radical faction tried to bomb the World Economic Forum in Davos.

“But I endure,” Rais continued. “You see, I was led to believe that it was my destiny to kill your father, but I was wrong. It is my *fate*. Do you know the difference?” He scoffed lightly. “Of course you don’t. You are a child. Destiny is comprised of the events that one is supposed to fulfill. It is something we can control, something we can dictate. Fate, on the other hand, is beyond us. It is determined by another power, one we cannot fully comprehend. I don’t believe I am allowed to perish until your father dies at my hand.”

“You’re Amun,” Maya said. It wasn’t a question.

“I was, once. But Amun is no more. I alone endure.”

The assassin had confirmed what she had already feared; that he was a fanatic, someone who had been indoctrinated by the cultlike terrorism group of Amun into believing that his actions were not only justified, but necessary. Maya was gifted with the dangerous combination of intelligence and curiosity; she had read much on the subjects of terrorism and fanaticism in the wake of the Davos bombing and her speculation that her father’s absence at the time it had happened meant he had been a part of stopping and dismantling the organization.

So she knew very well that this man could not be swayed with pleas, prayers, or supplication. She knew there was no changing his mind, and she was aware that hurting children was not beyond him. All of it only strengthened her resolve that she had to act as soon as she saw the chance.

“I have to use the bathroom.”

“I don’t care,” Rais responded.

Maya frowned. She had once eluded an Amun member on the New Jersey boardwalk by feigning the need for the bathroom—she didn’t believe her father’s cover story about the man being a local gang member for even a second—and had managed to get Sara to safety then. It was the only thing she could think of in the current moment that would allow them even a precious minute alone, but her request had been denied.

They drove for several more minutes in silence, heading southbound on the interstate while Maya stroked Sara’s hair. Her younger sister seemed to have calmed to a point that she was no longer crying, or had simply run out of tears.

Rais put the blinker on and eased the truck off the next exit. Maya peered out the window and felt a small surge of hope; they were pulling into a rest stop. It was tiny, little more than a picnic area surrounded by trees and a small, squat brick building with restrooms, but it was something.

He was going to let them use the bathroom.

The trees, she thought. If Sara can get into the woods, maybe she can lose him.

Rais parked the truck and let the engine idle for a moment as he scanned the building. Maya did too. There were two trucks there, long tractor trailers parked parallel to the brick building, but no one else. Outside the bathrooms under an awning were a couple of vending machines. She noted with dismay that there were no cameras, at least none visible, on the premises.

“The right side is the women’s restroom,” Rais said. “I will walk you there. If you try to scream or call out to anyone, I will kill them. If you so much as gesture or signal to anyone that anything is amiss, I will kill them. Their blood will be on your hands.”

Sara was trembling in her arms again. Maya hugged her tightly around the shoulders.

“The two of you will hold hands. If you separate, Sara will get hurt.” He twisted around partially to face them—specifically Maya. He had already assumed that of the two, she would be the one more likely to give him trouble. “Do you understand?”

Maya nodded, averting her gaze from his wild green eyes. He had dark lines beneath them, as if he hadn't slept in some time, and his dark hair was shorn short on top of his head. He did not seem all that old, certainly younger than their father, but she could not guess his age.

He held up a black pistol—the Glock that had belonged to her father. Maya had tried to use it on him when he broke into the house, and he had taken it from her. “This will be in my hand, and my hand will be in my pocket. Again I will remind you that trouble for me is trouble for her.” He gestured toward Sara with his head. She whimpered slightly.

Rais got out of the truck first, sticking his hand and the pistol into his black jacket pocket. Then he opened the rear door of the cab. Maya climbed out first, her legs shaky as her feet touched the pavement. She reached back into the cab for Sara's hand and helped her younger sister out.

“Go.” The girls walked in front of him as they headed for the bathroom. Sara shivered; late March in Virginia meant that the weather was just starting to turn, lingering in the mid- to high fifties, and both of them were still in their pajamas. Maya wore only flip-flops on her feet, striped flannel pants, and a black tank top. Her sister had on sneakers with no socks, poplin pajama pants emblazoned with pineapples, and one of their dad's old T-shirts, a tie-dyed rag with the logo of some band neither of them had ever heard of.

Maya turned the knob and pushed into the bathroom first. She instinctively wrinkled her nose in disgust; the place smelled of urine and mold, and the floor was wet from a leaking sink pipe. Still she pulled Sara along behind her into the restroom.

There was a single window in the place, a plate of frosted glass high up in the wall that looked like it would swing outward with a good push. If she could boost her sister up and out, she could distract Rais while Sara ran...

“Move.” Maya flinched as the assassin pushed into the bathroom behind them. Her heart sank. He wasn't going to let them be alone, even for a minute. “You, there.” He pointed to Maya and the second stall of the three. “You, there.” He instructed Sara to the third.

Maya let go of her sister's hand and entered the stall. It was filthy; she wouldn't have wanted to use it even if she actually had to go, but she would at least have to pretend. She started to push the door closed but Rais stopped it with the palm of his hand.

“No,” he told her. “Leave it open.” And then he turned his back, facing the exit.

He's not taking any chances. She slowly sat on the closed toilet seat lid and breathed into her hands. There was nothing she could do. She had no weapons against him. He had a knife and two guns, one of which was currently in his hand, hidden in the jacket pocket. She could try to jump him and let Sara get out, but he was blocking the door. He had already killed Mr. Thompson, a former Marine and a bear of a man who most would have avoided a fight with at any cost. What chance would she have against him?

Sara sniffled in the stall beside her. *This isn't the right time to act*, Maya knew. She had hoped, but she would have to wait again.

Suddenly there was a loud creak as the door to the bathroom was pushed open, and a surprised female voice said, “Oh! Excuse me... Am I in the wrong restroom?”

Rais took a step to the side, past the stall and out of Maya's view. “So sorry, ma'am. No, you're in the right place.” His voice immediately took on a pleasant, even courteous affectation. “My two daughters are in here and... well, maybe I'm overprotective, but you just can't be too careful these days.”

Anger swelled in Maya's chest at the ruse. The fact that this man had taken them from their father and would dare to pretend to be him made her face hot with rage.

“Oh. I see. I just need to use the sink,” the woman told him.

“By all means.”

Maya heard the clacking of shoes against tile, and then a woman came partially into view, facing away from her as she twisted the faucet knob. She looked to be middle-aged, with blonde hair just past her shoulders and dressed smartly.

“Can’t say I blame you,” the woman said to Rais. “Normally I would never stop in a place like this, but I spilled coffee on myself on the way to visit family, and... uh...” She trailed off as she gazed into the mirror.

In the reflection, the woman could see the open stall door, and Maya seated there atop the closed toilet. Maya had no idea what she might look like to a stranger—hair tangled, cheeks puffy from crying, eyes rimmed red—but she could imagine it was likely cause for alarm.

The woman’s gaze flitted to Rais and then back to the mirror. “Uh... I just couldn’t drive another hour and a half with my hands sticky...” She glanced over her shoulder, the water still running, and then she mouthed three very clear words to Maya.

Are you okay?

Maya’s lower lip trembled. *Please don’t talk to me. Please don’t even look at me.* She slowly shook her head. *No.*

Rais’s back must have been turned again, facing the door, because the woman nodded slowly. *No!* Maya thought desperately. She wasn’t trying to plead for help.

She was trying to keep this woman from suffering the same fate as Thompson.

Maya waved her hand at the woman and mouthed one word back at her. *Go. Go.*

The woman frowned deeply, her hands still dripping wet. She glanced in Rais’s direction again. “I suppose it would be too much to ask for paper towels, huh?”

She said it a bit too forcefully.

Then she gestured to Maya with her thumb and pinky, making a phone signal with her hand. She seemed to be suggesting she would call someone.

Please just go.

As the woman turned back toward the door, there was a blur of motion in the air. It happened so fast that at first Maya wasn’t even sure it had happened at all. The woman froze, her eyes widening in shock.

A thin arc of blood spurted from her open throat, spraying against the mirror and sink.

Maya clamped both hands over her mouth to stifle the scream that rose from her lungs. At the same time, the woman’s hands flew to her neck, but there was no stopping the damage that had been done. Blood ran in rivulets over and between her fingers as she sank to her knees, a soft gurgle escaping her lips.

Maya squeezed her eyes shut, both hands still over her mouth. She didn’t want to see it. She didn’t want to watch this woman die because of her. Her breath came in heaving, smothered sobs. From the next stall she heard Sara whimpering softly.

When she dared to open her eyes again, the woman stared back at her. One cheek rested against the filthy wet floor.

The pool of blood that had escaped her neck nearly reached Maya’s feet.

Rais bent at the waist and cleaned his knife on the woman’s blouse. When he looked up at Maya again, it was not anger or distress in his too-green eyes. It was disappointment.

“I told you what would happen,” he said softly. “You tried to signal to her.”

Tears blurred Maya’s vision. “No,” she managed to choke out. She couldn’t control her trembling lips, her shaking hands. “I-I didn’t...”

“Yes,” he said calmly. “You did. Her blood is on your hands.”

Maya began hyperventilating, her breaths coming in wheezing gulps. She bent over, putting her head between her knees, her eyes clenched shut and her fingers in her hair.

First Mr. Thompson, and now this innocent woman. They had both died simply by being too close to her, too close to what this maniac wanted—and he had proven twice now that he was willing to kill, even indiscriminately, to get what he wanted.

When she finally regained control of her breathing and dared to look up again, Rais had the woman's black handbag and was rooting through it. She watched as he took out her phone and tore out both the battery and the SIM card.

"Stand up," he ordered Maya as he entered the stall. She stood quickly, flattening herself against the metal stall partition and holding her breath.

Rais flushed the battery and SIM down the toilet. Then he turned to face her, only inches away in the narrow space. She couldn't meet his gaze. Instead she stared at his chin.

He dangled something in front of her face—a set of car keys.

"Let's go," he said quietly. He left the stall, seemingly having no problem walking through the wide puddle of blood on the floor.

Maya blinked. The rest stop wasn't at all about letting them use the bathroom. It wasn't this assassin showing an ounce of humanity. It was a chance for him to ditch Thompson's truck. *Because the police might be looking for it.*

At least she hoped they were. If her father hadn't come home yet, there was little chance that anyone would know that the Lawson girls were missing.

Maya stepped as gingerly as possible to avoid the puddle of blood—and to avoid looking at the body on the floor. Every joint felt like gelatin. She felt weak, powerless, against this man. All the resolve that she had mustered only minutes ago in the truck had dissolved like sugar in boiling water.

She took Sara by the hand. "Don't look," she whispered, and directed her younger sister around the woman's body. Sara stared at the ceiling, taking long breaths through her open mouth. Fresh tears streaked both of her cheeks. Her face was white as a sheet and her hand felt cold, clammy.

Rais pulled the bathroom door open just a few inches and peered outside. Then he held up a hand. "Wait."

Maya peered around him and saw a portly man in a trucker's cap walking away from the men's room, patting his hands dry on his jeans. She squeezed Sara's hand, and with her other she instinctively smoothed her own tangled, messy hair.

She couldn't fight this assassin, not unless she had a weapon. She couldn't try to enlist the help of a stranger, or they might suffer the same fate as the dead woman behind them. She had only one choice now, and that was to wait and hope that her dad came for them... which he could only do if he knew where they were, and there was nothing to help him find them. Maya had no way to leave clues or a trail.

Her fingers snagged in her hair and came away with a few loose strands. She shook them off her hand and they fell slowly to the floor.

Hair.

She had hair. And hair could be tested—that was basic forensics. Blood, saliva, hair. Any of those things could prove that she had been somewhere, and that she had still been alive when she was. When the authorities found Thompson's truck, they would find the dead woman, and they would collect samples. They would find her hair. Her dad would know they had been there.

"Go," Rais told them. "Outside." He held the door as the two girls, holding hands, left the bathroom. He followed, glancing around once more to ensure no one was watching. Then he took out Mr. Thompson's heavy Smith & Wesson revolver and flipped it around in his hand. With a single, solid motion, he swung the gun's handle downward and snapped the doorknob off the closed bathroom door.

"Blue car." He gestured with his chin and put the gun away. The girls walked slowly toward a dark blue sedan parked a few spaces away from Thompson's truck. Sara's hand trembled in Maya's—or it might have been Maya doing the trembling, she wasn't sure.

Rais pulled the car out of the rest stop and back onto the interstate, but not south, the way they had been going before. Instead he doubled back and headed north. Maya understood what he was doing; when the authorities found Thompson's truck they would assume he would continue south. They would be looking for him, and them, in the wrong places.

Maya yanked out a few strands of her hair and dropped them to the floor of the car. The psychopath who had kidnapped them was right about one thing; their fate was being determined by another power, in this case, him. And it was one that Maya could not yet fully comprehend.

They had only one chance now to avoid whatever fate was in store for them.

"Dad will come," she whispered in her sister's ear. "He'll find us."

She tried not to sound as uncertain as she felt.

CHAPTER TWO

Reid Lawson moved quickly up the stairs of his home in Alexandria, Virginia. His movements seemed wooden, his legs still feeling numb from the shock he'd experienced only minutes earlier, but his stare was set in an expression of grim determination. He took the steps two at a time to the second floor, though he dreaded what would be up there—or, more appropriately, what wouldn't.

Downstairs and outside was a flurry of activity. In the street in front of his house were no fewer than four police cars, two ambulances, and a fire truck, all protocol for a situation like this one. Uniformed cops stretched caution tape in an X over his front door. Forensics collected samples of Thompson's blood from the foyer and hair follicles from his girls' pillows.

Reid could barely remember even calling the authorities. He barely recalled giving the police a statement, a stammering patchwork of fragmented sentences punctuated by short, gasping breaths while his mind swam with horrifying possibilities.

He had gone away for the weekend with a friend. A neighbor was watching his girls.

The neighbor was now dead. His girls were gone.

Reid made a call as he reached the top of the stairs and away from prying ears.

"You should have called us first," Cartwright said as greeting. Deputy Director Shawn Cartwright was head of the Special Activities Division and, unofficially, Reid's boss at the CIA.

They've already heard. "How did you know?"

"You're flagged," Cartwright said. "We all are. Anytime our info comes up in a system—name, address, social, anything—it's automatically sent to the NSA with priority. Hell, you get a speeding ticket the agency will know before the cop lets you drive away."

"I have to find them." Every second that ticked by was a thunderous chorus reminding him that he might never see his daughters again if he didn't leave now, this instant. "I saw Thompson's body. He's been dead for at least twenty-four hours, which is a significant lead on us. I need equipment, and I need to go *now*."

Two years earlier, when his wife, Kate, had died suddenly of an ischemic stroke, he'd felt completely numb. A dazed, detached feeling had overtaken him. Nothing felt real, as if any moment he would wake from the nightmare to find it had all been in his head.

He hadn't been there for her. He had been at a conference on ancient European history—no, that wasn't the truth. That was his cover story while he was on a CIA op in Bangladesh, pursuing a lead on a terrorist faction.

He wasn't there for Kate back then. He wasn't there for his girls when they were taken.

But he was sure as hell going to be there for them now.

"We're going to help you, Zero," Cartwright assured him. "You're one of us, and we take care of our own. We're sending techs to your house to assist the police in their investigation, posing as Homeland Security personnel. Our forensics are faster; we should have a bead on who did this within the—"

"I know who did this," Reid interrupted. "It was *him*." There was no doubt in Reid's mind who was responsible for this, who had come and taken his girls. "Rais." Just saying the name aloud renewed Reid's rage, starting in his chest and radiating through every limb. He clenched his fists to keep his hands from shaking. "The Amun assassin that escaped from Switzerland. This was him."

Cartwright sighed. "Zero, until there's evidence, we don't know that for sure."

"I do. I know it. He sent me a picture of them." He had received a photo, sent to Sara's phone from Maya's. The picture was of his daughters, still in their pajamas, huddled together in the back of Thompson's stolen truck.

"Kent," the deputy director said carefully, "you've made a lot of enemies. This doesn't confirm —"

“It was him. I know it was him. That photo is proof of life. He’s taunting me. Anyone else might have just...” He couldn’t bring himself to say it aloud, but any of the other myriad foes Kent Steele had amassed over his career might have just killed his girls as revenge. Rais was doing this because he was a fanatic who believed he was destined to kill Kent Steele. That meant that eventually the assassin would want Reid to find him—and hopefully, the girls as well.

Whether or not they’re alive when I do, though... He gripped his forehead with both hands as if he could somehow pry the thought from his head. *Stay clear-headed. You can’t think like that.*

“Zero?” Cartwright said. “You still with me?”

Reid took a calming breath. “I’m here. Listen, we need to track Thompson’s truck. It’s a newer model; it has a GPS unit. He also has Maya’s phone. I’m sure the agency has the number on file.” Both the truck and the phone could be tracked; if the locations synced and Rais hadn’t ditched either of them yet, it would give them a solid direction to pursue.

“Kent, listen...” Cartwright tried to say, but Reid immediately cut him off.

“We know there are members of Amun in the United States,” he rattled on, unabated. Two terrorists had gone after his girls once before on a New Jersey boardwalk. “So it’s possible there’s an Amun safe house somewhere within US borders. We should contact H-6 and see if we can get any info out of the detainees.” H-6 was a CIA black site in Morocco, where detained members of the terrorist organization were currently being held.

“Zero—” Cartwright tried again to break into the one-sided conversation.

“I’m packing a bag and heading out the door in two minutes,” Reid told him as he hurried into his bedroom. Every moment that passed was another moment that his girls were farther away from him. “The TSA should be on alert, in case he tries to take them out of the country. Same with ports and train stations. And highway cameras—we can access those. As soon as we have a lead, have someone meet me. I’ll need a car, something fast. And an agency phone, a GPS tracker, guns—”

“Kent!” Cartwright barked into the phone. “Just stop a second, all right?”

“Stop? These are my little girls, Cartwright. I need information. I need help...”

The deputy director sighed heavily, and Reid immediately knew something was very wrong. “You’re not going on this op, Agent,” Cartwright told him. “You’re too close.”

Reid’s chest heaved, his anger swelling again. “What are you talking about?” he asked quietly. “Just what the hell are you talking about? I’m going after my girls—”

“You’re not.”

“These are my *children*...”

“Listen to yourself,” Cartwright said sharply. “You’re ranting. You’re emotional. This is a conflict of interest. We can’t allow it.”

“You know I’m the best person for this,” Reid said forcefully. No one else would be going for his children. It would be him. It had to be him.

“I’m sorry. But you have a habit of attracting the wrong kind of attention,” Cartwright said, as if that was an explanation. “The higher-ups, they are trying to avoid a... repeat performance, if you will.”

Reid balked. He knew precisely what Cartwright was talking about, though he didn’t actually remember it. Two years ago his wife, Kate, died, and Kent Steele buried his grief in his work. He went on a weeks-long spree, cutting off communication with his team as he pursued members of Amun and leads across Europe. He refused to come in when the CIA called him back. He didn’t listen to anyone—not Maria Johansson, not his best friend, Alan Reidigger. From what Reid gathered, he left a slew of bodies in his wake that most described as nothing short of a rampage. In fact, it was the primary reason that the name “Agent Zero” was whispered in equal parts terror and disdain amongst insurgents the world over.

And when the CIA had had enough, they sent someone to take him out. They sent Reidigger after him. But Alan didn't kill Kent Steele; he had found another way, the experimental memory suppressor that would allow him to forget all about his life in the CIA.

"I get it. You're afraid of what I might do."

"Yeah," Cartwright agreed. "You're damn right we are."

"You should be."

"Zero," the deputy director warned, "don't. You let us do this our way, so it can get done quickly, quietly, and cleanly. I'm not going to tell you again."

Reid ended the call. He was going after his girls, with or without the CIA's help.

CHAPTER THREE

After hanging up on the deputy director, Reid stood outside the door to Sara's bedroom with his hand on the knob. He did not want to go in there. But he needed to.

Instead he distracted himself with the details that he knew, running through them in his mind: Rais had entered the house through an unlocked door. There were no signs of forced entry, no windows or door locks broken. Thompson had tried to fight him off; there was evidence of a struggle. Ultimately the old man had succumbed to knife wounds to the chest. No shots had been fired, but the Glock that Reid kept by the front door was gone. So was the Smith & Wesson that Thompson perpetually kept at his waist, which meant that Rais was armed.

But where would he take them? None of the evidence at the crime scene that was his home led to a destination.

In Sara's room, the window was still open and the fire escape ladder still unfurled from the sill. It seemed that his daughters had attempted, or at least thought, to try to climb down it. But they hadn't made it.

Reid closed his eyes and breathed into his hands, willing away the threat of new tears, of new terrors. Instead he retrieved her cell phone charger, still plugged into the wall beside her nightstand.

He had found her phone on the basement floor, but hadn't told the police about it. Nor did he show them the photo that had been sent to it—sent with the intent that he would see it. He couldn't hand the phone over, despite it clearly being evidence.

He might need it.

In his own bedroom, Reid plugged Sara's cell phone into the wall outlet behind his bed. He put the device on silent, and then turned on call and message forwarding to his number. Lastly he hid her phone between the mattress and box spring. He didn't want it taken by the cops. He needed it to stay active, in case more taunts came. Taunts could become leads.

He quickly stuffed a bag with a couple changes of clothes. He did not know how long he would be gone, how far he would have to go. *To the ends of the earth, if necessary.*

He switched out his sneakers for boots. He left his wallet in his top dresser drawer. In his closet, stuffed deep in the toe of a pair of black dress shoes, was a wad of emergency cash, nearly five hundred dollars. He took it all.

Atop his dresser was a framed photo of the girls. His chest grew tight just looking at it.

Maya had her arm around Sara's shoulders. Both girls were smiling wide, seated across from him at a seafood restaurant as he took their picture. It was from a family trip to Florida the previous summer. He remembered it well; he had snapped the photo mere moments before their food arrived. Maya had a virgin daiquiri in front of her. Sara had a vanilla milkshake.

They were happy. Smiling. Content. Safe. Before he had brought any of this terror down upon them, they were safe. At the time this photo was taken, the very notion of ever being pursued by radicals intent to harm them, kidnapped by murderers, was the stuff of fantasy.

This is your fault.

He flipped the frame over and tore open the back. As he did, he made himself a promise. When he found them—and *I will find them*—he would be done. Done with the CIA. Done with covert operations. Done with saving the world.

To hell with the world. I just want my family to be safe and kept safe.

They would leave, move far away, change their names if they needed to. All that would matter for the rest of his life would be their safety, their happiness. Their survival.

He took the photo from the frame, folded it in half, and tucked it into his inside jacket pocket.

He would need a gun. He could probably find one in Thompson's house, just next door, if he could manage to slip in without the police or emergency personnel seeing—

Someone cleared their throat loudly in the hall, an obvious warning sign meant for him in case he needed a moment to compose himself.

“Mr. Lawson.” The man stepped into the bedroom doorway. He was short, soft in the middle, but had hard lines etched in his face. He reminded Reid a little of Thompson, though that could have just been guilt. “My name is Detective Noles, with the Alexandria Police Department. I understand this is a very difficult time for you. I know you’ve already given a statement to the first-responding officers, but I have some follow-up questions for you that I’d like to be on the record, if you would please come with me down to the precinct.”

“No.” Reid took up his bag. “I’m going to find my girls.” He marched out of the room and past the detective.

Noles followed quickly. “Mr. Lawson, we strongly discourage citizens from taking any action in a case like this. Let us do our jobs. The best thing for you to do would be to stay somewhere safe, with friends or family, but close by...”

Reid paused at the bottom of the stairs. “Am I a suspect in the kidnapping of my own daughters, Detective?” he asked, his voice low and hostile.

Noles stared. His nostrils flared briefly. Reid knew his training dictated that this sort of situation be handled delicately, as not to further traumatize victims’ families.

But Reid was not traumatized. He was angry.

“As I said, I just have a few follow-up questions,” Noles said carefully. “I’d like you to come with me, down to the precinct.”

“I reject your questions.” Reid stared back. “I’m going to get in my car now. The only way you’re taking me anywhere is in handcuffs.” He very much wanted this stout detective out of his face. For a brief moment he even considered mentioning his CIA credentials, but he had nothing on him to back it up.

Noles said nothing as Reid turned on his heel and strode out of the house to the driveway.

Still the detective followed, out the door and across the lawn. “Mr. Lawson, I’m only going to ask you once more. Consider for a second how this looks, you packing a bag and running off while we’re actively investigating your home.”

A white-hot jolt of anger ran through Reid, from the base of his spine up to the top of his head. He very nearly dropped his bag right there, so much was his desire to turn and deck Detective Noles across the jaw for even remotely implying that he might have had a hand in this.

Noles was a veteran; he must have been able to read the body language, but still he pressed on. “Your girls are missing and your neighbor is dead. All this happened while you weren’t home, yet you don’t have a solid alibi. You can’t tell us who you were with or where you were. Now you’re running off like you know something we don’t. I have questions, Mr. Lawson. And I *will* get answers.”

My alibi. Reid’s actual alibi, the truth, was that he had spent the last forty-eight hours running down a crazed religious leader who was in possession of an apocalypse-sized batch of mutated smallpox. His alibi was that he just got home from saving millions of lives, perhaps even billions, only to find that the two people he cared most about in this entire world were nowhere to be found.

But he couldn’t say any of that, no matter how much he wanted to. Instead, Reid forced his rage down and held back both his fist and his tongue. He paused alongside his car and turned to face the detective. As he did, the shorter man’s hand moved slowly to his belt—and his handcuffs.

Two uniformed officers milling about outside noticed the potential altercation and took a few cautious steps closer to him, hands also moving to their belts.

Ever since the memory suppressor had been cut from his head, it felt like Reid was of two minds. One side, the logical, Professor Lawson side, was telling him: *Back down. Do as he asks. Or else you’ll find yourself in jail and you’ll never get to the girls.*

But the other side, the Kent Steele side of him—the secret agent, the renegade, the thrill-seeker—it was much louder, shouting, knowing from experience that every second counted desperately.

That side won out. Reid tensed, ready for a fight.

CHAPTER FOUR

For what felt like a long moment, no one moved—not Reid, not Noles, not the two cops behind the detective. Reid clung to his bag in a white-knuckled grip. If he tried to get in the car and leave, he had no doubt the officers would advance on him. And he knew he would react accordingly.

Suddenly there was the screech of tires and all eyes turned toward a black SUV as it came to an abrupt halt at the end of the driveway, perpendicular to Reid's own vehicle, blocking him in. A figure stepped out and strode quickly over to defuse the situation.

Watson? Reid nearly blurted it out.

John Watson was a fellow field agent, a tall African-American man whose features were perpetually passive. His right arm was suspended in a dark blue sling; he had caught a stray bullet to the shoulder only the day prior, assisting on the op to stop Islamic radicals from releasing their virus.

"Detective." Watson nodded to Noles. "My name is Agent Hopkins, Department of Homeland Security." With his good hand he flashed a convincing badge. "This man needs to come with me."

Noles frowned; the tension of the moment before had evaporated, replaced by confusion. "Say what now? Homeland Security?"

Watson nodded gravely. "We believe the abduction has something to do with an open investigation. I'm going to need Mr. Lawson to come with me, right now."

"Now hang on." Noles shook his head, still thrown by the sudden intrusion and rapid explanation. "You can't just barge in here and take over—"

"This man is a department asset," Watson interrupted. He kept his voice low, as if sharing a conspiratorial secret, though Reid knew it was CIA subterfuge. "He's WITSEC."

Noles's eyes widened to the point it looked like they might fall out of his head. WITSEC, Reid knew, was an acronym for the witness protection program of the US Department of Justice. But Reid said nothing; he simply folded his arms over his chest and shot the detective a pointed glare.

"Still..." Noles said hesitantly, "I'm going to need more to go on here than a flashy badge..." The detective's cell suddenly blared a ringtone.

"I assume that will be your confirmation from my department," said Watson as Noles reached for his phone. "You're going to want to take that. Mr. Lawson, this way, please."

Watson strode away, leaving a befuddled Detective Noles stammering into his cell. Reid hefted his bag and followed, but he paused at the SUV.

"Wait," he said before Watson could climb into the driver's seat. "What is this? Where are we going?"

"We can talk while we drive, or we can talk now and waste time."

The only reason Reid could conceive of for Watson being there was if the agency sent him, with the intent of picking up Agent Zero so they could keep an eye on him.

He shook his head. "I'm not going to Langley."

"Neither am I," Watson replied. "I'm here to help. Get in the car." He slid into the driver's seat.

Reid hesitated for a brief moment. He needed to be on the road, but he had no destination. He needed a lead. And he had no reason to believe he was being lied to; Watson was one of the most honest and by-the-books agents he'd ever met.

Reid climbed into the passenger's seat beside him. With his right arm in a sling, Watson had to reach over his body to shift and he steered with one hand. They pulled away in seconds, doing about fifteen over the speed limit, moving quickly but avoiding scrutiny.

He glanced over at the black bag in Reid's lap. "Where were you planning on going?"

"I have to find them, John." His vision blurred at the thought of them out there, alone, in the hands of that murderous madman.

“On your own? Unarmed, with a civilian cell phone?” Agent Watson shook his head. “You should know better.”

“I already talked to Cartwright,” Reid said bitterly.

Watson scoffed. “You think Cartwright was standing alone in the room when he spoke with you? You think he was on a secure line, in an office at Langley?”

Reid frowned. “I’m not sure I follow. It sounds like you’re suggesting that Cartwright wants me to do the thing he just told me not to do.”

Watson shook his head, not taking his eyes off the road. “It’s more that he knows you’re going to do the thing he just told you not to do, whether he wants you to or not. He knows you better than most. The way he sees it, the best way to avoid another problem is to make sure you have some support this time around.”

“He sent you,” Reid murmured. Watson neither confirmed nor denied it, but he didn’t have to. Cartwright knew that Zero was going after his girls; their conversation had been for the benefit of other ears at Langley. Still, knowing Watson’s penchant for adherence to protocol, it didn’t make sense to Reid why he would help. “What about you? Why are you doing this?”

Watson merely shrugged. “There are a couple of kids out there. Scared, alone, in bad hands. I don’t like that much.”

It wasn’t really an answer, and it might not have even been the truth, but Reid knew it was the best he was going to get out of the stoic agent.

He couldn’t help but think that part of Cartwright’s acquiescence to help him was some measure of guilt. Twice while he was away Reid had asked the deputy director to put his girls in a safe house. But instead the deputy director made excuses about manpower, about a lack of resources... *And now they’re gone.*

Cartwright could have avoided this. He could have helped. Again Reid felt his face grow hot as a surge of anger rose up within him, and again he stifled it down. Now wasn’t the time for that. Now was the time to go after them. Nothing else mattered.

I’m going to find them. I’m going to get them back. And I am going to kill Rais.

Reid took a deep breath, in through his nose and out through his mouth. “So what do we know so far?”

Watson shook his head. “Not much. We just found out right after you did, when you called the cops. But the agency is on it. We should have a lead shortly.”

“Who’s on it? Anyone I know?”

“Director Mullen gave it to Spec Ops, so Riker is taking lead...”

Reid found himself scoffing aloud again. Less than forty-eight hours earlier, a memory had returned to Reid, one from his former life as Agent Kent Steele. It was still foggy and fragmented, but it was about a conspiracy, some sort of government cover-up. A pending war. Two years ago, he had known about it—had at least known some part of it—and had been working to build a case. Regardless of how little he knew, he was certain that at least a few members of the CIA were involved.

At the top of his list was newly appointed Deputy Director Ashleigh Riker, head of Special Operations Group. And his lack of trust in her notwithstanding, he definitely didn’t expect she would put her best foot forward in finding his children.

“She assigned a new guy, young, but capable,” Watson continued. “Name’s Strickland. He’s a former Army Ranger, excellent tracker. If anyone could find who did this, it’d be him. Other than you, that is.”

“I *know* who did this, John.” Reid shook his head bitterly. He immediately thought of Maria; she was a fellow agent, a friend, maybe more—and definitively one of the only people Reid could trust. Last he’d heard, Maria Johansson was on an op tracking Rais into Russia. “I need to contact Johansson. She should know what’s happened.” He knew that until he could prove it was Rais, the CIA wouldn’t pull her back.

“You won’t be able to—not while she’s in the field,” Watson replied. “But I can try to get word to her another way. I’ll have her call you when she’s able to find a secure line.”

Reid nodded. He didn’t like not being able to contact Maria, but he had little choice. Personal phones were never carried on ops, and the CIA would likely be monitoring her activity.

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going?” Reid asked. He was getting anxious.

“To someone who can help. Here.” He tossed Reid a small silver flip phone—a burner, one that the CIA couldn’t trace unless they knew about it and had the number. “There are a few numbers programmed in there. One’s a secure line to me. Another’s to Mitch.”

Reid blinked. He didn’t know a Mitch. “Who the hell is Mitch?”

Instead of answering, Watson pulled the SUV off the road and into the drive of an auto body shop called the Third Street Garage. He eased the vehicle right into an open garage bay and parked. As soon as he cut the ignition, the garage door rumbled slowly down behind them.

They both climbed out of the car as Reid’s eyes adjusted to the relative darkness. Then the lights flickered on, bright fluorescent bulbs that made dots swim in his vision.

Beside the SUV, in the second garage bay, was a black car, a late eighties model Trans Am. It wasn’t much younger than he was, but the paint job looked glossy and new.

Also in the garage bay with them was a man. He wore dark blue coveralls that barely concealed spattered grease stains. His features were obscured by a tangled mass of brown beard and a red baseball cap pulled low over his forehead, the brim of it discolored with dried sweat. The mechanic slowly wiped his hands on a filthy, oil-stained rag, staring at Reid.

“This is Mitch,” Watson told him. “Mitch is a friend.” He tossed a ring of keys to Reid and gestured to the Trans Am. “It’s an older model, so there’s no GPS. It’s reliable. Mitch has been fixing it up for the last few years. So try not to destroy it.”

“Thanks.” He had been hoping for something more inconspicuous, but he would take what he could get. “What is this place?”

“This? This is a garage, Kent. They fix cars here.”

Reid rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“The agency’s already trying to get eyes and ears on you,” Watson explained. “Any way they can track you, they will. Sometimes in our line of work you need... friends on the outside, so to speak.” He gestured again toward the burly mechanic. “Mitch is a CIA asset, someone I recruited from my days in the National Resources Division. He’s an expert at, uh, ‘vehicle procurement.’ If you need to get somewhere, you call him.”

Reid nodded. He didn’t know that Watson had been in asset collection prior to being a field agent—though, to be fair, he wasn’t even sure that John Watson was his real name.

“Come on, I got some things for you.” Watson popped the trunk and unzipped a black canvas duffel bag.

Reid took a step back, impressed; inside the bag was an array of supplies, including recording devices, a GPS tracking unit, a frequency scanner, and two pistols—a Glock 22, and his backup of choice, the Ruger LC9.

He shook his head in disbelief. “How did you get all this?”

Watson shrugged one shoulder. “Had a bit of help from a mutual friend.”

Reid didn’t have to ask. *Bixby*. The eccentric CIA engineer who spent most of his waking hours in a subterranean research and development lab beneath Langley.

“You and him go way back, even if you don’t remember it all,” Watson said. “Although he made sure to mention that you still owe him some tests.”

Reid nodded. Bixby was one of the co-inventors of the experimental memory suppressor that had been installed in his head, and the engineer had asked if he could run a few tests on Reid’s head.

He can open my skull if it means getting my girls back. He felt another overwhelming, powerful wave of emotion crash over him, knowing that there were people willing to break the rules, to put

themselves in harm's way to help him—people he could barely remember even having a relationship with. He blinked back the threat of tears that stung his eyes.

“Thank you, John. Really.”

“Don't thank me yet. We've barely begun.” Watson's phone rang in his pocket. “That'll be Cartwright. Give me a minute.” He retreated to a corner to take the call, his voice low.

Reid zipped the bag closed and slammed the trunk shut. As he did, the mechanic grunted, making a sound somewhere between clearing his throat and muttering something.

“Did... did you say something?” Reid asked.

“Said sorry. 'Bout your kids.” Mitch's expression was well hidden behind his grizzled beard and baseball cap, but his voice sounded genuine.

“You know about... them?”

The man nodded. “Already on the news. Their photos, a hotline to call with tips or sightings.”

Reid bit his lip. He hadn't thought about that, the publicity—and the invariable connection to him. He immediately thought of their Aunt Linda, who lived up in New York. These sorts of things had a way of spreading quickly, and if she heard about it she would be fraught with concern, calling and calling Reid's phone for information and getting none.

“Got something,” Watson said suddenly. “Thompson's truck was found at a rest stop seventy miles south of here on I-95. A woman was found dead at the scene. Her throat was cut, car gone, ID taken.”

“So we don't know who she was?” Reid asked.

“Not yet. But we're on it. I've got a tech on the inside scanning police airwaves and keeping an eye via satellite. As soon as something's reported, you'll know about it.”

Reid grunted. Without an ID they wouldn't be able to find the vehicle. Even though it wasn't much of a lead, it was still something to go on, and he was anxious to be on the trail. He had the door to the Trans Am open as he asked, “What exit?”

Watson shook his head. “Don't go down there, Kent. It'll be crawling with cops, and I'm sure Agent Strickland is en route.”

“I'll be careful.” He didn't trust that the police or this rookie agent would find everything that he would. Besides, if Rais was playing this the way Reid thought he would, there could be another clue in the form of a taunt, something meant just for him.

The photo of his girls flashed again across his memory, the one Rais had sent from Maya's phone, and it reminded him of one last thing. “Here, hang onto this for me.” He handed Watson his personal cell. “Rais has Sara's number, and I've got her phone forwarding to mine. If anything comes through, I want to know about it.”

“Sure. The crime scene is on exit sixty-three. You need anything else?”

“Don't forget to have Maria call me.” He settled behind the wheel of the sports car and nodded to Watson. “Thank you. For all your help.”

“Not doing it for you,” Watson reminded him somberly. “Doing it for those kids. And Zero? If I'm made, if I'm compromised in any way, if they figure out what I'm doing with you, I'm out. You understand? I can't afford to get agency blacklisted.”

Reid's initial kneejerk instinct was a quick swell of anger—*this is about my children, and he's afraid of being blacklisted?*—but he stifled it just as fast as it came on. Watson was an unexpected ally in all of this, and the man was sticking his neck out for his girls. Not for him, but for two children he'd only met briefly.

Reid nodded tightly. “I understand.” To the solemn, grunting mechanic he added, “Thanks, Mitch. I appreciate your help.”

Mitch grunted in response and pressed the switch to open the garage bay as Reid climbed into the Trans Am. The interior was all black leather, clean, pleasant smelling. The engine turned over

immediately and thrummed under the hood. *A 1987 model*, his brain told him. *5.0 liter V8 engine. At least two hundred fifty horsepower.*

He pulled out of the Third Street Garage and headed for the highway, his hands tightly wrapped around the steering wheel. The horrors that had been swirling through his head previously were replaced with a steely resolve, a hard determination. There was a hotline. The police were on it. The CIA was on it. And now he too was on the road after them.

I'm on my way. Dad is coming for you.

And for him.

CHAPTER FIVE

“You should eat.” The assassin gestured at a carton of Chinese takeout on the nightstand beside the bed.

Maya shook her head. The food was long cold by now, and she wasn’t hungry. Instead, she sat on the bed with her knees drawn up, Sara leaning against her with her head in her older sister’s lap. The girls were handcuffed together, Maya’s left wrist with Sara’s right. Where he had gotten the handcuffs, she didn’t know, but the assassin had warned them several times that if either of them tried anything to escape or make noise, the other would suffer for it.

Rais sat in an armchair near the door of the seedy motel room with orange carpeting and yellow walls. The room smelled musty and the bathroom reeked of bleach. They had been there for hours; the ancient bedside alarm clock told her in blocky red LED numerals that it was two thirty in the morning. The television was on, tuned into a news station with the volume low.

A white station wagon was parked directly outside, mere feet from the door; the assassin had stolen it after dark from a used car lot. It was the third time they had switched cars that day, from Thompson’s truck to the blue sedan and now to the white SUV. Each time they did, Rais changed directions, heading first south, then back north, and then to the northeast toward the coast.

Maya understood what he was doing; a cat-and-mouse game, leaving the stolen vehicles in different locations so that the authorities would have no idea which way they were heading. Their motel room was less than ten miles from Bayonne, not far from the border to New Jersey and New York. The motel itself was a strip of a building that was so rundown and frankly disgusting that driving by it gave the impression it had been closed for years.

Neither of the girls had slept much. Sara had catnapped in Maya’s arms, stealing twenty or thirty minutes at a time before rousing with a start and a whimper as she woke from whatever dream she’d been having and remembered where she was.

Maya had fought the exhaustion, trying to stay awake as long as possible—Rais had to sleep sometime, she knew, and it could afford them a precious few minutes they needed to make a run for it. But the motel was located in an industrial park. She saw when they had pulled in that there were no houses nearby and no other businesses that would be open this time of night. She wasn’t even certain anyone would be in the motel office. They would have nowhere to go except into the night, and the handcuffs would slow them down.

Eventually Maya had succumbed to the fatigue and unwillingly nodded off. She was asleep less than an hour when she woke with a slight gasp—and then gasped again when, startled, she saw Rais sitting in the armchair only three feet from her.

He was staring directly at her, eyes wide open. Just watching.

It had made her skin crawl... until a whole minute passed, and then another. She watched him, staring back, her fright mingling with curiosity. Then she realized.

He sleeps with his eyes open.

She wasn’t sure if that was more disturbing than waking to find him watching her or not.

Then he blinked, and she sucked in yet another startled gasp, her heart leaping into her throat.

“Damaged facial nerves,” he said quietly, almost a whisper. “I’ve heard it can be quite unsettling.” He gestured to the carton of leftover Chinese takeout that had been delivered to their room hours earlier. “You should eat.”

She shook her head, cradling Sara across her lap.

The low-volume news station was repeating the major headlines from earlier that day. A terror organization had been deemed responsible for the release of a deadly smallpox virus in Spain and other parts of Europe; their leader, as well as the virus, had been apprehended and several other members were now in custody. That afternoon the United States had officially lifted its international

travel ban to all countries except for Portugal, Spain, and France, where there were still isolated incidents of mutated smallpox. But everyone seemed confident that the World Health Organization had the situation under control.

Maya had suspected that her father had been sent to assist with that case. She wondered if he had been the one to take down the ringleader. She wondered if he was back in the country yet.

She wondered if he had found Mr. Thompson's body. If he had realized they were missing—or if *anyone* had realized they were missing.

Rais sat in the yellow chair with a cell phone resting on the armrest. It was an older style phone, practically prehistoric by today's standards—it wasn't good for anything but calls and messages. A burner phone, Maya had heard such things called on TV. It did not connect to the internet and had no GPS, which she knew from police procedural shows meant it could only be traced by the phone number, which someone would have to have.

Rais was waiting for something, it seemed. A call or a message. Maya desperately wanted to know where they were going, if there even was a destination. She suspected that Rais *wanted* their father to find them, to track them down, but the assassin did not seem to be in any rush to get anywhere. Was this his game, she wondered, stealing cars and changing directions, eluding the authorities, in the hopes that their father would be the one to find them first? Would they just keep bouncing from place to place until there was a faceoff?

Suddenly a monophonic ring tone blared out from the burner phone beside Rais. Sara jumped slightly in her arms with the high-pitched intrusion.

"Hello." Rais answered the phone flatly. "*Ano.*" He stood from his chair for the first time in three hours as he switched from English to some foreign tongue. Maya knew only English and French, and she could recognize a handful of other languages from single words and accents, but she didn't know this one. It was a guttural tongue, but not altogether unpleasant.

Russian? she thought. *No. Polish, maybe.* It was no use guessing; she couldn't be sure, and knowing wouldn't help her understand anything that was being said.

Still, she listened in, noting the frequent usage of "z" and "-ski" sounds, trying to pick out cognates, of which there seemed to be none.

There was one word that she managed to pick out, however, and it made her blood run cold.

"Dubrovnik," the assassin said, as if by way of confirmation.

Dubrovnik? Geography was one of her best subjects; Dubrovnik was a city in southwestern Croatia, a famous seaport and popular tourist destination. But far more important than that was the implication of the mentioned word.

It meant that Rais was planning to take them out of the country.

"*Ano,*" he said (which seemed like an affirmative; she guessed it to mean "yes"). And then: "Port Jersey."

They were the only two English words in the entire conversation besides "hello," and she picked them out easily. Their motel was already close to Bayonne, a stone's throw from the industrial Port Jersey. She had seen it many times before, crossing the bridge from Jersey into New York or back, stacks upon stacks of multicolored freight containers being loaded by cranes onto vast, dark ships that would carry them overseas.

Her heartbeat tripled its pace. Rais was going to take them out of the US by way of Port Jersey to Croatia. And from there... she had no idea, and no one else would either. There would be little hope of ever being found again.

Maya could not allow it. Her resolve to fight back strengthened; her determination to do something about this situation came roaring back to life.

The trauma of watching Rais cut the woman's throat in the rest stop bathroom earlier that day still lingered; she saw it whenever she closed her eyes. The vacant, dead stare. The pool of blood

nearly touching her feet. But then she touched her sister's hair and she knew that she would absolutely accept the same fate if it meant Sara would be safe and away from this man.

Rais continued his conversation in the foreign language, chattering in short, punctuated sentences. He turned and parted the thick curtains slightly, only an inch or so, to peer out at the parking lot.

His back was to her, probably for the first time since they had arrived at the seedy motel.

Maya reached out and very carefully pulled open the drawer of the nightstand. It was all she could reach, handcuffed to her sister and without moving from the bed. Her gaze flitted nervously to Rais's back, and then to the drawer.

There was a Bible in it, a very old one with a chipped, peeling spine. And beside it was a simple blue ballpoint pen.

She took it and closed the drawer again. At almost the same moment Rais turned back. Maya froze, the pen clutched in her closed fist.

But he did not pay her any attention. He seemed bored with the call now, anxious to get off the phone. Something on the television caught his attention for a few seconds and Maya hid the pen in the elastic waistband of her flannel pajama pants.

The assassin grunted a halfhearted goodbye and ended the call, flinging the phone onto the armchair cushion. He turned toward them, scrutinizing each in turn. Maya stared straight ahead, her gaze as vacant as she could make it, pretending to watch the newscast. Seemingly satisfied, he took his post on the chair again.

Maya gently stroked Sara's back with her free hand as her younger sister stared at the television, or perhaps at nothing at all, her eyes half-closed. After the incident in the restroom at the rest stop, it took hours for Sara to stop crying, but now she simply lay there, her gaze empty and glazed. It seemed she had nothing left.

Maya ran her fingers up and down her sister's spine in an attempt to comfort her. There was no way for them to communicate between each other; Rais had made it clear that they were not allowed to speak unless asked a question. There was no way for Maya to relay a message, to create a plan.

Though... maybe it doesn't have to be verbal, she thought.

Maya stopped touching her sister's back for a moment. When she resumed, she took her index finger and surreptitiously drew the slow, lazy shape of a letter between Sara's shoulder blades—a large S.

Sara lifted her head curiously for just a moment, but she did not look up at Maya or say anything. Maya hoped desperately that she understood.

Q, she drew next.

Then U.

Rais sat in the chair in Maya's peripheral vision. She didn't dare glance over at him for fear of seeming suspicious. Instead she stared straight ahead, as she had been, and drew the letters.

E. E. Z. E.

She moved her finger slowly, deliberately, pausing for two seconds between each letter and five seconds between each word until she spelled out her message.

Squeeze my hand if you understand.

Maya did not even see Sara move. But their hands were close, on account of being cuffed together, and she felt cool, clammy fingers close tightly around her own for a moment.

She understood. Sara got the message.

Maya started anew, moving slowly as possible. There was no rush, and she needed to make sure that Sara got every word.

If you have a chance, she wrote, you run.

Do not look back.

Do not wait for me.

Find help. Get Dad.

Sara lay there, quietly and perfectly still, for the entire message. It was a quarter after three before Maya finished. Finally she felt the cool touch of a thin finger on the palm of her left hand, nestled partially under Sara's cheek. The finger traced a pattern on her palm, the letter N.

Not without you, Sara's message said.

Maya closed her eyes and sighed.

You have to, she wrote back. *Or there is no chance for either of us.*

She didn't give Sara an opportunity to respond. Once she had finished her message, she cleared her throat and said quietly, "I have to go to the bathroom."

Rais raised an eyebrow and gestured toward the open bathroom door on the far end of the room. "By all means."

"But..." Maya lifted her shackled wrist.

"So?" the assassin asked. "Take her with you. You have a free hand."

Maya bit her lip. She knew what he was doing; the sole window in the bathroom was small, barely large enough for Maya to fit through and wholly impossible while handcuffed to her sister.

She slid off the bed slowly, prodding her sister to come with her. Sara moved mechanically, as if she had forgotten how to properly use her limbs.

"You have one minute. Do not lock the door," Rais warned. "If you do I will kick it down."

Maya led the way and closed the door to the tiny bathroom, cramped with both of them standing in it. She flicked on the light—fairly certain she saw a roach skitter to safety beneath the sink—and then turned on the bath fan, which droned loudly overhead.

"I won't," Sara whispered almost immediately. "I won't go without—"

Maya quickly held a finger to her own lips to signal for quiet. For all she knew, Rais was standing right on the other side of the door with an ear to it. He did not take chances.

She quickly pulled the ballpoint pen from the hem of her pants. She needed something to write on, and the only thing available was toilet paper. Maya tore off a few squares and spread them on the small sink, but every time she pressed the pen to it, the paper tore easily. She tried again with a few fresh squares, but again the paper ripped.

This is no use, she thought bitterly. The shower curtain would do her no good; it was just a plastic sheet hanging over the tub. There were no curtains over the small window.

But there was something she could use.

"Stay still," she whispered in her sister's ear. Sara's pajama pants were white with a pineapple print on them—and they had pockets. Maya turned one of the pockets inside out and, as carefully as she could, tore it out until she had a rough-edged triangular scrap of fabric that had the fruity imprint on one side but was all-white on the other.

She quickly flattened it on the sink and wrote carefully as her sister watched. The pen snagged several times on the fabric, but Maya bit her tongue to avoid grunting in angry frustration as she wrote out a note.

Port Jersey.

Dubrovnik.

There was more that she wanted to write, but she was nearly out of time. Maya stowed the pen under the sink and tightly rolled the fabric note into a cylinder. Then she looked around desperately for a place to hide the note. She couldn't just stick it under the sink with the pen; that would be too conspicuous, and Rais was thorough. The shower was out of the question. Getting the note wet would run the ink.

An abrupt knock on the thin bathroom door startled them both.

"It's been a minute," Rais said clearly from the other side.

“I’m almost done,” she said hastily. She held her breath as she lifted the lid from the toilet tank, hoping that the thrumming bathroom fan drowned out any scraping noise. She looped the rolled-up note through the chain on the flushing mechanism, high enough that it wouldn’t touch the water.

“I said you have one minute. I am opening the door.”

“Just give me a few seconds, please!” Maya pleaded as she quickly replaced the lid. Lastly, she tugged a few hairs from her head and dropped them atop the closed toilet tank. With any luck—with a lot of luck—anyone who was following their trail would recognize the clue.

She could only hope.

The knob to the bathroom door turned. Maya flushed the toilet and crouched in a gesture to suggest she was pulling up her pajama bottoms.

Rais stuck his head into the open door, his gaze directed at the floor. Slowly he panned up to the two girls, inspecting each in turn.

Maya held her breath. Sara reached for her sister’s shackled hand and their fingers intertwined.

“Finished?” he asked slowly.

She nodded.

He looked left and right in distaste. “Wash your hands. This room is disgusting.”

Maya did so, washing with gritty orange hand soap as Sara’s wrist dangled limply next to her own. She dried her hands on the brown towel and the assassin nodded.

“Back on the bed. Go.”

She led Sara back into the room and onto the bed. Rais lingered a moment, glancing around the small bathroom. Then he flicked off the fan and the light and returned to his chair.

Maya put her arm around Sara and held her close.

Dad will find it, she thought desperately. He’ll find it. I know he will.

CHAPTER SIX

Reid headed south on the interstate, trying hard to ride the line between speeding and getting there quickly as he headed toward the rest stop where Thompson's truck had been ditched. Despite his anxiety to get a lead, find a clue, he was beginning to feel optimistic about being on the road. His grief was still present, sitting heavy in his gut as if he had swallowed a bowling ball, but now it was wrapped in a shell of resolution and tenacity.

Already he was feeling the familiar sensation of his Kent Steele persona taking the reins as he barreled down the highway in the black Trans Am, a trunk full of guns and gadgets at his disposal. There was a time and place to be Reid Lawson, but this wasn't it. Kent was their father too, whether the girls knew it or not. Kent had been Kate's husband. And Kent was a man of action. He didn't wait around for the police to find a lead, for some other agent to do his job.

He was *going* to find them. He just needed to know where they were going.

The interstate heading south through Virginia was mostly straight, two lanes, lined on both sides with thick trees, and thoroughly monotonous. Reid's frustration grew with every passing minute that he didn't get there fast enough.

Why south? he thought. *Where would Rais be taking them?*

What would I do if I was him? Where would I go?

"That's it," he said aloud to himself as a realization struck him like a blow to the head. Rais wanted to be found—but not by the police or the FBI or another CIA agent. He wanted to be found by Kent Steele, and Kent Steele alone.

I can't think in terms of what he would do. I have to think of what I would do.

What would I do?

The authorities would assume that since the truck was found south of Alexandria, that Rais was taking the girls further south. "Which means I would go..."

His musing was interrupted by the blaring tone of the burner phone in the center console.

"Go north," Watson said immediately.

"What did you find?"

"There's nothing to find at the rest stop. Turn it around first. Then we'll talk."

Reid didn't have to be told twice. He dropped the phone into the console, downshifted into third, and jerked the wheel to the left. There weren't many cars on the highway at this time of day on a Sunday; the Trans Am crossed the empty lane and skidded sideways into the grassy median. Its wheels did not screech against the pavement or lose purchase when the ground turned soft beneath them—Mitch must have installed high-performance radial tires. The Trans Am fishtailed across the median, the front end spinning only slightly as it kicked a cascade of dirt out behind it.

Reid straightened the car as he crossed the barren narrow strip between stretches of highway. As the car found asphalt again, he popped the clutch, shifted up, and slammed down on the pedal. The Trans Am shot forward like a bolt of lightning into the opposite lane.

Reid fought down the sudden exhilaration that spiked in his chest. His brain reacted strongly to anything adrenaline producing; it craved the thrill, the fleeting possibility of losing control and the galvanizing pleasure of gaining it back.

"Heading north," Reid said as he plucked up the phone again. "What did you find?"

"I've got a tech monitoring the police airwaves. Don't worry, I trust him. A blue sedan was reported abandoned at a used car lot this morning. In it they found a purse, with IDs and cards matching the woman that was killed at the rest stop."

Reid frowned. Rais had stolen the car and ditched it quickly. "Where?"

"That's the thing. It's about two hours north of your current location, in Maryland."

He scoffed in frustration. “Two hours? I don’t have that kind of time to waste. He’s already got a big lead on us.”

“Working on it,” Watson said cryptically. “There’s more. The dealership says there’s a car missing from their lot—a white SUV, eight years old. We have nothing to track it with other than waiting for it to get spotted. Satellite imaging would be like a needle in a haystack...”

“No,” Reid said. “No, don’t bother. The SUV will mostly likely be another dead end. He’s toying with us. Changing direction, trying to throw us off from wherever he’s really taking them.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because that’s what I would do.” He thought for a moment. Rais already had a lead on them; they needed to get ahead of his game, or at least on par with it. “Have your tech look into any cars reported stolen in the last twelve hours or so, between here and New York.”

“That’s a pretty wide net to throw,” Watson noted.

He was right; Reid knew that a car was stolen about every forty-five seconds in the US, amounting to hundreds of thousands each year. “All right, exclude the top ten most frequently stolen models,” he said. As much as he didn’t want to admit it, Rais was smart. He would likely know which cars to avoid and which to aim for. “Scratch off anything expensive or flashy, bright colors, distinguishing features, anything the cops would find easily. And, of course, anything new enough to be equipped with GPS. Focus on locations that wouldn’t have many people around—vacant lots, closed businesses, industrial parks, that sort of thing.”

“Got it,” Watson said. “I’ll call you back when I have info.”

“Thanks.” He stashed the phone in the center console again. He didn’t have two hours to burn driving the highways. He needed something faster, or a better lead on where his girls might be. He wondered if Rais had once again changed direction; perhaps headed north just to turn west, heading inland, or even going south again.

He glanced over at the lanes of southbound traffic. *I wonder if I could be passing them right now, right next to me. I’d never know it.*

His thoughts were suddenly drowned out by a piercing yet familiar sound—the steady rising and falling of a wailing police siren. Reid swore under his breath as he glanced in the rearview mirror to see a police cruiser tailing him, its red and blue lights flashing.

Not what I need right now. The cop must have spotted him cross the median. He looked again; the cruiser was a Caprice. *5.7-liter engine. Top speed of a hundred and fifty. I doubt the Trans Am can maintain that.* Even so, he wasn’t about to pull over and waste precious time.

Instead he slammed the pedal down anew, jumping from the previous eighty-five he was doing up to an even hundred miles an hour. The cruiser kept pace, leaping up in speed effortlessly. Still Reid kept both hands on the wheel, his hands steady, the familiarity and excitement of a high-speed chase returning to him.

Except this time he was the one being chased.

The phone rang again. “You were right,” Watson said. “I got a... wait, is that a siren?”

“Sure is,” Reid muttered. “Anything you can do about this?”

“Me? Not on an unofficial op.”

“I can’t outrun him...”

“But you can outdrive him,” Watson replied. “Call Mitch.”

“Call Mitch?” Reid repeated blankly. “And say what exactly...? Hello?”

Watson had already hung up. Reid swore under his breath and skirted around a minivan, swerving back into the left lane with one hand as he thumbed the flip phone. Watson told him that he’d programmed a number for the mechanic into the phone.

He found a number labeled with only the letter “M” and called as the siren continued to blare behind him.

Someone answered, but didn’t speak.

“Mitch?” he asked.

The mechanic grunted in response.

Behind him, the cop moved into the right lane and accelerated, trying to get up next to him. Reid jerked the wheel quickly and the Trans Am slid flawlessly into the lane, blocking the cop car. Behind the closed windows and the roar of the engine he could faintly hear the echo of a PA system, the trooper ordering him to pull over.

“Mitch, I’m, uh...” *What am I supposed to say?* “I’m doing about one-ten down I-95 with a cop on my tail.” He glanced in the rearview mirror and groaned as a second cruiser pulled onto the highway from a speed-trap vantage point. “Make that two.”

“All right,” Mitch said gruffly. “Give it a minute.” He sounded tired, as if the notion of a high-speed police chase was as blasé as a trip to the grocery store.

“Give *what* a minute?”

“Distraction,” Mitch grunted.

“I’m not sure I have a minute,” Reid protested. “They’ve probably already got the license plate.”

“Don’t worry about that. It’s a fake. Unregistered.”

That’s not going to inspire them to call off the pursuit, Reid thought glumly. “What sort of a distraction... hello? Mitch?” He threw the phone onto the passenger seat irritably.

With both hands back on the wheel, Reid veered around a pickup truck, back into the fast lane, and put the pedal fully down. The Trans Am responded with zeal, roaring forward as the needle leapt to one-thirty. He darted around much slower traffic, weaving in and out of both lanes, using the shoulder, but still the pair of cruisers kept up.

I can’t outrun them. But I can outdrive them. Come on, Kent. Give me something. It had happened several times over the last month, ever since the memory suppressor had been removed, that a particular skill set from his former life as a CIA operative would come rushing back in times of need. He didn’t know he spoke Arabic until he was faced with terrorists torturing him for information. He didn’t know he could fend off three killers hand-to-hand until he had to fight for his life.

That’s it. I just have to put myself in a desperate situation.

Reid grabbed the emergency brake just behind the gearshift and yanked it upward. There immediately came an awful screech from inside the Trans Am and the smell of something burning. At the same time, his hands spun the wheel to the right and the Trans Am fishtailed tightly, its back end once again crossing into the median as if he were trying to spin in the opposite direction.

The two cop cars followed suit, slamming on their brakes and trying to make the tight turnaround. But as they hit their brakes, facing south, Reid continued into the spin, doing a complete three-sixty. He pushed down the emergency brake, shifted, and slammed the gas again. The sports car jolted forward and left the confused cops quite literally in the dust.

Reid let out a whoop of victory as his heart thrummed in his chest. His excitement, however, was short-lived; he had his foot firmly on the gas, trying to maintain his speed, but the Trans Am was losing power. The speedometer needle dropped to ninety-five, then ninety, falling fast. He was in fifth gear, but his e-brake maneuver must have blown a cylinder, or else kicked dirt up into the engine.

The earsplitting wail of sirens made the bad news worse. The two cruisers were behind him and catching up fast, now joined by a third. The highway traffic moved aside to clear a path as Reid had to weave in and out of lanes, desperately trying to keep the needle up to little avail.

He groaned. It was going to be impossible to shake the cops at this rate. They were no more than sixty yards behind him and gaining. The cruisers formed a triangle, one in each lane with the third splitting the line behind them.

They’re going to try the PIT maneuver—box me in and force the car sideways.

Come on, Mitch. Where’s my distraction? He had no idea what the mechanic had planned, but he could really use it at the moment as the cruisers closed the gap on the failing sports car.

He got his answer an instant later as something huge leapt into his peripheral vision.

From the southbound side of the highway, a tractor trailer jumped the median doing at least seventy, its huge tires bouncing violently over the ruts in the grass. As it reached the pavement again—going the wrong direction—it teetered dangerously and the silver tank it was hauling tipped sideways, bearing down upon him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

For an instant, time slowed down as Reid found himself, and the entire car, engulfed in the shadow of an eighteen-wheeled machine that had all but left the ground.

In that oddly still moment, he could clearly see the tall blue letters stenciled down the side of the tanker—“POTABLE,” they read—as the truck bore down, poised to crush him, the Trans Am, and any hope of finding his girls.

His higher brain, the cerebrum, seemed to have shut itself off in the shadow of the enormous truck, yet his limbs moved as if of their own minds. Instinct took over as his right grabbed the e-brake again and pulled. His left hand spun the wheel clockwise, and his foot mashed the gas pedal against the rubber floor mat. The Trans Am turned sideways and darted out, parallel to the truck, back into the sunlight and out from beneath it.

Reid felt the impact of the truck crunching against the road more than he heard it. The silver tank struck the pavement between the Trans Am and the cop cars, closing in at less than thirty yards. Brakes squealed and the cruisers skidded sideways as the huge silver tank split open at the bolted seams and released its cargo.

Nine thousand gallons of clean water cascaded out and flowed over the police cars, shoving them back like an aggressive riptide.

Reid didn't pause to see the fallout. The Trans Am was barely pushing seventy with the pedal to the floor, so he straightened out and headed further up the highway as best he could. The waterlogged troopers undoubtedly called in the conspicuous car with the unregistered plates; there would be more trouble ahead if he didn't get off the road soon.

The burner rang, the screen displaying only the letter M.

“Thanks, Mitch,” Reid answered.

The mechanic grunted, as seemed to be his primary method of communication.

“You knew where I was. You know where I am now.” Reid shook his head. “You're tracking the car, aren't you?”

“John's idea,” Mitch said simply. “Thought you might get yourself into some trouble. He was right.” Reid started to protest, but Mitch interrupted. “Get off at the next exit. Turn right on River Drive. There's a park with a baseball field. Wait there.”

“Wait there for what?”

“Transportation.” Mitch hung up. Reid scoffed. The whole point of the Trans Am was supposed to be clandestine, staying off the agency's grid—not to exchange the CIA for someone else that might track him.

But without it, you'd have been caught by now.

He swallowed his anger and did as he was told, guiding the car off the exit another half a mile up the interstate and toward the park. He hoped that whatever Mitch had in store for him was fast; he had a lot of ground to cover quickly.

The park was sparsely populated for a Sunday. In the baseball field a group of neighborhood kids were playing a pick-up game, so Reid parked the Trans Am in the gravel lot outside the chain-link fence behind first base and waited. He didn't know what he was looking for, but he knew he had to move fast, so he popped the trunk, retrieved his bag, and waited beside the car for whatever Mitch had planned.

He had a suspicion that the grizzled mechanic was more than just a CIA asset. He was “an expert in vehicle procurement,” Watson had said. Reid wondered if Mitch was a resource, someone like Bixby, the eccentric CIA engineer who specialized in weapons and handheld gear. And if that was the case, why was he helping Reid? No memories sparked in his head when he thought of Mitch's gruff appearance, his grunting demeanor. Was there a forgotten history there?

The phone rang in his pocket. It was Watson.

“You good?” the agent asked.

“Good as I can be, all things considered. Though Mitch’s idea of a ‘distraction’ might be a little overambitious.”

“He gets the job done. Anyway, your hunch was right. My guy found a report of a twelve-year-old Caddy stolen from an industrial park in New Jersey this morning. He snapped a satellite image of the place. Guess what he saw?”

“The missing white SUV,” Reid ventured.

“Right,” Watson confirmed. “Sitting in the parking lot of some junk heap called the Starlight Motel.”

New Jersey? His hope fell. Rais had taken his girls even further north—his two-hour drive just became at least three and a half to have any hope of catching up. *He might be taking them into New York. A major metro area, easy to get lost in.* Reid had to get a better lead on him before that happened.

“The agency doesn’t know what we know yet,” Watson continued. “They have no reason to link the stolen Caddy to your girls. Cartwright confirmed that they’re following the leads they’ve got and sending Strickland north to Maryland. But it’s just a matter of time. Get there first and you’ll have a head start on him.”

Reid deliberated for a moment. He didn’t trust Riker; that much was clear. In fact, the jury was still out even on his own boss, Deputy Director Cartwright. But... “Watson, what do you know about this Agent Strickland?”

“I only met him once or twice. He’s young, a bit eager to please, but seems decent. Maybe even trustworthy. Why, what are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking...” Reid couldn’t believe he was about to suggest it, but it was for his daughters. Their safety was the most important thing, no matter what the perceived cost. “I’m thinking that we shouldn’t be the only ones with this intel. We need all the help we can get, and while I don’t trust Riker to do the right thing, maybe Strickland will. Could you get information to him anonymously?”

“I think I could, yeah. I’d have to filter it through some of my asset connections, but it’s doable.”

“Good. I want to get him our intel—but *after* I’ve been there to see for myself. I don’t want him gaining a lead on me. I just want someone to know what we know.” More specifically, he wanted someone who wasn’t Cartwright to know what they knew. *Because if I fail, I need someone to succeed.*

“If you say so, sure.” Watson was silent for a moment. “Kent, there’s one more thing. Back at that rest stop, Strickland found something...”

“What? What did he find?”

“Hair,” Watson told him. “Brown hair, with the follicle still attached. Pulled out by the root.”

Reid’s throat ran dry. He didn’t believe that Rais wanted to kill the girls—he couldn’t allow himself to believe that. The assassin needed them alive if he wanted Kent Steele to find them.

But the thought was of little comfort as unwelcome images invaded Reid’s thoughts, scenes of Rais grabbing his daughter by a fistful of hair, forcing her to go where he wanted. Hurting her. And if he was hurting them in any way at all, Reid was going to hurt him in every way.

“Strickland didn’t think much of it,” Watson continued, “but the police found more of it in the back seat of the dead woman’s car. Like someone left them there on purpose. Like a...”

“Like a clue,” Reid murmured. *It was Maya.* He just knew it. She was smart, smart enough to leave something behind. Smart enough to know that the scene would be swept over carefully and her hairs would be found. She was alive—or at least she had been when they were there. He was simultaneously proud that his daughter was so keen while rueful that she would ever have to think to do such a thing in the first place.

Oh god. A new realization took its place immediately: If Maya had purposely left her hair in the rest stop bathroom, then she was there when it happened. She had watched that monster murder an innocent woman. And if Maya was there... Sara might have been too. They had both been affected,

mentally and emotionally, by the events of February, on the boardwalk; he didn't want to think of the trauma going through their minds now.

"Watson, I have to get to New Jersey fast."

"Working on it," the agent replied. "Just stay put, it'll be there any minute."

"What will be here?"

Watson answered, but his response was drowned out by the sudden, startling chirp of a siren directly behind him. He spun as a police cruiser crunched over the gravel lot toward him.

I don't have time for this. He snapped the phone shut and slipped it into his pocket. The passenger's side window was down; he could see that there were two officers inside. The car pulled right up alongside his and the door swung open.

"Sir, put the bag on the ground and your hands on your head." The officer was young, with a military-style high and tight fade and aviator shades over his eyes. Reid took notice that one hand was on the holster of his service pistol, the button clasp undone.

The driver got out as well, older, around Reid's age with a shaved head. He stood behind his open door, his hand also hovering near his belt.

Reid hesitated, unsure of what to do. *Local police must have heard the APB from the troopers.* It couldn't have been difficult to spot the Trans Am with the fake plates parked so openly next to the baseball field. He scolded himself for being so careless.

"Sir, put the bag down and hands on your head!" the young officer shouted forcefully.

Reid had nothing to threaten them with; his guns were in the bag, and even if he had one he wasn't about to shoot anyone. As far as these cops were aware, they were just doing their job, detaining a fugitive from a high-speed chase that had incapacitated three cars and, in all likelihood, still had the northbound lanes of I-95 shut down.

"This isn't what you think." Even as he said it, he lowered the bag to the gravel slowly. "I'm just trying to find my daughters." Both arms came up, his fingertips touching just behind his ears.

"Turn around," the young officer ordered. Reid did so. He heard the familiar clinking of handcuffs as the cop pulled a pair loose from the pouch on his belt. He waited for the cold bite of steel on his wrist.

"You have the right to remain silent..."

As soon as he felt contact, Reid sprang into action. He spun, grabbed the officer's right wrist with his own, and twisted it upward at an angle. The cop cried out in both surprise and pain, though Reid was careful not to twist far enough to break it. He wasn't going to injure the officers if he could help it.

In the same motion he grabbed the loose cuff with his left hand and snapped it around the officer's wrist. The driver had his gun out in an instant, shouting angrily.

"Back away! On the ground, now!"

Reid shoved forward with both arms and sent the young officer stumbling into the open door. It swung shut—or tried to, pushing the older cop backward. Reid tucked into a roll, coming up on his knees right beside the man. He snapped the Glock out of the cop's grip and tossed it over his shoulder.

The younger cop straightened and tried to yank his pistol loose. Reid grabbed the empty, swinging half of the handcuffs dangling from the officer's wrist and pulled, throwing the man off balance again. He looped the cuffs through the open window, yanking the cop into the door, and snapped the open loop of steel around the older officer's wrist.

As the pair struggled against each other and the door of the cruiser, Reid tugged the younger cop's pistol free and aimed it at them. They fell still immediately.

"I'm not going to shoot you," he told them as he retrieved his bag. "I just want you to stay quiet and don't move for a minute or so." He leveled the gun at the older officer. "Put your hand down, please."

The cop's free hand fell away from his shoulder-mounted radio.

“Just put down the gun,” the younger officer said, his uncuffed hand out in a pacifying gesture. “Another unit is on its way. They will shoot you on sight. I don’t think you want that.”

Is he bluffing? No; Reid could hear sirens wailing in the distance. *About a minute out. Ninety seconds at best.* Whatever Mitch and Watson had planned, it needed to arrive *now*.

The boys on the baseball field had paused their game, now clustered behind the nearest concrete dugout and peering out in awe at the scene mere yards from them. Reid noticed in his periphery that one of the boys was on a cell phone, likely reporting the incident.

At least they’re not filming it, he thought glumly, keeping the gun trained on the two cops. *Come on, Mitch...*

Then—the younger cop frowned at his partner. They glanced at each other and then skyward as a new sound joined the distant screaming sirens—a whining hum, like a high-pitched motor.

What is that? Definitely not a car. Not loud enough to be a chopper or a plane...

Reid looked up as well, but he couldn’t tell what direction the sound was coming from. He didn’t have to wonder long. From over left field came a tiny object, soaring quickly through the air like a buzzing bee. Its shape was indistinguishable; it appeared to be white, but it was difficult to look directly at it.

The underbelly is painted in reflective coating, Reid’s mind told him. *Keeps the eyes from being able to focus on it.*

The object dropped in altitude as if it were falling from the sky. As it crossed over the pitcher’s mound, something else dropped down from it—a steel cable with a narrow crossbar at the bottom, like a single rung of a ladder. *A rappelling line.*

“That must be my ride,” he murmured. While the cops stared in disbelief at the literal UFO soaring toward them, Reid dropped the gun on the gravel. He made sure he had a tight grip on his bag, and as the crossbar swung toward him, he reached up and grabbed onto it.

He sucked in a breath as he was instantly swept into the sky, up twenty feet in seconds, then thirty, then fifty. The boys on the baseball field shouted and pointed as the flying object above Reid’s head retracted the rappelling line rapidly, gaining altitude again at the same time.

He glanced down and saw two more police cars screeching into the park’s lot, the drivers exiting their vehicles and looking upward. He was a hundred feet in the air before he reached the cockpit and settled into the single seat that waited there.

Reid shook his head in astonishment. The vehicle that had picked him up was little more than a small egg-shaped pod with four parallel arms in an X shape, each of which had a spinning rotor at the end. He knew what this was—a quadcopter, a single-person manned drone, fully automated and highly experimental.

A memory flashed in his mind: *A rooftop in Kandahar. Two snipers have you pinned at your location. You have no idea where they are. Make a move and you die. Then, a sound—a high-pitched whine, barely more than a hum. It reminds you of your string trimmer back home. A shape appears in the sky. It’s hard to look at. You can barely see it, but you know help has arrived...*

The CIA had experimented with machines like this one to extract agents from hot zones. *He* had been part of the experiment.

There were no controls before him; just an LED screen that told him their air speed of two hundred sixteen miles an hour and an ETA of fifty-four minutes. Beside the screen was a headset. He plucked it up and fit it over his ears.

“Zero.”

“Watson. Jesus. How did you get this?”

“I didn’t.”

“So Mitch,” Reid said, confirming his suspicions. “He’s not just an ‘asset,’ is he?”

“He’s whatever you need him to be for you to trust that he wants to help.”

The quadcopter's air speed increased steadily, leveling out at just under three hundred miles per hour. Several minutes fell off the ETA.

"What about the agency?" Reid asked. "Can they...?"

"Track it? No. Too small, flies at low altitudes. Besides, it's decommissioned. They thought the motor was too loud for it to be stealthy."

He breathed a small sigh of relief. He had a trajectory now, this Starlight Motel in New Jersey, and at last it wasn't a taunt from Rais that led him. If they were still there, he could put an end to this—or try to. He couldn't ignore the fact that this would only end in a confrontation with the assassin, and keeping his girls out of the crossfire.

"I want you to wait forty-five minutes and then send the motel lead to Strickland and local PD," he told Watson. "If he's there, I want everyone else there too."

Besides, by the time the CIA and police arrived, either his girls would be safe or Reid Lawson would be dead.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Maya hugged her sister closer to her. The handcuff chain rattled between their wrists; Sara's hand was drawn up over her own chest, her hand gripping Maya's on her shoulder as they huddled together in the backseat of the car.

The assassin drove, easing the car down the length of Port Jersey. The cargo terminal was long, several hundred yards by Maya's best guess. Tall stacks of containers loomed high on either side of them, forming a narrow lane with no more than a foot of room on either side of the car's mirrors.

The headlights were off, and it was dangerously dark, but it did not seem to bother Rais. Every now and then there would be a brief break between the cargo stacks and Maya could see bright lights in the distance, closer to the water's edge. She could even hear the drone of machinery. Crews were working. People were around. Yet that gave her little hope; Rais had so far shown a propensity for planning, and she doubted they would come into view of any prying eyes.

She would have to do something herself to keep them from leaving.

The clock in the car's center console told her it was four in the morning. It had been less than an hour since she had left the note in the toilet tank of the motel. Shortly thereafter, Rais had stood suddenly and announced that it was time to go. Without a word of explanation, he led them out of the motel room, but not to the white station wagon in which they'd arrived. Instead he led them to an older car a few doors down from their room. He seemed to have no problem as he jimmied open the door and put them in the backseat. Rais had tugged off the cover of the ignition column and hotwired the vehicle in a matter of seconds.

And now they were at the port, under the cover of darkness and drawing near to the northern tip of land, where the concrete ended and Newark Bay began. Rais slowed and put the car in park.

Maya peered beyond the windshield. There was a boat there, a fairly small one by commercial standards. It couldn't have been more than sixty feet long end to end, and was laden with cube-shaped steel containers that looked to be about five feet by five feet. The only light on that end of the dock, other than the moon and stars, came from two sickly yellow bulbs on the boat, one on the bow and another at the stern.

Rais turned off the engine and sat there in silence for a long moment. Then he flicked the headlights on and off, just once. Two men emerged from the boat's cabin. They glanced his way, and then disembarked down the narrow ramp between the ship and the dock.

The assassin twisted in his seat, staring directly at Maya. He said only one word, drawing it out slowly. "Stay." Then he got out of the car and closed the door again, standing only a few feet from it as the men approached.

Maya clenched her jaw and tried to slow her rapidly pulsing heartbeat. If they got on this boat and left shore, their chances of ever being found again would be diminished significantly. She could not hear what the men were saying; she heard only low tones as Rais spoke to them.

"Sara," she whispered. "You remember what I said?"

"I can't." Sara's voice broke. "I won't..."

"You have to." They were still handcuffed together, but the ramp to board the boat was narrow, barely more than two feet wide. They would have to remove the cuffs, she told herself. And when they did... "As soon as I move, you go. Find people. Hide if you have to. You need to—"

She didn't get to finish her statement. The rear door was yanked open and Rais peered in at them. "Get out."

Maya's knees felt weak as she slid out of the backseat, followed by Sara. She forced herself to look at the two men who had come from the boat. They were both light-skinned, with dark hair and dark features. One of the pair had a thin beard and short hair, and wore a black leather jacket with

his arms folded across his chest. The other wore a brown coat, and his hair was longer, around his ears. He had a paunch that protruded over his belt and a smirk on his lips.

It was this man, the chubby one, that circled around the two girls, walking slowly. He said something in a foreign language—the same language, Maya realized, that Rais had spoken over the phone in the motel room.

Then he said a single word in English.

“Pretty.” He laughed. His cohort in the leather jacket grinned. Rais stood there stoically.

With that one word, a comprehension crept into Maya’s mind and tightened like icy fingers gripping a throat. There was something far more insidious happening here than simply being taken out of the country. She did not even want to think about it, let alone fathom it. It couldn’t be real. Not this. Not to them.

Her gaze found Rais’s chin. She couldn’t stand to look at his green eyes.

“You.” Her voice was quiet, quavering, struggling to find the words. “You’re a monster.”

He sighed gently. “Perhaps. That’s all a matter of perspective. I need passage across the sea; you are my bartering chip. My ticket, as it were.”

Maya’s mouth ran dry. She did not cry or tremble. She just felt cold.

Rais was *selling* them.

“Ahem.” Someone cleared their throat. Five pairs of eyes snapped to attention as a newcomer stepped into the dim glow of the boat’s lights.

Maya’s heart surged with sudden hope. The man was older, perhaps in his fifties, wearing khakis and a pressed white shirt—he looked official. Under one arm he held a white hard hat.

Rais had the Glock out and leveled in an instant. But he did not shoot. *Others would hear it*, Maya realized.

“Whoa!” The man dropped his hard hat and put both hands up.

“Hey.” The foreigner in the black leather jacket stepped forward, between the gun and the newcomer. “Hey, is okay,” he said in accented English. “Is okay.”

Maya’s mouth fell agape in confusion. *Okay?*

As Rais slowly lowered the gun, the thin man reached into his leather jacket and produced a crumpled manila envelope, folded on itself in thirds and taped shut. Something rectangular and thick was inside it, like a brick.

He handed it off as the official-looking man scooped up his hard hat.

My god. She knew damn well what was in the envelope. This man was being paid off to keep his crews away, to keep that area of the dock clear.

Anger and helplessness rose in equal measure. She wanted to shout at him—*please, wait, help*—but then his gaze met hers, for just a second, and she knew it was no use.

There was no remorse behind his eyes. No kindness. No sympathy. No sound escaped her throat.

Just as quickly as he had appeared, the man retreated back into the shadows. “Pleasure doing business,” he muttered as he vanished.

This can’t be happening. She felt numb. Never in her entire life had she ever met someone who would stand idly by while children were clearly in harm’s way—and accept money to do nothing.

The chubby man barked something in his foreign tongue and made a vague gesture toward their hands. Rais said something in response that sounded like a succinct argument, but the other man insisted.

The assassin looked annoyed as he fished in his pocket and pulled out a small silver key. He grabbed at the chain of the handcuffs, forcing both their wrists aloft. “I’m going to take these off of you,” he told them. “Then we’re going to get on the boat. If you wish to make it back to dry land alive, you’ll stay silent. You’ll do as you’re told.” He pushed the key into the cuff around Maya’s wrist and opened it. “And don’t even think about jumping into the water. None of us will go after you.

We will watch you freeze to death and drown. It would take only a couple of minutes.” He unlocked Sara’s cuff, and she instinctively rubbed her sore, reddened wrist.

Now. Do it now. You have to do something now. Maya’s brain screamed at her, but she couldn’t seem to move.

The foreigner in the black leather jacket stepped forward and grabbed her upper arm roughly. The sudden physical contact broke her paralysis, jarring her into action. She didn’t even think about it.

One foot swung upward, as hard as she could muster, and connected with Rais’s groin.

As it did, a memory flashed across her vision. It took only an instant, though it felt much longer, as if everything had slowed around her.

Shortly after the Amun terrorists had tried to kidnap her in New Jersey, her father had pulled her aside one day. He had to stick to his cover story—they were gang members abducting young girls in the area as part of an initiation—but still he told her: *I won’t always be around. There won’t always be someone there to help.*

Maya had played soccer for years; she had a powerful and well-placed kick. A hiss of breath escaped Rais as he doubled over, both hands flying impulsively to his crotch.

If someone attacks you, especially a man, it’s because he’s bigger. Stronger. He’ll outweigh you. And because of all that, he’ll think he can do what he wants. That you don’t have a chance.

She jerked her left arm downward, quickly and violently, and pulled free of the leather-jacketed man. Then she launched herself forward, into him, and knocked him off balance.

You don’t fight fair. You do whatever you need to do. Crotch. Nose. Eyes. You bite. You flail. You scream. They’re already not fighting fair. You don’t either.

Maya twisted her body back around and, at the same time, swung one thin arm in a wide arc. Rais was bent at the waist; his face was about eye level with her. Her fist smashed into the side of his nose.

Pain immediately splintered through her hand, starting at the knuckles and radiating up the length, all the way to her elbow. She cried out and grabbed at it. Even so, Rais took the blow hard, nearly falling to the dock.

An arm snaked around her waist and pulled her backward. Her feet left the ground, kicking at nothing as she thrashed both arms. She hadn’t even realized she was screaming until a thick hand clamped over her nose and mouth, cutting off both the sound and her breath.

But then she saw her—a small figure getting smaller. Sara ran, back the way they had come, disappearing into the darkness of the cargo stacks.

I did it. She’s gone. She’s away. Whatever fate would befall Maya now didn’t matter. *Don’t stop running, Sara. Keep going, find people, find help.*

Another figure shot forward like an arrow—Rais. He sprinted after Sara, also vanishing into the shadows. He was fast, much faster than Sara, and had seemed to recover quickly from Maya’s blows.

He won’t find her. Not in the dark.

She couldn’t breathe with the hand gripping her face. She clawed at it until the fingers slid down, only slightly, but enough for her to suck air in through her nose. The chubby man held her fast, one arm around her waist and her feet still off the ground. But she didn’t fight him; she fell still and waited.

For several long moments the dock was quiet. The droning of machinery at the other end of the port echoed in the night, likely drowning out any chance of Maya’s screams having been heard. She and the two men waited for Rais to return—the former praying desperately he came back empty-handed.

A short shriek shattered the silence, and Maya’s limbs went limp.

Rais emerged from the darkness again. He had Sara under one arm, the way one might carry a surfboard, with his other hand clasped over her mouth to quiet her. Her face was bright red and she was sobbing, though her cries were muffled.

No. Maya had failed. Her attack had done nothing, least of all get Sara to safety.

Rais stopped a few feet short of Maya, staring her down with pure fury in his bright green eyes. A thin rivulet of blood ran from one nostril where she had struck him.

"I told you," he hissed. "I told you what would happen if you tried to do something. Now, you're going to watch."

Maya flailed again, trying to scream, but the man held her tight.

Rais said something harshly in the foreign tongue to the one in the leather jacket. He hurried over and took Sara, holding her still and keeping her silent.

The assassin unsheathed the large knife, the one he had used to murder Mr. Thompson and the woman in the rest stop bathroom. He forced Sara's arm out to one side and held it firmly.

No! Please don't hurt her. Don't. Don't... She tried to form words, to scream them out, but they came out only as shrill, muffled cries.

Sara tried to pull away as she wept, but Rais held her arm in a white-knuckled grip. He forced her fingers apart and wedged the knife in the space between her ring and pinky fingers.

"You're going to watch," he said again, staring directly at Maya, "as I cut off one of your sister's fingers." He pressed the knife to skin.

Don't. Don't. Please, god, don't...

The man holding her, the chubby one, muttered something.

Rais paused and looked up at him irritably.

The two had a quick exchange, not a word of which Maya understood. It wouldn't have mattered anyway; her gaze was locked on her little sister, whose eyes were clenched shut, tears running down both cheeks and over the hand that held her mouth tightly.

Rais growled in frustration. At long last he released his grip on Sara's hand. The chubby man released his grip on Maya, and at the same time the one in the leather jacket shoved Sara forward. Maya caught her sister in her arms and hugged her close.

The assassin stepped forward, speaking quietly. "This time, you're lucky. These gentlemen suggested that I not damage any merchandise before it gets to where it's going."

Maya trembled from head to toe, but she didn't dare move.

"Besides," he told her, "where you're going will be far worse than anything I might do to you. Now we're all going to get on the boat. Remember, you're only good to them alive."

The chubby man led the way up the ramp, Sara behind him and Maya right behind her as they stepped shakily onto the boat. There was no use in fighting back now. Her hand throbbed with pain where she'd struck Rais. There were three men and only two of them, and he was faster. He had found Sara in the dark. They had little chance of making it out on their own.

Maya glanced over the side of the boat at the black water below. For just a split second, she thought about jumping; freezing in its depth might be preferable to the fate that awaited them. But she couldn't do that. She couldn't leave Sara. She couldn't lose her last ounce of hope.

They were directed to the stern of the ship, where the man in the leather jacket took out a ring of keys and unlocked the padlock on the door of a boxy steel crate, painted a rusty orange.

He swung the door open, and Maya gasped in horror.

Inside the crate, squinting in the dim yellow light, were several other young girls, at least four or five that Maya could see.

Then she was shoved from behind, forced inside. Sara was too, and she fell to her knees on the floor of the small container. As the door swung behind them, Maya scrambled to her and wrapped Sara in her arms.

Then the door slammed shut, and they were plunged into darkness.

CHAPTER NINE

The sun set quickly in the overcast sky as the quadcopter raced north to deliver its cargo, one determined CIA operative and father, to the Starlight Motel in New Jersey.

His ETA was five minutes. A message on the screen blinked a warning: *Prepare to deploy*. He glanced out the side of the cockpit and saw, far below, that they were soaring over a wide industrial park of boxy warehouses and manufacturing facilities, sitting silent and dark, illuminated only by the dots of orange streetlights.

He unzipped the black duffel bag sitting in his lap. Inside he found two holsters and two guns. Reid struggled out of his jacket in the tiny cockpit and put on the shoulder rig that held a Glock 22, standard-issue—none of Bixby's high-tech biometric trigger locks like he had with the Glock 19. He pulled his jacket back on and tugged up the leg of his jeans to attach the ankle holster that held his backup weapon of choice, the Ruger LC9. It was a compact pistol with a stubby barrel, nine-millimeter caliber in a nine-round expanded box magazine that stuck out just an inch and a half further than the grip.

He had one hand on the rappelling crossbar, ready to disembark from the manned drone as soon as they reached a safe altitude and speed. He was just about to tug the headset from his ears when Watson's voice came through it.

"Zero."

"Nearly there. Just under two minutes—"

"We just got another photo, Kent," Watson cut him off. "Sent to your daughter's phone."

Icy fingers of panic gripped Reid's heart. "Of them?"

"Sitting on a bed," Watson confirmed. "Looks like it could be the motel."

"The number it came from, can it be traced?" Reid asked hopefully.

"Sorry. He already ditched it."

His hope deflated. Rais was smart; so far he had sent photos of only where he had been, not where he was. If there was any chance of Agent Zero catching up to him, the assassin wanted it to be on his terms. For the entire ride in the quadcopter, Reid had been nervously optimistic about the motel lead, anxious that they had might have caught up to Rais's game.

But if there was a photo... then there was a good chance they had already moved on.

No. You can't think like that. He wants you to find him. He chose a motel in the middle of nowhere specifically for that reason. He's baiting you. They're here. They have to be.

"Were they okay? Did they look... are they hurt...?"

"They looked okay," Watson told him. "Upset. Scared. But okay."

The message on the screen changed, blinking in red: *Deploy. Deploy.*

Regardless of the photo or his thoughts, he'd arrived. He had to see for himself. "I have to go."

"Make it quick," Watson told him. "One of my guys is calling in a false lead at the motel matching Rais's and your daughters' description."

"Thanks, John." Reid pulled off the headset, made sure he had a tight grip on the rappel bar, and stepped out of the quadcopter.

The controlled descent of fifty feet to the ground was faster than he anticipated and took his breath away. The familiar thrill, the rush of adrenaline, coursed through his veins as wind roared in his ears. He bent his knees slightly on approach and touched down onto asphalt in a crouch.

As soon as he released the rappel bar the line zipped back up to the quadcopter, and the drone buzzed away into the night, returning to wherever it had come from.

Reid glanced around quickly. He was in the parking lot of a warehouse across the street from the dingy motel, dimly lit by only a few yellow bulbs outside. A hand-painted sign facing the street told him that he was in the right place.

He scanned left and right as he hurried across the empty street. It was quiet here, eerily quiet. There were three cars in the lot, each spaced out along the row of rooms facing him—and one of them was clearly the white SUV that had been stolen from the used car lot in Maryland.

It was parked right outside of a room with a brass number 9 on the door.

There were no lights on inside; it didn't seem like anyone was staying there at the moment. Even so, he dropped his bag just outside the door and listened carefully for about three seconds.

He didn't hear anything, so he pulled the Glock from his shoulder holster and kicked the door in.

The jamb splintered easily as the door flew open and Reid stepped inside, the gun level at the darkness. Yet nothing moved in the shadows. There were still no sounds, no one crying out in surprise or scrambling for a weapon.

His left hand felt along the wall for a light switch and flicked it on. Room 9 had an orange carpet and yellow wallpaper that was curling at the corners. The room had recently been cleaned, insofar as “cleaned” seemed to go at the Starlight Motel. The bed had been hastily made and it reeked of cheap aerosol disinfectant.

But it was empty. His heart sank. There was no one here—no Sara or Maya or the assassin that had taken them.

Reid stepped carefully, looking over the room. Near the door was a green armchair. The fabric of the seat cushion and back was slightly discolored with the imprint of someone who had sat there recently. He knelt beside it, outlining the shape of the person with his gloved fingertips.

Someone sat here for hours. About six-foot, a hundred and eighty pounds.

It was him. He sat here, next to the only point of entry, near the window.

Reid tucked his gun back into its holster and carefully peeled back the bedspread. The sheets were stained; they hadn't been changed. He inspected them cautiously, lifting each pillow in turn, careful not to disrupt any potential evidence.

He found two blonde hairs, long strands without the roots. They had fallen out naturally. He found a single brunette strand in the same fashion. *They were here, together, on this bed, while he sat there and watched them. But why?* Why had Rais brought them here? Why had they stopped? Was it another ploy in the assassin's cat-and-mouse game, or was he waiting for something?

Maybe he was waiting for me. I took too long to follow the clues. Now they're gone again.

If Watson had called in the fake report, the police would be at the motel in minutes, and Strickland was likely already on a chopper. But Reid refused to leave without something to go on, or else all of it would have been for nothing, just another dead end.

He hurried to the motel office.

The carpet was green and coarse beneath his boots, reminiscent of AstroTurf. The place stank of cigarette smoke. Beyond the counter was a dark doorway, and behind it Reid could hear something playing at low volume, a radio or television.

He rang the service bell on the counter, a dissonant chime ringing out in the quiet office.

“Hmm.” He heard a soft grunt from the back room, but no one came.

Reid rang the bell again three times in quick succession.

“All right, man! Jesus.” A male voice. “I'm coming.” A young man stepped out from the rear. He looked to be in his mid-twenties or early thirties; it was hard for Reid to tell on account of his bad skin and red-rimmed eyes, which he rubbed as if he'd just awoken from a nap. There was a small silver hoop in his left nostril and his dirty-blond hair was trussed up in mangy-looking dreadlocks.

He stared at Reid for a long moment, as if annoyed by the very concept of someone walking through the office door. “Yeah? What?”

“I'm looking for information,” Reid said flatly. “There was a man here recently, Caucasian, early thirties or so, with two teenage girls. One brunette, and a younger one, blonde. He drove that white SUV here. They stayed in room nine—”

“You a cop?” the clerk interrupted.

Reid was quickly growing irritated. “No. I’m not a cop.” He wanted to add that he was the father of those two girls, but he stopped himself; he didn’t want this clerk to be able to identify him by any more than he already could.

“Look, bro, I don’t know nothin’ about teenage girls,” the clerk insisted. “What people do here is their business—”

“I just want to know when he was here. If you saw the two girls. I want the name that the man gave you. I want to know if he paid in cash or with a card. If it was a card, I want the last four digits of the number. And I want to know if he said anything at all, or if you overheard anything, that might tell me where he went from here.”

The clerk stared at him for a long moment, and then he let out a hoarse, raspy snicker. “My man, look around you. This ain’t the kind of place that takes names or credit cards or anything like that. This is the kind of place people rent rooms by the hour, if you know what I mean.”

Reid’s nostrils flared. He’d had just about enough of this nitwit. “There must be something, anything, you can tell me. When did they check in? When did they check out? What did he say to you?”

The clerk shot him a pointed stare. “What’s it worth to you? For fifty bucks I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.”

Reid’s fury ignited like a fireball as he reached across the counter, grabbed the young clerk by the front of his T-shirt, and yanked him forward, almost off his feet. “You have *no* idea what you’re keeping me from,” he growled in the kid’s face, “or how far I’ll go to get it. You’re going to tell me what I want to know or you’ll be eating through a straw for the foreseeable future.”

The clerk put his hands up, his eyes wide as Reid shook him. “All right, man! All right! There’s a, uh, registry under the counter... let me grab it and I’ll look it up. I’ll tell you when they were here. Okay?”

Reid hissed a breath and released the young guy. He stumbled back, smoothed his T-shirt, and then reached for something unseen beneath the counter.

“Place like this,” the clerk said slowly, “the kind of people we get here... they value their privacy, if you know what I mean. They don’t care much for people snooping.” He took two slow steps back, withdrawing his right arm from underneath the counter... as it gripped the dark brown slide of a sawed-off twelve-gauge shotgun.

Reid sighed ruefully and shook his head. “You’re going to wish you hadn’t done that.” The clerk was wasting his time for the sake of protecting scumbags like Rais—not that he knew what Rais was involved in, but other sordid types, pimps and traffickers and the like.

“Go on back to the suburbs, man.” The barrel of the shotgun was pointed at center mass, but it was shaky. Reid got the impression that the kid had used it to threaten, but never actually fired it before.

He had no doubt that he had the faster draw on the clerk; he wouldn’t even hesitate to shoot him, in the shoulder or in the leg, if it meant getting what he needed. But he didn’t want to fire a shot. The report would be heard for a half mile in the industrial park. It might spook whatever guests were staying in the motel—might even prompt someone to call the police, and he didn’t need that attention.

Instead he took a different approach. “You sure that thing’s loaded?” he asked.

The clerk glanced down at the shotgun for a dubious second. In that moment, with his gaze averted, Reid planted a hand firmly on the counter and vaulted over it easily. At the same time he swung out his right leg and kicked the shotgun out of the clerk’s hands. As soon as his feet were on the ground he leaned forward and swung his elbow into the kid’s nose. A sharp gasp erupted from the clerk’s throat as blood flowed from both nostrils.

Then, just for good measure, Reid grabbed a fistful of filthy dreadlocks and slammed the guy’s face into the counter.

The clerk collapsed to the rough green carpet, moaning as he spat blood onto the floor from his nose and two cracked lips. He groaned and tried to get to his hands and knees. “You... oh, god... you broke my fuckin’ nose, man!”

Reid snapped up the shotgun. “That’s the least of your concerns right now.” He pressed the barrel into the dirty-blond dreadlocks.

The clerk immediately dropped to his stomach and whimpered. “Don’t... don’t kill me... please don’t... please... don’t kill me...”

“Give me your phone.”

“I don’t... I don’t have one...”

Reid bent at the waist and quickly patted the guy down. He was being honest; he didn’t have a phone, but he did have a wallet. Reid flipped it open and checked the driver’s license.

“George.” Reid scoffed. The clerk didn’t look much like a George. “You got a car here, George?”

“I got, I got a dirt bike, p-parked out back...”

“Good enough. Here’s what’s going to happen, George. I’m taking your bike. You, you’re going to walk out of here. Or run, if you prefer. You’re going to go to the hospital and get your nose checked out. You’re going to tell them that you were sucker-punched in a bar. You’re not going to say a word about this place, or a word about me.” He leaned over and lowered his voice. “Because I’ve got a police scanner, George. And if I hear one mention, even one *word* of a man fitting my description, I’m going to come to...” He checked the ID again. “Apartment 121B on Cedar Road, and I’m going to bring your shotgun with me. You got all that?”

“I got it, I got it.” The clerk blubbered, blood and spittle hanging from his lips. “I got it, I promise I got it.”

“Now, the man with the girls. When were they here?”

“There was... was a guy, like you said, but I didn’t see no girls...”

“But you saw a man that fit that description?”

“Yes, yes. He was real serious. Barely said a word. Came last night, after dark, and paid for the night in cash...”

“When did he leave?”

“I don’t know! Sometime in the night. Left the door open, or else I wouldn’t have known he was gone...”

During the night? Reid’s heart sank. He had hoped, but hadn’t truly expected to find the girls at the motel—but he thought he was catching up. If they had a full day’s lead on him... they could be anywhere.

Reid dropped the wallet and stepped back, taking the shotgun barrel from the kid’s head. “Go.”

The clerk scooped up the wallet and ran through the dark doorway, tripping once and falling onto his hands before hurrying out into the night.

Reid ejected the cartridges from the shotgun, four of them in all, and stuffed them into a jacket pocket. He wasn’t actually going to take the gun with him; it was an illegal weapon by virtue of having its barrel and stock cut off, and likely unregistered even before its modifications. He wiped the shotgun clean of his prints before replacing it beneath the counter.

He didn’t need to invite trouble. He had enough as it was.

The police would arrive at any moment, but he couldn’t leave without something more to go on. He hurried back to the broken door of room 9 and searched again, this time not caring to replace anything or handle with care. He tore the pillows and sheets from the bed. He searched under the bed and chair. He pulled out the drawers of each shoddy nightstand and the bureau, but found nothing but an old Bible with a cracked spine. He fanned its pages and shook it out, just in case.

At every opportunity so far, Maya had left something behind on purpose. According to the clerk, the girls had spent most of a night here.

Reid hurried into the bathroom. It stank strongly of bleach as he checked the shower stall, the sink, the vanity with the cracked mirror. He opened the single small cabinet beneath the sink and found two spare rolls of toilet paper, a spray can of air freshener, and, curiously, a blue ballpoint pen.

Reid turned on the hot water in both the sink and the shower and closed the door to the tiny bathroom, letting it fill with steam. He inspected the mirror in the hopes that Maya had perhaps written an invisible message that would only show with condensation—but there was no message. Still nothing.

I'm missing something. She left a clue. I know she did.

Sirens wailed in the distance, floating to him through the open motel room door. The police were en route. He grunted in frustration and kicked at the toilet bowl with his boot, hard enough to chip the porcelain.

He looked down and blinked.

I should have seen that. Should have known.

Atop the toilet tank was a single hair, brown, long, with a white root still attached. He dropped to his hands and knees and found a few more scattered on the floor. They were Maya's hair, tugged loose from her head on purpose—to give him a clue.

He lifted the lid from the back of the toilet.

Reid reached in and tugged loose the furled scrap of fabric that was looped into the flush lever's chain. He unrolled it in his fingers, which began to tremble as soon as he recognized the familiar pattern of pineapples.

Sara.

The scrap was triangular; a pocket, he realized, torn loose from her favorite pajamas.

He held the scrap to his face. It could have been his imagination, but it still smelled like her, like his baby girl.

He turned the fabric over to the other side, the all-white side, where three words were written in blue ink.

"No," he whispered hoarsely.

Port Jersey. Dubrovnik.

Reid sprinted from the bathroom as fast as he could.

Rais was trying to take his girls out of the country... if he hadn't already.

CHAPTER TEN

No, no, no... As Reid leapt across the orange carpet of room 9, it felt as if his legs couldn't move fast enough, as if every muscle was straining to react at an impossible speed. He had to get to the port.

He understood now. The cars, the change of directions, even the murder of the woman in the rest stop bathroom—all of it would confuse the authorities, make Rais look desperate and meandering, as if he didn't know what he was doing.

He knew damn well what he was doing. He was taking Reid's girls to Europe—and from there, god only knew where. With a twelve-hour lead, they could be anywhere in the world. Away from the jurisdiction of the police and feds. Away from him...

He scooped up his bag without pausing and kept running, parallel to the row of motel rooms toward the office at the end. He barely heard the sirens, wasn't even cognizant of their blaring wail until he was suddenly awash in headlights.

Three police cruisers screeched into the narrow lot of the Starlight Motel. Reid blinked in their glare as officers poured from them, unseen behind the bright headlights, shouting so many warnings at him at once that not any one of them was intelligible.

He didn't stop. He couldn't stop, not now. Reid sprinted onward, around the corner of the motel and behind it. As George had said, there was a dirt bike waiting, faded with age and looking worse for the wear.

Reid leapt onto it, slinging his back securely over one shoulder. He squeezed the clutch and kick-started the engine. It sputtered once and then came to life in a high-pitched whine, strong and robust beneath him. Despite its appearance it seemed that the clerk had taken decent care of the parts that mattered.

The pursuing officers came around the corner, their rapid footfalls drowned out by the roar of the bike's engine. They held their hands out in front of them in warning. Two went for their guns.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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