



# JACK MARS

# AGENT

# ZERO

AN AGENT ZERO SPY THRILLER—BOOK 1

An Agent Zero Spy Thriller

Jack Mars

**Agent Zero**

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2019

## **Mars J.**

Agent Zero / J. Mars — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,  
2019 — (An Agent Zero Spy Thriller)

ISBN 978-1-64-029799-9

“You will not sleep until you are finished with AGENT ZERO. The author did 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 this much-anticipated debut of an epic spy thriller series by #1 bestseller Jack Mars, readers are taken on an action thriller across Europe as presumed-CIA operative Kent Steele, hunted by terrorists, by the CIA, and by his own identity, must solve the mystery of who is after him, of the terrorists’ pending target—and of the beautiful woman he keeps seeing in his mind. Kent Steele, 38, a brilliant professor of European History at Columbia University, lives a quiet life in a New York suburb with his two teenage daughters. All that changes when late one night he gets a knock on his door and is abducted by three terrorists—and finds himself flown across the ocean to be interrogated in a basement in Paris. They are convinced that Kent is the most lethal spy the CIA has ever known. He is convinced they have the wrong man. Do they? With a conspiracy around him, adversaries as smart as he is, and an assassin on his tail, the wild game of cat and mouse leads Kent on a perilous road—one that may lead back to Langley—and to a shocking discovery of his own identity. AGENT ZERO is an espionage thriller that will keep you turning pages late into the night. “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!

ISBN 978-1-64-029799-9

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# **Jack Mars**

## **Agent Zero (An Agent Zero Spy Thriller—Book #1)**

**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](http://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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*“The life of the dead is placed in the memory of the living.”*

—*Marcus Tullius Cicero*



## CHAPTER ONE

The first class of the day was always the toughest. Students shuffled into the lecture hall at Columbia University like shiftless, dead-eyed zombies, their senses dulled by all-night study sessions or hangovers or some combination thereof. They wore sweatpants and yesterday's T-shirts and clutched Styrofoam cups of soy mocha lattes or artisanal blonde roasts or whatever it was the kids were drinking these days.

Professor Reid Lawson's job was to teach, but he also recognized the need for a morning boost—a mental stimulant to supplement the caffeine. Lawson gave them a moment to find their seats and get comfortable while he took off his tweed sport coat and draped it over his chair.

"Good morning," he said loudly. The announcement jarred several students, who looked up suddenly as if they hadn't realized they'd wandered into a classroom. "Today, we're going to talk about pirates."

That got some attention. Eyes looked forward, blinking through the slush of sleep deprivation and trying to determine if he had really said "pirates" or not.

"Of the Caribbean?" joked a sophomore in the front row.

"Of the Mediterranean, actually," Lawson corrected. He paced slowly with his hands clasped behind his back. "How many of you have taken Professor Truitt's class on ancient empires?" About a third of the class raised their hands. "Good. Then you know that the Ottoman Empire was a major world power for, oh, almost six hundred years. What you may *not* know is that the Ottoman corsairs, or more colloquially, the Barbary pirates, stalked the seas for much of that time, from the coast of Portugal, through the Strait of Gibraltar, and much of the Mediterranean. What do you think they were after? Anyone? I know you're alive out there."

"Money?" asked a girl in the third row.

"Treasure," said the sophomore from the front.

"Rum!" came a shout from a male student in the back of the room, eliciting a chuckle from the class. Reid grinned too. There was some life in this crowd after all.

"All good guesses," he said. "But the answer is 'all of the above.' See, the Barbary pirates mostly targeted European merchant vessels, and they would take everything—and I mean *everything*. Shoes, belts, money, hats, goods, the ship itself... and its crew. It's believed that in the two-century span from 1580 to 1780, the Barbary pirates captured and enslaved more than two *million* people. They would take it all back to their North African kingdom. This went on for centuries. And what do you think the European nations did in return?"

"Declared war!" shouted the student in the back.

A mousy girl in horn-rimmed glasses raised her hand slightly and asked, "Did they broker a treaty?"

"In a way," Lawson replied. "The powers of Europe agreed to pay tribute to the Barbary nations, in the form of huge sums of money and goods. I'm talking Portugal, Spain, France, Germany, England, Sweden, the Netherlands... they were all paying the pirates to keep away from their boats. The rich got richer, and the pirates backed off—mostly. But then, between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, something happened. An event occurred that would be a catalyst to the end of the Barbary pirates. Anyone want to venture a guess?"

No one spoke. To his right, Lawson spotted a kid scrolling on his phone.

"Mr. Lowell," he said. The kid snapped to attention. "Any guess?"

"Um... America happened?"

Lawson smiled. "Are you asking me, or telling me? Be confident in your answers, and the rest of us will at least *think* you know what you're talking about."

"America happened," he said again, more emphatically this time.



“That’s right! America happened. But, as you know, we were just a fledgling nation then. America was younger than most of you are. We had to establish trade routes with Europe to boost our economy, but the Barbary pirates started taking our ships. When we said, ‘What the hell, guys?’ they demanded tribute. We barely had a treasury, let alone anything in it. Our piggy bank was empty. So what choice did we have? What could we do?”

“Declare war!” came a familiar shout from the rear of the hall.

“Precisely! We had no choice but to declare war. Now, Sweden had already been fighting the pirates for a year, and together, between 1801 and 1805, we took Tripoli Harbor and captured the city of Derne, effectively ending the conflict.” Lawson leaned against the edge of his desk and folded his hands in front of him. “Of course, that’s glossing over a lot of details, but this is a European history class, not American history. If you get the chance, you should do some reading on Lieutenant Stephen Decatur and the USS *Philadelphia*. But I digress. Why are we talking about pirates?”

“Because pirates are cool?” said Lowell, who had since put away his phone.

Lawson chuckled. “I can’t disagree. But no, that’s not the point. We’re talking about pirates because the Tripolitan War represents something rarely seen in the annals of history.” He stood up straight, scanning the room and making eye contact with several students. At least now Lawson could see light in their eyes, a glimpse that most students were alive this morning, if not attentive. “For literal centuries, none of the European powers wanted to stand up to the Barbary nations. It was easier to just pay them. It took America—which was, back then, a joke to most of the developed world—to be the change. It took an act of desperation from a nation that was hilariously and hopelessly outgunned to bring about a shift in the power dynamic of the world’s most valuable trade route at the time. And therein lies the lesson.”

“Don’t mess with America?” someone offered.

Lawson smiled. “Well, yes.” He stuck a finger in the air to punctuate his point. “But moreover, that desperation and an utter lack of viable choices can and has, historically, led to some of the biggest triumphs the world has ever seen. History has taught us, again and again, that there is no regime too big to topple, no country too small or weak to make a real difference.” He winked. “Think about that next time you’re feeling like little more than a speck in this world.”

By the end of class, there was a marked difference between the dragging, weary students who had entered and the laughing, chatting group that filed out of the lecture hall. A pink-haired girl paused by his desk on the way out to smile and comment, “Great talk, Professor. What was the name of that American lieutenant you mentioned?”

“Oh, that was Stephen Decatur.”

“Thanks.” She jotted it down and hurried out of the hall.

“Professor?”

Lawson glanced up. It was the sophomore from the front row. “Yes, Mr. Garner? What can I do for you?”

“Wondering if I can ask a favor. I’m applying for an internship at the Museum of Natural History, and uh, I could use a letter of recommendation.”

“Sure, no problem. But aren’t you an anthropology major?”

“Yeah. But, uh, I thought a letter from you might carry a bit more weight, you know? And, uh...” The kid looked at his shoes. “This is kind of my favorite class.”

“Your favorite class so far.” Lawson smiled. “I’d be happy to. I’ll have something for you tomorrow—oh, actually, I have an important engagement tonight that I can’t miss. How’s Friday?”

“No rush. Friday would be great. Thanks, Professor. See ya!” Garner hurried out of the hall, leaving Lawson alone.

He glanced around the empty auditorium. This was his favorite time of day, between classes—the present satisfaction of the previous mingled with the anticipation of the next.

His phone chimed. It was a text from Maya. *Home by 5:30?*

Yes, he replied. *Wouldn't miss it.* The “important engagement” that evening was game night at the Lawson house. He cherished his quality time with his two girls.

Good, his daughter texted back. *I have news.*

What news?

Later was her reply. He frowned at the vague message. Suddenly the day was going to feel very long.

\*

Lawson packed up his messenger bag, pulled on his downy winter coat, and hurried to the parking lot as his teaching day came to an end. February in New York was typically bitter cold, and lately it had been even worse. The slightest bit of wind was downright blistering.

He started the car and let it warm for a few minutes, cupping his hands over his mouth and blowing warm breath over his frozen fingers. This was his second winter in New York, and it didn't seem like he was acclimating to the colder climate. In Virginia he had thought forty degrees in February was frigid. *At least it isn't snowing,* he thought. *Silver linings.*

The commute from the Columbia campus to home was only seven miles, but traffic at this time of day was heavy and fellow commuters were generally irritating. Reid mitigated that with audiobooks, which his older daughter had recently turned him on to. He was currently working his way through Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, though today he barely heard the words. He was thinking about Maya's cryptic message.

The Lawson home was a brown-bricked, two-story bungalow in Riverdale in the northern end of the Bronx. He loved the bucolic, suburban neighborhood—the proximity to the city and the university, the winding streets that gave way to wide boulevards to the south. The girls loved it too, and if Maya was accepted to Columbia, or even her safety school of NYU, she wouldn't have to leave home.

Reid immediately knew something was different when he entered the house. He could smell it in the air, and he heard the hushed voices coming from the kitchen down the hall. He set down his messenger bag and slid quietly out of his sport coat before carefully tiptoeing from the foyer.

“What in the world is going on here?” he asked by way of greeting.

“Hi, Daddy!” Sara, his fourteen-year-old, bounced on the balls of her feet as she watched Maya, her older sister, perform some suspicious ritual over a Pyrex baking dish. “We're making dinner!”

“I'm making dinner,” Maya murmured, not looking up. “*She* is a spectator.”

Reid blinked in surprise. “Okay. I have questions.” He peered over Maya's shoulder as she applied a purplish glaze to a neat row of pork chops. “Starting with... *huh?*”

Maya still didn't glance up. “Don't give me that look,” she said. “If they're going to make home ec a required course, I'm going to put it to some use.” Finally she looked up at him and smiled thinly. “And *don't* get used to it.”

Reid put his hands up defensively. “By all means.”

Maya was sixteen, and dangerously smart. She had clearly inherited her mother's intellect; she would be a senior that coming school year by virtue of having skipped the eighth grade. She had Reid's dark hair, pensive smile, and flair for the dramatic. Sara, on the other hand, got her looks entirely from Kate. As she grew into a teenager, it sometimes pained Reid to look at her face, though he never let on. She'd also acquired Kate's fiery temper. Most of the time, Sara was a total sweetheart, but every now and then she would detonate, and the fallout could be devastating.

Reid watched in astonishment as the girls set the table and served dinner. “This looks amazing, Maya,” he commented.

“Oh, wait. One more thing.” She retrieved something from the fridge—a brown bottle. “Belgian is your favorite, right?”

Reid narrowed his eyes. “How did you...?”

“Don’t worry, I had Aunt Linda buy it.” She popped the cap and poured the beer into a glass. “There. Now we can eat.”

Reid was extremely grateful to have Kate’s sister, Linda, only a few minutes away. Gaining his associate professorship while raising two girls into teenagers would have been an impossible task without her. It was one of the primary motivators for the move to New York, for the girls to have a positive female influence close by. (Though he had to admit, he wasn’t crazy about Linda buying his teenage daughter beer, regardless of who it was for.)

“Maya, this is amazing,” he gushed after the first bite.

“Thank you. It’s a chipotle glaze.”

He wiped his mouth, set down his napkin, and asked, “Okay, I’m suspicious. What did you do?”

“What? Nothing!” she insisted.

“What’d you break?”

“I didn’t...”

“You get suspended?”

“Dad, come on...”

Reid melodramatically gripped the table with both hands. “Oh God, don’t tell me you’re pregnant. I don’t even own a shotgun.”

Sara giggled.

“Would you stop?” Maya huffed. “I’m allowed to be nice, you know.” They ate in silence for a minute or so before she casually added, “But since you mention it...”

“Oh, boy. Here it comes.”

She cleared her throat and said, “I sort of have a date. For Valentine’s Day.”

Reid nearly choked on his pork chop.

Sara smirked. “I *told* you he’d be weird about it.”

He recovered and held up a hand. “Wait, wait. I’m not being weird. I just didn’t think... I didn’t know you were, uh... Are you dating?”

“No,” Maya said quickly. Then she shrugged and looked down at her plate. “Maybe. I don’t know yet. But he’s a nice guy, and he wants to take me to dinner in the city...”

“In the city,” Reid repeated.

“Yes, Dad, in the city. And I’d need a dress. It’s a fancy place. I don’t really have anything to wear.”

There were many times when Reid desperately wished Kate was there, but this might have topped them. He had always assumed that his daughters would date at some point, but he was hoping that it wouldn’t be until they were twenty-five. It was times like this that he resorted to his favored parenting acronym, WWKS—what would Kate say? As an artist and a decidedly free spirit, she probably would have handled the situation much differently than he would, and he tried to stay cognizant of that.

He must have looked particularly troubled, because Maya laughed a little and put her hand on his. “Are you okay, Dad? It’s just a date. Nothing’s going to happen. It’s not a big deal.”

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “You’re right. Of course it’s no big deal. We can see if Aunt Linda can take you to the mall this weekend and—”

“I want you to take me.”

“You do?”

She shrugged. “I mean, I wouldn’t want to get anything you weren’t okay with.”

A dress, dinner in the city, and some boy... this wasn’t anything he’d actually considered having to deal with before.

“All right then,” he said. “We’ll go on Saturday. But I have a condition—I get to pick tonight’s game.”

“Hmm,” said Maya. “You drive a hard bargain. Let me consult with my associate.” Maya turned to her sister.

Sara nodded. “Fine. As long as it’s not Risk.”

Reid scoffed. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Risk is the best.”

After dinner, Sara cleared the dishes while Maya made hot chocolate. Reid set up one of their favorites, Ticket to Ride, a classic game about building train routes across America. As he set out cards and plastic train cars, he found himself wondering when this had happened. When had Maya grown up so quickly? For the last two years, ever since Kate passed, he had played the parts of both parents (with some much-appreciated help from their Aunt Linda). They both still needed him, or so it seemed, but it wouldn’t be long until they were off to college, and then careers, and then...

“Dad?” Sara entered the dining room and took a seat across from him. As if reading his mind, she said, “Don’t forget, I have an art show at school next Wednesday night. You’ll be there, right?”

He smiled. “Of course, honey. Wouldn’t miss it.” He clapped his hands together. “Now! Who’s ready to get demolished—I mean, who’s ready to play a family-friendly game?”

“Bring it on, old man,” Maya called from the kitchen.

“Old man?” Reid said indignantly. “I’m thirty-eight!”

“I stand by it.” She laughed as she entered the dining room. “Oh, the train game.” Her grin dissolved to a thin smile. “This was Mom’s favorite, wasn’t it?”

“Oh... yeah.” Reid frowned. “It was.”

“I’m blue!” Sara announced, grabbing at pieces.

“Orange,” said Maya. “Dad, what color? Dad, hello?”

“Oh.” Reid snapped out of his thoughts. “Sorry. Uh, green.”

Maya pushed some pieces his way. Reid forced a smile, though his thoughts were troubled.

\*

After two games, both of which Maya had won, the girls went to bed and Reid retired to his study, a small room on the first floor, just off the foyer.

Riverdale was not a cheap area, but it was important to Reid to ensure that his girls had a safe and happy environment. There were only two bedrooms, so he had claimed the den on the first floor as his office. All of his books and memorabilia were crammed into nearly every available inch of the ten-by-ten first-floor room. With his desk and a leather armchair, only a small patch of well-worn carpet was still visible.

He fell asleep often in that armchair, after late nights of taking notes, preparing lectures, and rereading biographies. It was starting to give him back problems. Yet if he was being honest with himself, it wasn’t getting any easier to sleep in his own bed. The location might have changed—he and the girls moved to New York shortly after Kate passed—but he still had the king-sized mattress and frame that had been *theirs*, his and Kate’s.

He would have thought that by now the pain of losing Kate might have waned, at least slightly. Sometimes it did, temporarily, and then he would pass her favorite restaurant or catch a glimpse of one of her favorite movies on TV and it would come roaring back, as fresh as if it had happened yesterday.

If either of the girls experienced the same, they didn’t talk about it. In fact, they often spoke about her openly, something that Reid still hadn’t been able to do.

There was a picture of her on one of his bookshelves, taken at a friend’s wedding a decade earlier. Most nights the frame was turned backward, or else he would spend the entire evening staring at it.

How stunningly unfair the world could be. One day, they had everything—a nice home, wonderful kids, great careers. They were living in McLean, Virginia; he was working as an adjunct

professor at the nearby George Washington University. His job had him traveling a lot, to seminars and summits and as a guest lecturer on European history to schools all over the country. Kate was in the restorations department at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Their girls were thriving. Life was perfect.

But as Robert Frost famously said, nothing gold can stay. One wintry afternoon Kate fainted at work—at least that's what her coworkers believed it to be when she suddenly went limp and fell out of her chair. They called an ambulance, but it was already too late. She was announced DOA at the hospital. An embolism, they had said. A blood clot had traveled to her brain and caused an ischemic stroke. The doctors used barely comprehensible medical terms wherever possible in their explanation, as if it would somehow soften the blow.

Worst of all, Reid had been away when it happened. He was at an undergraduate seminar in Houston, Texas, giving talks about the Middle Ages when he got the call.

That was how he discovered his wife had died. A phone call, just outside a conference room. Then came the flight home, the attempts to console his daughters in the midst of his own devastating grief, and the eventual move to New York.

He pushed himself up from the chair and spun the photo around. He didn't like thinking about all that, the end and the aftermath. He wanted to remember her like this, in the photo, Kate at her brightest. That's what he chose to remember.

There was something else, something right at the edge of his consciousness—some sort of hazy memory attempting to surface as he stared at the picture. It almost felt like déjà vu, but not of the present moment. It was as if his subconscious was trying to push something through.

A sudden knock at the door startled him back to reality. Reid hesitated, wondering who it could be. It was nearly midnight; the girls had been in bed for a couple of hours. The brisk knock came again. Fearing it might wake the kids, he hurried to answer it. After all, he lived in a safe neighborhood and had no reason to fear opening his door, midnight or not.

The harsh winter wind was not what froze him in his tracks. He stared in surprise at the three men on the other side. They were decidedly Middle Eastern, each with dark skin, a dark beard, and deep-set eyes, dressed in thick black jackets and boots. The two that flanked either side of the exit were tall and lanky; the third, behind them, was broad-shouldered and hulking, with an assumedly perpetual scowl.

"Reid Lawson," said the tall man to the left. "Is that you?" His accent sounded Iranian, but it was not thick, suggesting he had spent a decent amount of time stateside.

Reid's throat felt dry as he noticed, over their shoulders, a gray van idling at the curb, its headlights turned off. "Um, I'm sorry," he told them. "You must have the wrong house."

The tall man to the right, without taking his eyes off Reid, held up a cell phone for his two associates to see. The man to the left, the one asking the question, nodded once.

Without warning, the hulking man lurched forward, deceptively fast for his size. One meaty hand reached for Reid's throat. Reid accidentally twisted away, just out of reach, by stumbling backward and nearly tripping over his own feet. He recovered, touching down with his fingertips on the tiled floor.

As he skittered backward to regain his balance, the three men entered his house. He panicked, thinking only of the girls asleep in their beds upstairs.

He turned and ran through the foyer, into the kitchen, and skirted around the island. He glanced over his shoulder—the men gave chase. *Cell phone*, he thought desperately. It was on his desk in the study, and his assailants blocked the way.

He had to lead them away from the house, and away from the girls. To his right was the door to the backyard. He threw it open and ran out onto the deck. One of the men cursed in a foreign tongue—Arabic, he guessed—as they ran after him. Reid vaulted over the railing of the deck and landed in the small backyard. A bolt of pain shot up through his ankle with the impact, but he ignored it.

He rounded the corner of the house and flattened himself against the brick façade, trying desperately to quiet his ragged breathing.

The brick was icy to the touch and the slight winter breeze cut through him like a knife. His toes were already numb—he'd run out of the house in only his socks. Goose bumps prickled up and down his limbs.

He could hear the men whispering to each other, hoarsely and urgently. He counted the distinct voices—one, two, and then three. They were out of the house. Good; that meant they were only after him, and not the kids.

He needed to get to a phone. He couldn't go back into the house without endangering his girls. He couldn't very well bang on a neighbor's door. Wait—there was a yellow emergency call box mounted on a telephone pole down the block. If he could get there...

He took a deep breath and sprinted across the dark yard, daring to enter the halo of light cast from the streetlamps above. His ankle throbbed in protest and the shock of the cold sent stings up his feet, but he forced himself to move as fast as he could.

Reid glanced over his shoulder. One of the tall men had spotted him. He shouted to his cohorts, but did not chase after him. Strange, Reid thought, but he didn't stop to question it.

He reached the yellow emergency call box, tore it open, and jammed his thumb against the red button, which would send an alert to the local 911 dispatch. He looked over his shoulder again. He couldn't see any of them.

"Hello?" he hissed into the intercom. "Can anyone hear me?" Where was the light? There was supposed to be a light when the call button was pushed. Was this even working? "My name is Reid Lawson, there are three men after me, I live at—"

A strong hand grabbed a fistful of Reid's short brown hair and yanked backward. His words caught in his throat and escaped as little more than a hoarse wheeze.

Next thing he knew, there was rough fabric over his face, blinding him—a bag on his head—and at the same time, his arms were forced behind his back and locked into cuffs. He tried to struggle, but the strong hands held him firmly, twisting his wrists nearly to the point of breaking.

"Wait!" he managed to cry out. "Please..." An impact struck his abdomen so hard that the air rushed out of his lungs. He couldn't breathe, let alone speak. Dizzying colors swam in his vision as he nearly passed out.

Then he was being dragged, his socks scraping the pavement of the sidewalk. They shoved him into the van and slid the door shut behind him. The three men exchanged guttural foreign words with each other that sounded accusatory.

"Why...?" Reid finally managed to choke out.

He felt the sharp sting of a needle in his upper arm, and then the world fell away.

## CHAPTER TWO

Blind. Cold. Rumbling, deafening, jostling, aching.

The first thing Reid noticed as he woke was that the world was black—he could not see. The acrid scent of fuel filled his nostrils. He tried to move his throbbing limbs, but his hands were bound behind him. He was freezing, but there was no breeze; just cold air, as if he were sitting in a refrigerator.

Slowly, as if through a fog, the memory of what had occurred floated back to him. The three Middle Eastern men. A bag over his head. A needle in his arm.

He panicked, yanking at his bonds and flailing his legs. Pain seared through his wrists where the metal of the cuffs dug into his skin. His ankle pulsed, sending shockwaves up his left leg. There was an intense pressure in his ears, and he could not hear anything other than a roaring engine.

For just a split second, he felt a dropping sensation in his stomach—a result of negative vertical acceleration. He was on a plane. And by the sound of it, this was no ordinary passenger plane. The rumbling, the intensely loud engine, the smell of fuel... he realized he must on a cargo plane.

How long had he been unconscious? What did they shoot him with? Were the girls safe? *The girls*. Tears stung his eyes as he hoped against hope that they were safe, that the police had heard enough of his message, and that authorities had been sent to the house...

He squirmed in his metal seat. Despite the pain and hoarseness in his throat, he ventured to speak.

“H-hello?” It came out as barely a whisper. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Hello? Anyone...?” He realized then that the noise of the engine would drown him out to anyone who wasn’t seated beside him. “Hello!” he tried to shout. “Please... someone tell me what’s—”

A harsh male voice hissed at him in Arabic. Reid flinched; the man was close, no more than a few feet away.

“Please, just tell me what’s going on,” he pleaded. “What’s happening? Why are you doing this?”

Another voiced shouted threateningly in Arabic, this time to his right. Reid winced at the sharp reprimand. He hoped that the rumbling of the plane masked the trembling in his limbs.

“You have the wrong person,” he said. “What is it you want? Money? I don’t have much, but I can—wait!” A strong hand closed around his upper arm in a viselike grip, and an instant later he was ripped from his seat. He staggered, trying to stand, but the unsteadiness of the plane and the pain in his ankle won out. His knees buckled and he fell on his side.

Something solid and heavy struck him in the midsection. Pain spider-webbed through his torso. He tried to protest, but his voice only came out in unintelligible sobs.

Another boot kicked him in the back. Yet another, in the chin.

Despite the horrifying situation, a bizarre thought struck Reid. These men, their voices, these blows all suggested a personal vendetta. He did not just feel attacked. He felt *loathed*. These men were angry—and their anger was directed at him like the pinpoint of a laser.

The pain subsided, slowly, and gave way to a cold numbness that engulfed his body as he passed out.

\*

Pain. Searing, throbbing, aching, burning.

Reid woke again. The memories of the past... he didn’t even know how long it had been, nor did he know if it was day or night, and where he was that it might be day or night. But the memories came again, disjointed, like single frames cut from a film reel and left on the floor.



Three men.

The emergency box.

The van.

The plane.

And now...

Reid dared to open his eyes. It was difficult. The lids felt as if they were glued shut. Even behind the thin skin he could tell that there was a bright, harsh light waiting on the other side. He could feel the heat of it on his face, and see the network of tiny capillaries through his lids.

He squinted. All he could see was the unforgiving light, bright and white and searing into his head. God, his head hurt. He tried to groan and found, through an electric dose of new pain, that his jaw hurt as well. His tongue felt fat and dry, and he tasted a mouthful of pennies. Blood.

His eyes, he realized—they had been difficult to open because they were, in fact, glued shut. The side of his face felt hot and sticky. Blood had run down his forehead and into his eyes, no doubt from being relentlessly kicked to unconsciousness on the plane.

But he could see the light. The bag had been removed from his head. Whether or not that was a good thing remained to be seen.

As his eyes adjusted, he tried again in vain to move his hands. They were still bound, but this time, not by handcuffs. Thick, coarse ropes held him in place. His ankles, too, were lashed to the legs of a wooden chair.

Finally his eyes adjusted to the harshness of the light and hazy outlines formed. He was in a small windowless room with uneven concrete walls. It was hot and humid, enough for sweat to prickle on the back of his neck, though his body felt cold and partially numb.

He could not fully open his right eye and it stung to try. Either he had been kicked there, or his captors had beaten him further while he was unconscious.

The bright light was coming from a thin procedure lamp on a tall, thin wheeled base, adjusted to about his height and shining downward in his face. The halogen bulb shined fiercely. If there was anything behind that lamp, he couldn't see it.

He flinched as a heavy *chink* echoed through the small room—the sound of a deadbolt sliding aside. Hinges groaned, but Reid could not see a door. It closed again with a dissonant clang.

A silhouette blocked the light, bathing him in its shadow as it stood over him. He trembled, not daring to look up.

"Who are you?" The voice was male, slightly higher pitched than that of his previous captors, but still heavily tinged with a Middle Eastern accent.

Reid opened his mouth to speak—to tell them he was nothing more than a history professor, that they had the wrong guy—but he quickly recalled that the last time he tried to do so, he was kicked into submission. Instead, a small whimper escaped his lips.

The man sighed and retreated away from the light. Something scraped against the concrete floor; the legs of a chair. The man adjusted the lamp so that it faced slightly away from Reid, and then sat across from him in the chair so that their knees were nearly touching.

Reid slowly looked up. The man was young, thirty at best, with dark skin and a neatly trimmed black beard. He wore round, silver eyeglasses and a white *kufi*, a brimless, rounded cap.

Hope blossomed within Reid. This young man appeared to be an intellectual, not like the savages who had attacked him and torn him from his home. Perhaps he could negotiate with this man. Perhaps he was in charge...

"We will start simple," the man said. His voice was soft and casual, the way a psychologist might speak with a patient. "What is your name?"

"L... Lawson." His voice cracked on his first try. He coughed, and was slightly alarmed to see specks of blood hit the floor. The man before him wrinkled his nose distastefully. "My name

is... Reid Lawson.” Why did they keep asking his name? He’d told them already. Did he unwittingly wrong someone?

The man sighed slowly, in and out through his nose. He propped his elbows against his knees and leaned forward, lowering his voice further. “There are many people who would like to be in this room right now. Lucky for you, it is just you and I. However, if you are not honest with me, I will have no choice but to invite... others. And they tend to lack my compassion.” He sat up straight. “So I ask you again. What... is... your... name?”

How could he convince them that he was who he said he was? Reid’s heart rate doubled as a stark realization struck him like a blow to the head. He might very well die in this room. “I’m telling you the truth!” he insisted. Suddenly the words flowed from him like a burst dam. “My name is Reid Lawson. Please, just tell me why I’m here. I don’t know what’s happening. I haven’t done anything—”

The man backhanded Reid across the mouth. His head jerked wildly. He gasped as the sting radiated through his freshly split lip.

“Your name.” The man wiped blood from the gold ring on his hand.

“I t-told you,” he stammered. “M-my name is Lawson.” He choked back a sob. “Please.”

He dared to look up. His interrogator stared back impassively, coldly. “Your name.”

“Reid Lawson!” Reid felt heat rise in his face as the pain congealed into anger. He didn’t know what else to say, what they wanted him to say. “Lawson! It’s Lawson! You can check my... my...” No, they couldn’t check his identification. He didn’t have his wallet on him when the trio of Muslim men took him.

His interrogator tut-tutted, and then drove his bony fist into Reid’s solar plexus. The air was again forced from his lungs. For a full minute, Reid could not draw a breath; it finally came again in a ragged gasp. His chest burned fiercely. Sweat dripped down his cheeks and burned his split lip. His head hung limp, his chin between his collarbones, as he fought off a wave of nausea.

“Your name,” the interrogator repeated calmly.

“I... I don’t know what you want me to tell you,” Reid whispered. “I don’t know what you’re looking for. But it’s not me.” Was he losing his mind? He was certain he hadn’t done anything to deserve this sort of treatment.

The man in the *kufi* leaned forward again, this time taking Reid’s chin gently with two fingers. He lifted his head, forcing Reid to look him in the eyes. His thin lips stretched into a half smirk.

“My friend,” he said, “this will get much, much worse before it gets better.”

Reid swallowed and tasted copper at the back of his throat. He knew that blood was an emetic; about two cups’ worth would cause him to vomit, and he already felt nauseous and dizzy. “Listen to me,” he implored. His voice sounded tremulous and timid. “The three men that took me, they came to 22 Ivy Lane, my home. My name is Reid Lawson. I am a professor of European history at Columbia University. I am a widower, with two teen...” He stopped himself. So far his captors had not given any indication that they knew about his girls. “If that’s not what you’re looking for, I cannot help you. Please. That’s the truth.”

The interrogator stared for a long, unblinking moment. Then he barked something sharply in Arabic. Reid flinched at the sudden outburst.

The deadbolt slid back again. Over the man’s shoulder, Reid could see just an outline of the thick door as it swung open. It appeared to be made of some kind of metal, iron or steel.

This room, he realized, was built to be a prison cell.

A silhouette appeared in the doorway. The interrogator shouted something else in his native tongue, and the silhouette vanished. He smirked at Reid. “We will see,” he said simply.

There was a telltale squeak of wheels, and the silhouette reappeared, this time pushing a steel cart into the small concrete room. Reid recognized the conveyor as the quiet, hulking brute who had come to his home, still wearing the perpetual scowl.

Upon the cart was an archaic machine, a brown box with a dozen knobs and dials and thick black wires plugged into one side. From the opposite end trailed a scroll of white paper with four thin needles pressed against it.

It was a polygraph machine—probably nearly as old as Reid was, but a lie detector nonetheless. He breathed a sigh of half-relief. At least they would know that he was telling the truth.

What they might do with him afterward... he didn't want to think about that.

The interrogator set about wrapping the Velcro sensors around two of Reid's fingers, a cuff around his left bicep, and two cords around his chest. He took a seat again, produced a pencil from his pocket, and stuck the pink eraser end in his mouth.

"You know what this is," he said simply. "You know how this works. If you say anything other than the answers to my questions, we will hurt you. Do you understand?"

Reid nodded once. "Yes."

The interrogator flicked a switch and fiddled with the knobs of the machine. The scowling brute stood over his shoulder, blocking the light from the procedure lamp and staring down at Reid.

The thin needles danced slightly against the scroll of white paper, leaving four black trails. The interrogator marked the sheet with a scribble, and then turned his cool gaze back to Reid. "What color is my hat?"

"White," Reid answered quietly.

"What species are you?"

"Human." The interrogator was establishing a baseline for the questions to come—usually four or five known truths so that he could monitor for potential lies.

"In what city do you dwell?"

"New York."

"Where are you now?"

Reid almost scoffed. "In a... in a chair. I don't know."

The interrogator made intermittent marks on the paper. "What is your name?"

Reid did his best to keep his voice steady. "Reid. Lawson."

All three of them were eyeing the machine. The needles continued unperturbed; there were no significant crests or valleys in the scrawling lines.

"What is your occupation?" the interrogator asked.

"I am a professor of European history at Columbia University."

"How long have you been a university professor?"

"Thirteen years," Reid answered honestly. "I was an assistant professor for five and an adjunct professor in Virginia for another six. I've been an associate professor in New York for the past two years."

"Have you ever been to Tehran?"

"No."

"Have you ever been to Zagreb?"

"No!"

"Have you ever been to Madrid?"

"N—yes. Once, about four years ago. I was there for a summit, on behalf of the university."

The needles remained steady.

"Don't you see?" As much as Reid wanted to shout, he fought to remain calm. "You have the wrong person. Whoever you're looking for, it's not me."

The interrogator's nostrils flared, but otherwise there was no reaction. The brute clasped his hands in front of him, his veins standing stark against his skin.

"Have you ever met a man named Sheikh Mustafar?" the interrogator asked.

Reid shook his head. "No."

“He’s lying!” A tall, lanky man entered the room—one of the other two men who had assaulted his home, the same one who had first asked him his name. He swept in with long strides, his hostile gaze directed at Reid. “This machine can be beaten. We know this.”

“There would be some sign,” the interrogator replied calmly. “Body language, sweat, vitals... Everything here suggests he is telling the truth.” Reid couldn’t help but think they were speaking in English for his benefit.

The tall man turned away and paced the length of the concrete room, muttering angrily in Arabic. “Ask him about Tehran.”

“I did,” the interrogator answered.

The tall man spun on Reid, fuming. Reid held his breath, waiting to be struck again.

Instead, the man resumed his pacing. He said something rapidly in Arabic. The interrogator responded. The brute stared at Reid.

“Please!” he said loudly over their chattering. “I’m not whoever you think I am. I have no memory of anything you’re asking...”

The tall man fell silent, and his eyes widened. He almost smacked himself in the forehead, and then spoke excitedly to the interrogator. The impassive man in the *kufi* stroked his chin.

“Possible,” he said in English. He stood and took Reid’s head in both his hands.

“What is this? What are you doing?” Reid asked. The man’s fingertips felt slowly up and down his scalp.

“Quiet,” the man said flatly. He probed Reid’s hairline, his neck, his ears—“Ah!” he said sharply. He jabbered to his cohort, who dashed over and violently yanked Reid’s head to one side.

The interrogator ran a finger along Reid’s left mastoid process, the small section of temporal bone just behind the ear. There was an oblong lump beneath the skin, barely larger than a grain of rice.

The interrogator barked something at the tall man, and the latter quickly swept out of the room. Reid’s neck ached from the strange angle at which they were holding his head.

“What? What’s going on?” he asked.

“This lump, here,” the interrogator said, running his finger over it again. “What is this?”

“It’s... it’s just a bone spur,” said Reid. “I’ve had it since a car accident, in my twenties.”

The tall man returned quickly, this time with a plastic tray. He set it down on the cart, next to the polygraph machine. Despite the dim light and the odd angle of his head, Reid could clearly see what was inside the tray. A knot of fear tightened in his stomach.

The tray was home to a number of sharp, silver implements.

“What are those for?” His voice was panicked. He squirmed against his bonds. “What are you doing?”

The interrogator snapped a short command to the brute. He stepped forward, and the sudden brightness of the procedure lamp nearly blinded Reid.

“Wait... wait!” he shouted. “Just tell me what you want to know!”

The brute seized Reid’s head in his large hands and gripped it tightly, forcing him still. The interrogator chose a tool—a thin-bladed scalpel.

“Please don’t... please don’t...” Reid’s breath came in short gasps. He was nearly hyperventilating.

“Shh,” said the interrogator calmly. “You will want to remain still. I would not want to cut off your ear. At least, not by accident.”

Reid screamed as the blade sliced into the skin behind his ear, but the brute held him still. Every muscle in his limbs went taut.

A strange sound reached his ears—a soft melody. The interrogator was singing a tune in Arabic as he cut into Reid’s head.

He dropped the bloody scalpel into the tray as Reid hissed shallow breaths through his teeth. Then the interrogator reached for a pair of needle-nose pliers.

“I’m afraid that was just the beginning,” he whispered in Reid’s ear. “This next part will actually hurt.”

The pliers gripped something in Reid’s head—was it his bone?—and the interrogator tugged. Reid screamed in agony as white-hot pain shot through his brain, pulsing out into nerve endings. His arms trembled. His feet slapped against the floor.

The pain crescendoed until Reid thought he couldn’t possibly take any more. Blood pounded in his ears, and his own screams sounded as if they were far away. Then the procedure lamp dimmed, and the edges of his vision darkened as he slipped into unconsciousness.

## CHAPTER THREE

When Reid was twenty-three, he was in a car accident. The stoplight had turned green and he eased into the intersection. A pickup truck jumped the light and smashed into his front passenger side. His head struck the window. He was unconscious for several minutes.

His only injury was a cracked temporal bone in his skull. It healed fine; the only evidence of the accident was a small lump behind his ear. The doctor told him it was a bone spur.

The funny thing about the accident was that while he could recall the event, he couldn't recall any pain—not when it happened, and not afterward, either.

But he could feel it now. As he regained consciousness, the small patch of bone behind his left ear thrummed torturously. The procedure lamp was again shining in his eyes. He squinted and moaned slightly. Moving his head the slightest amount sent a fresh sting up his neck.

Suddenly his mind flashed onto something. The bright light in his eyes was not the lamp at all.

*The afternoon sun blazes against a blue cloudless sky. An A-10 Warthog flies overhead, banking right and dipping in altitude over the flat, drab rooftops of Kandahar.*

The vision was not fluid. It came in flashes, like several still photographs in sequence; like watching someone dance under a strobe light.

*You stand on the beige rooftop of a partially destroyed building, a third of it blasted away. You bring the stock to your shoulder, eye the scope, and sight in on a man below...*

Reid jerked his head and groaned. He was in the concrete room, under the discerning eye of the procedure lamp. His fingers trembled and his limbs felt cold. Sweat trickled down his brow. He was likely going into shock. In his periphery, he could see that the left shoulder of his shirt was soaked in blood.

"Bone spur," said the interrogator's placid voice. Then he chuckled sardonically. A slender hand appeared in Reid's field of vision, gripping the pair of needle-nose pliers. Pinched between its teeth was something tiny and silver, but Reid couldn't make out details. His vision was fuzzy and the room tilted slightly. "Do you know what this is?"

Reid shook his head slowly.

"I admit, I have only ever seen this once before," said the interrogator. "A memory suppression chip. It is a very useful tool for people in your unique situation." He dropped the bloody pliers and the small silver grain into the plastic tray.

"No," Reid grunted. "Impossible." The last word came out as little more than a murmur. Memory suppression? That was science fiction. For that to work, it would have to affect the entire limbic system of the brain.

*The fifth floor of the Ritz Madrid. You adjust your black tie before you kick in the door with a solid heel just above the doorknob. The man inside is caught off guard; he leaps to his feet and snatches a pistol from the bureau. But before the man can level it at you, you grab his gun hand and twist it down and away. The force snaps the wrist easily...*

Reid shook the muddled sequence from his brain as the interrogator took a seat in the chair across from him.

"You did something to me," he muttered.

"Yes," the interrogator agreed. "We have liberated you from a mental prison." He leaned forward with his tight smirk, searching Reid's eyes for something. "You're remembering. This is fascinating to watch. You're confused. Your pupils are abnormally dilated, despite the light. What is real, 'Professor Lawson'?"

*The sheikh. By any means necessary.*

*"When our memories fail us..."*

*Last known whereabouts: Safe house in Tehran.*

*“Who are we?”*

*A bullet sounds the same in every language... Who said that?*

*“Who do we become?”*

*You said that.*

Reid felt himself slipping again into the void. The interrogator slapped him twice, jarring him back to the concrete room. “Now we may continue in earnest. So I ask you again. What... is... your... name?”

*You enter the interrogation room alone. The suspect is cuffed to a looped bolt in the table. You reach into your inner suit pocket and produce a leather-bound ID badge and open it...*

*“Reid. Lawson.” His voice was uncertain. “I’m a professor... of European history...”*

The interrogator sighed disappointedly. He beckoned with one finger to the brutish, scowling man. A heavy fist plowed into Reid’s cheek. A molar bounced across the floor in a wake of fresh blood.

For a moment, there was no pain; his face was numb, pulsing with the impact. Then a fresh, nebulous agony took over.

*“Nnggh...” He tried to form words, but his lips would not move.*

*“I ask you again,” said the interrogator. “Tehran?”*

*The sheikh was holed up in a safe house disguised as an abandoned textile factory.*

*“Zagreb?”*

*Two Iranian men are apprehended on a private airstrip, about to board a chartered plane to Paris.*

*“Madrid?”*

*The Ritz, fifth floor: an activated sleeper cell with a suitcase bomb. Suspected destination: the Plaza de Cibeles.*

*“Sheikh Mustafar?”*

*He bargained for his life. Gave us everything he knew. Names, locations, plans. But he only knew so much...*

*“I know you are remembering,” said the interrogator. “Your eyes betray you... Zero.”*

*Zero. An image flashed in his head: A man in aviator sunglasses and a dark motorcycle jacket. He stands on the street corner in some European city. Moves with the crowd. No one is aware. No one knows he’s there.*

Reid tried again to shake the visions from his head. What was happening to him? The images danced in his head like stop-motion sequences, but he refused to acknowledge them as memories. They were false. Implanted, somehow. He was a university professor, with two teenage girls and a humble home in the Bronx...

*“Tell us what you know of our plans,” the interrogator demanded flatly.*

*We don’t talk. Ever.*

The words echoed through the cavern of his mind, over and over. *We don’t talk. Ever.*

*“This is taking too long!” shouted the tall Iranian man. “Coerce him.”*

The interrogator sighed. He reached for the metal cart—but not to turn on the polygraph machine. Instead, his fingers lingered over the plastic tray. “I am generally a patient man,” he told Reid. “But I admit, my associate’s frustration is somewhat contagious.” He plucked up the bloody scalpel, the tool he had used to cut the small silver grain from his head, and he gently pressed the tip of the blade against Reid’s denim jeans, about four inches above the knee. “All we want to know is what you know. Names. Dates. Who you’ve told about what you know. The identities of your fellow agents in the field.”

*Morris. Reidigger. Johansson.* Names flashed across his mind, and with each came a face that he had never seen before. A younger man with dark hair and a cocky smile. A round-faced, friendly-looking guy in a starched white shirt. A woman with flowing blonde hair and steely, gray eyes.



“And what became of the sheikh.”

Somehow Reid was suddenly aware that the sheikh in question had been detained and taken to a black site in Morocco. It wasn't a vision. He simply knew.

*We don't talk. Ever.*

A cold chill ran down Reid's spine as he struggled to maintain some semblance of sanity.

“Tell me,” the interrogator insisted.

“I don't know.” The words felt strange rolling from his swollen tongue. He glanced up in alarm and saw the other man smirking back at him.

He had understood the foreign demand... and answered back in flawless Arabic.

The interrogator pushed the tip of the scalpel into Reid's leg. He screamed as the knife penetrated the muscle of his thigh. He instinctively tried to pull his leg away, but his ankles were bound to the chair legs.

He clenched his teeth hard, his jaw aching in protest. The wound in his leg burned fiercely.

The interrogator smirked and cocked his head slightly. “I will admit, you're tougher than most, Zero,” he said in English. “Unfortunately for you, I am a professional.” He reached down and slowly tugged off one of Reid's now-filthy socks. “I don't get to resort to this tactic often.” He straightened and stared Reid directly in the eye. “Here is what is going to happen next: I am going to cut off small pieces of you, and show you each one. We will begin with your toes. Then the fingers. After that... we will see where we stand.” The interrogator knelt and pressed the blade against the smallest toe of his right foot.

“Wait,” Reid pleaded. “Please, just wait.”

The other two men in the room gathered on either side, watching with interest.

Desperate, Reid fingered the ropes that held his wrists in place. It was an inline knot with two opposing loops tied with half hitches...

An intense shiver ran from the base of his spine to his shoulders. He knew. Somehow he just *knew*. He had an intense feeling of déjà vu, as if he had been in this situation before—or rather, these insane visions somehow implanted in his head told him he had.

But most importantly, he knew what he had to do.

“I'll tell you!” Reid panted. “I'll tell you what you want to know.”

The interrogator glanced up. “Yes? Good. First, however, I am still going to remove this toe. I would not want you to believe that I was bluffing.”

Behind the chair, Reid gripped his left thumb in his opposite hand. He held his breath and jerked hard. He felt the pop as the thumb dislocated. He waited for the sharp, intense pain to come, but it was little more than a dull throb.

A new realization struck him—this was not the first time that had happened to him.

The interrogator sliced into the skin of his toe and he yelped. With his thumb opposite its normal angle, he slipped his hand free of its bonds. With one loop open, the other gave way.

His hands were free. But he had no idea what to do with them.

The interrogator glanced up and his brow furrowed in confusion. “What...?”

Before he could utter another word, Reid's right hand shot out and grabbed the first implement it closed on—a black-handled precision knife. As the interrogator tried to stand, Reid pulled his hand back. The blade raked across the man's carotid.

Both hands flew to his throat. Blood eked between his fingers as the wide-eyed interrogator collapsed to the floor.

The hulking brute roared in fury as he lunged forward. He wrapped both meaty hands around Reid's throat and squeezed. Reid tried to think, but fear gripped him.

Next thing he knew, he lifted the precision knife again and jammed it into the brute's inner wrist. He twisted his shoulders as he pushed, and opened an avenue up the length of the man's forearm. The brute screamed and fell, clutching his grievous injury.

The tall, thin man stared in disbelief. Much like before, on the street in front of Reid's house, he seemed hesitant to approach him. Instead, he fumbled for the plastic tray and a weapon. He grabbed a curved blade and stabbed straight for Reid's chest.

Reid threw his body weight backward, toppling the chair and narrowly avoiding the knife. At the same time, he forced his legs outward as hard as he could. As the chair hit the concrete, the legs broke off from the frame. Reid stood and nearly stumbled, his legs weak.

The tall man shouted for help in Arabic, and then slashed the air indiscriminately with the knife, back and forth in wide sweeps to keep Reid at bay. Reid kept his distance, watching the silver blade swing hypnotically. The man swept right, and Reid lunged, trapping the arm—and the knife—between their bodies. His momentum drove them forward, and as the Iranian toppled, Reid twisted and neatly sliced through the femoral artery on the back of his thigh. He planted a foot and swished the knife the opposite way, piercing the jugular.

He didn't know how he knew, but he knew that the man had about forty-seven seconds of life left.

Feet pounded a staircase from nearby. Fingers shaking, Reid dashed to the open doorway and flattened himself against one side. The first thing through was a gun—he immediately identified it as a Beretta 92 FS—and an arm followed, and then a torso. Reid spun, caught the gun in the crook of his elbow, and slid the precision knife sideways between two ribs. The blade pierced the man's heart. A cry caught on his lips as he slid to the floor.

Then there was only silence.

Reid staggered backward. His breathing came in shallow gulps.

"Oh god," he breathed. "Oh god."

He had just killed—no, he had just *murdered* four men in the span of several seconds. Even worse was that it was kneejerk, reflexive, like riding a bike. Or suddenly speaking Arabic. Or knowing the sheikh's fate.

He was a professor. He had memories. He had children. A career. But clearly his body knew how to fight, even if he didn't. He knew how to escape from bonds. He knew where to deliver a lethal blow.

"What is happening to me?" he gasped.

He covered his eyes briefly as a roiling wave of nausea washed over him. There was blood on his hands—literally. Blood on his shirt. As the adrenaline subsided, the aches permeated through his limbs from being stationary for so long. His ankle still throbbed from leaping off his deck. He'd been stabbed in the leg. He had an open wound behind his ear.

He didn't even want to *think* about how his face might look.

*Get out*, his brain screamed at him. *More may come*.

"Okay," Reid said aloud, as if he were assenting to someone else in the room. He calmed his breathing as best he could and scanned his surroundings. His unfocused eyes fell on certain details—the Beretta. A rectangular lump in the interrogator's pocket. A strange mark on the neck of the brute.

He knelt beside the hulking man and stared at the scar. It was near the jaw line, partially obscured by beard, and no bigger than a dime. It appeared to be some sort of brand, burned into the skin, and looked similar to a glyph, like some letter in another alphabet. But he didn't recognize it. Reid examined it for several seconds, etching it into his memory.

He quickly rifled through the dead interrogator's pocket and found an ancient brick of a cell phone. *Likely a burner*, his brain told him. In the tall man's back pocket he found a scrap of torn white paper, one corner stained with blood. In a scrawling, nearly illegible hand was a long series of digits that began with 963—the country code to make an international call to Syria.

None of the men had any identification, but the would-be shooter had a thick billfold of euro banknotes, easily a few thousand. Reid pocketed that as well, and then lastly, he took the Beretta.

The pistol's weight felt oddly natural in his hands. *Nine-millimeter caliber. Fifteen-round magazine. One-hundred-twenty-five-millimeter barrel.*

His hands expertly ejected the clip in a fluid motion, as if someone else were controlling them. Thirteen rounds. He pushed it back in and cocked it.

Then he got the hell out of there.

Outside the thick steel door was a dingy hall that ended in a staircase going up. At the top of it was evidence of daylight. Reid climbed the stairs carefully, the pistol aloft, but he heard nothing. The air grew cooler as he ascended.

He found himself in a small, filthy kitchen, the paint peeling from the walls and dishes caked in grime piled high in the sink. The windows were translucent; they had been smeared with grease. The radiator in the corner was cold to the touch.

Reid cleared the rest of the small house; there was no one besides the four dead men in the basement. The single bathroom was in far worse shape than the kitchen, but Reid found a seemingly ancient first-aid kit. He didn't dare look at himself in the mirror as he washed as much blood as he could from his face and neck. Everything from head to toe stung, ached, or burned. The tiny tube of antiseptic ointment had expired three years earlier, but he used it anyway, wincing as he pressed bandages over his open cuts.

Then he sat on the toilet and held his head in his hands, taking a brief moment to get a grip. *You could leave, he told himself. You have money. Go to the airport. No, you don't have a passport. Go to the embassy. Or find a consulate. But...*

But he had just killed four men, and his own blood was all over the basement. And there was the other, clearer problem.

"I don't know who I am," he murmured aloud.

Those flashes, those visions that stalked his mind, they were from his perspective. His point of view. But he had never, *would* never do anything like that. Memory suppression, the interrogator had said. Was that even possible? He thought again of his girls. Were they safe? Were they scared? Were they... his?

That notion jarred him to his core. What if, somehow, what he thought was real wasn't real at all?

*No*, he told himself adamantly. They were his daughters. He was there for their birth. He raised them. None of these bizarre, intrusive visions contradicted that. And he needed to find a way to contact them, to make sure they were all right. That was his top priority. There was no way he would use the burner phone to contact his family; he didn't know if it was being traced or who might be listening in.

He suddenly remembered the slip of paper with the phone number on it. He stood and pulled it out of his pocket. The bloodstained paper stared back at him. He didn't know what this was about or why they thought he was anyone different than who he said he was, but there was a shade of urgency beneath the surface of his subconscious, something telling him that he was now unwillingly involved in something that was much, much bigger than him.

His hands shaking, he dialed the number on the burner.

A gruff male voice answered on the second tone. "Is it done?" he asked in Arabic.

"Yes," Reid replied. He tried to mask his voice as best he could and affect an accent.

"You have the information?"

"Mm."

The voice was silent for a long moment. Reid's heart pounded in his chest. Had they realized it wasn't the interrogator?

"187 Rue de Stalingrad," the man said finally. "Eight p.m." And he hung up.

Reid ended the call and took a deep breath. *Rue de Stalingrad?* he thought. *In France?*

He wasn't sure what he was going to do yet. His mind felt like he had broken through a wall and discovered a whole other chamber on the other side. He couldn't return home without knowing what was happening to him. Even if he did, how long would it be until they found him, and the girls, again? He had only one lead. He had to follow it.

He stepped out of the small house and found himself in a narrow alley, the mouth of which opened onto a street called Rue Marceau. He immediately knew where he was—a suburb of Paris, mere blocks from the Seine. He almost laughed. He thought he would be stepping out into the war-torn streets of a Middle Eastern city. Instead, he found a boulevard lined with shops and row homes, unassuming passersby enjoying their casual afternoon, bundled against the chilly February breeze.

He tucked the pistol into the waistband of his jeans and stepped out onto the street, blending in with the crowd and trying not to draw any attention to his blood-stained shirt, bandages, or obvious bruises. He hugged his arms close to him—he would need some new clothes, a jacket, something warmer than just his shirt.

He needed to make sure his girls were safe.

Then he would get some answers.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Walking the streets of Paris felt like a dream—just not in the way that anyone would expect or even desire. Reid reached the intersection of Rue de Berri and Avenue des Champs-Élysées, ever the tourist hotspot despite the chilly weather. The Arc de Triomphe loomed several blocks away to the northwest, the centerpiece of Place Charles de Gaulle, but its grandeur was lost on Reid. A new vision flashed across his mind.

*I've been here before. I've stood in this spot and looked up at this street sign. Wearing jeans and a black motorcycle jacket, the colors of the world muted by polarized sunglasses...*

He turned right. He wasn't sure what he would find this way, but he had the eerie suspicion that he would recognize it as he saw it. It was an incredibly bizarre sensation to not know where he was going until he got there.

It felt as if every new sight brought on some vignette of vague recollection, each disconnected from the next, yet still somehow congruent. He knew that the café on the corner served the best pastis he would ever taste. The sweet scent of the patisserie across the street made his mouth water for savory palmiers. He had never tasted palmiers before. Had he?

Even sounds jarred him. Passersby chattered idly to one another as they strolled the boulevard, occasionally stealing glances at his bandaged, bruised face.

"I would hate to see the other guy," a young Frenchman muttered to his girlfriend. They both chuckled.

*Okay, don't panic,* Reid thought. *Apparently you know Arabic and French.* The only other language that Professor Lawson spoke was German and a few phrases in Spanish.

There was something else too, something harder to define. Beneath his rattling nerves and instinct to run, to go home, to hide somewhere, beneath all of that there was a cold, steely reserve. It was like having the heavy hand of an older brother on his shoulder, a voice in the back of his mind saying, *Relax. You know all of this.*

While that voice ushered him softly from the back of his mind, on the forefront was his girls and their safety. Where were they? What were they thinking right then? What would it mean for them if they lost both parents?

He had never stopped thinking about them. Even as he was being beaten in the dingy basement prison, even as these flashes of visions were intruding on his mind, he had been thinking about the girls—particularly that last question. What would happen to them if he had died down there in that basement? Or if he died doing the very foolhardy thing that he was about to do?

He had to make sure. He had to reach out somehow.

But first, he needed a jacket, and not just to cover his bloodstained shirt. The February weather was approaching fifty degrees, but still too chilly for just a shirt. The boulevard acted as a wind tunnel and the breeze was brisk. He ducked into the next clothing boutique and chose the first coat that caught his eye—a dark brown bomber jacket, leather with a fleece lining. Strange, he thought. He would never have picked a jacket like this before, what with his tweed and plaid fashion sense, but he was drawn to it.

The bomber jacket was two hundred and forty euros. No matter; he had a pocketful of money. He picked out a new shirt as well, a slate-gray tee, and then a pair of jeans, new socks, and sturdy brown boots. He brought all his purchases up to the counter and paid in cash.

There was a thumbprint of blood on one of the bills. The thin-lipped clerk pretended not to notice. A strobe-like flash in his mind—

*"A guy walks into a gas station covered in blood. He pays for his fuel and starts to leave. The bewildered attendant calls out, 'Hey, man, are you okay?' The guy smiles. 'Oh yeah, I'm fine. It's not my blood.'"*

*I've never heard that joke before.*

"May I use your changing room?" Reid asked in French.

The clerk pointed toward the rear of the store. He hadn't said a single word during the entire transaction.

Before changing, Reid examined himself for the first time in a clean mirror. Jesus, he looked awful. His right eye was swelling fiercely and blood was staining the bandages. He'd have to find a drug store and buy some decent first-aid supplies. He slid his now-filthy and somewhat bloody jeans down over his wounded thigh, wincing as he did. Something clattered to the floor, startling him. The Beretta. He'd nearly forgotten he had it.

The pistol was heavier than he would have imagined. *Nine hundred forty-five grams, unloaded*, he knew. Holding it was like embracing a former lover, familiar and foreign at the same time. He set it down and finished changing, stuffed his old clothes in the shopping bag, and tucked the pistol into the waistband of his new jeans, at the small of his back.

Out on the boulevard, Reid kept his head low and walked briskly, staring down at the sidewalk. He didn't need more visions distracting him right now. He tossed the bag of old clothes in a trash can on a corner without missing a step.

"Oh! *Excusez-moi*," he apologized as his shoulder bumped roughly into a passing woman in a business suit. She glared at him. "So sorry." She huffed and stalked off. He stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets—along with the cell phone he had swiped from her purse.

It was easy. Too easy.

Two blocks away, he ducked under a department store awning and took out the phone. He breathed a sigh of relief—he'd targeted the businesswoman for a reason, and his instinct paid off. She had Skype installed on her phone and an account linked to an American number.

He opened the phone's Internet browser, looked up the number to Pap's Deli in the Bronx, and called.

A young male voice answered quickly. "Pap's, how can I help you?"

"Ronnie?" One of his students from the year prior worked part time at Reid's favorite deli. "It's Professor Lawson."

"Hey, Professor!" the young man said brightly. "How's it going? You want to put in a takeout order?"

"No. Yes... sort of. Listen, I need a really big favor, Ronnie." Pap's Deli was only six blocks from his house. On pleasant days, he would often walk the distance to pick up sandwiches. "Do you have Skype on your phone?"

"Yeah?" said Ronnie, a confused lilt in his voice.

"Good. Here's what I need you to do. Write down this number..." He instructed the kid to make a quick run down to his house, see who, if anyone, was there, and call back the American number on the phone.

"Professor, are you in some kind of trouble?"

"No, Ronnie, I'm fine," he lied. "I lost my phone and a nice woman is letting me use hers to let my kids know I'm okay. But I only have a few minutes. So if you could, please..."

"Say no more, Professor. Happy to help. I'll hit you back in a few." Ronnie hung up.

While he waited, Reid paced the short span of the awning, checking the phone every few seconds in case he missed the call. It felt like an hour passed before it rang again, though it had only been six minutes.

"Hello?" He answered the Skype call on the first ring. "Ronnie?"

"Reid, is that you?" A frantic female voice.

"Linda!" Reid said breathlessly. "I'm glad you're there. Listen, I need to know—"

"Reid, what happened? Where are you?" she demanded.

"The girls, are they at the—"

“What’s happened?” Linda interrupted. “The girls woke up this morning, freaking out because you were gone, so they called me and I came right over...”

“Linda, please,” he tried to interject, “where are they?”

She talked over him, clearly distraught. Linda was a lot of things, but good in a crisis wasn’t one of them. “Maya said that sometimes you go for walks in the morning, but both the front and back doors were open, and she wanted to call the police because she said you never leave your phone at home, and now this boy shows up from the deli and hands me a phone—?”

“Linda!” Reid hissed sharply. Two elderly men passing by looked up at his outburst. “Where are the girls?”

“They’re here,” she panted. “They’re both here, at the house with me.”

“They’re safe?”

“Yes, of course. Reid, what’s going on?”

“Did you call the police?”

“Not yet, no... on TV they always say you have to wait twenty-four hours to report someone missing... Are you in some sort of trouble? Where are you calling me from? Whose account is this?”

“I can’t tell you that. Just listen to me. Have the girls pack a bag and take them to a hotel. Not anywhere close; go outside the city. Maybe to Jersey...”

“Reid, *what?*”

“My wallet is on my desk in the office. Don’t use the credit card directly. Get a cash advance on whatever cards are in there and use it to pay for the stay. Keep it open-ended.”

“Reid! I’m not going to do a thing until you tell me what’s... hang on a sec.” Linda’s voice became muffled and distant. “Yes, it’s him. He’s okay. I think. Wait, Maya!”

“Dad? Dad, is that you?” A new voice on the line. “What happened? Where are you?”

“Maya! I, uh, had something come up, extremely last minute. I didn’t want to wake you...”

“Are you kidding me?” Her voice was shrill, agitated and worried at the same time. “I’m not stupid, Dad. Tell me the truth.”

He sighed. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I can’t tell you where I am, Maya. And I shouldn’t be on the phone long. Just do what your aunt says, okay? You’re going to leave the house for a little while. Don’t go to school. Don’t wander anywhere. Don’t talk about me on the phone or computer. Understand?”

“No, I don’t understand! Are you in some kind of trouble? Should we call the police?”

“No, don’t do that,” he said. “Not yet. Just... give me some time to sort something out.”

She was silent for a long moment. Then she said, “Promise me that you’re okay.”

He winced.

“Dad?”

“Yeah,” he said a bit too forcefully. “I’m okay. Please, just do what I ask and go with your Aunt Linda. I love you both. Tell Sara I said so, and hug her for me. I’ll contact you as soon as I can—”

“Wait, wait!” Maya said. “How will you contact us if you don’t know where we are?”

He thought for a moment. He couldn’t ask Ronnie to get any further involved in this. He couldn’t call the girls directly. And he couldn’t risk knowing where they were, because that could be leverage against him...

“I’ll set up a fake account,” said Maya, “under another name. You’ll know it. I’ll only check it from the hotel computers. If you need to contact us, send a message.”

Reid understood immediately. He felt a swell of pride; she was so smart, and so much cooler under pressure than he could hope to be.

“Dad?”

“Yeah,” he said. “That’s good. Take care of your sister. I have to go...”

“I love you too,” said Maya.

He ended the call. Then he sniffed. Again it came, the stinging instinct to run home to them, to keep them safe, to pack up whatever they could and leave, go somewhere...



He couldn't do that. Whatever this was, whoever was after him, had found him once. He had been supremely fortunate that they weren't after his girls. Maybe they didn't know about the kids. Next time, if there was a next time, maybe he wouldn't be so lucky.

Reid opened the phone, pulled out the SIM card, and snapped it in half. He dropped the pieces into a sewer grate. As he walked down the street, he deposited the battery in one trash bin, and the two halves of the phone in others.

He knew he was walking in the general direction of Rue de Stalingrad, though he had no idea what he would do when he arrived there. His brain screamed at him to change direction, to go anywhere else. But that sangfroid in his subconscious compelled him to keep going.

His captors had asked him what he knew of their "plans." The locations they had asked about, Zagreb and Madrid and Tehran, they had to be connected, and they were clearly linked to the men who had taken him. Whatever these visions were—he still refused to acknowledge them as anything but—there was knowledge in them about something that had either occurred or was going to occur. Knowledge he didn't know. The more he thought about it, the more he felt that sense of urgency nag at his mind.

No, it was more than that. It felt like an obligation.

His captors had seemed willing to kill him slowly for what he knew. And he had the sensation that if he didn't discover what this was and what he was supposed to know, more people would die.

"Monsieur." Reid was startled from his musing by a matronly woman in a shawl gently touching his arm. "You are bleeding," she said in English, and pointed to her own brow.

"Oh. *Merci*." He touched two fingers to his right brow. A small cut there had soaked the bandage and a bead of blood was making its way down his face. "I need to find a pharmacy," he murmured aloud.

Then he sucked in a breath as a thought struck him: there was a pharmacy two blocks down and one up. He had never been inside it—not to his own untrustworthy knowledge, anyway—but he simply knew it, as easily as he knew the route to Pap's Deli.

A chill ran from the base of his spine up to the nape of his neck. The other visions had been visceral, and had all manifested from some external stimulus, sights and sounds and even scents. This time there was no accompanying vision. It was plain knowledge recall, the same way he knew where to turn at each street sign. The same way he knew how to load the Beretta.

He made a decision before the light turned green. He would go to this meeting and get whatever information he could. Then he would decide what to do with it—report it to the authorities perhaps, and clear his name regarding the four men in the basement. Let them make the arrests while he went home to his children.

At the drug store, he bought a thin tube of super glue, a box of butterfly bandages, cotton swabs, and a foundation that nearly matched his skin tone. He took his purchases into the restroom and locked the door.

He peeled off the bandages that he had haphazardly stuck to his face back in the apartment and washed the crusted blood from his wounds. To the smaller cuts he applied the butterfly bandages. For the deeper wounds, ones that would ordinarily require stitches, he pinched the edges of the skin together and squeezed a bead of super glue, hissing through his teeth all the while. Then he held his breath for about thirty seconds. The glue burned fiercely but it subsided as it dried. Finally, he smoothed the foundation over the contours of his face, particularly the new ones created by his sadistic former captors. There was no way to completely mask his swollen eye and bruised jaw, but at least this way there would be fewer people staring at him on the street.

The entire process took about half an hour, and twice in that span customers banged on the door to the restroom (the second time, a woman shouting in French that her child was nearly to bursting). Both times Reid just shouted back, "*Occupé!*"

Finally, when he was finished, he examined himself again in the mirror. It was far from perfect, but at least it didn't look like he had been beaten in a subterranean torture chamber. He wondered if he should have gone with a darker foundation, something to make him appear more foreign. Did the caller know who he was supposed to be meeting? Would they recognize who he was—or who they thought he was? The three men who had come to his home didn't seem so sure; they had checked against a photograph.

"What am I doing?" he asked himself. *You're preparing for a meeting with a dangerous criminal that is likely a known terrorist*, said the voice in his head—not this new intrusive voice, but his own, Reid Lawson's voice. It was his own common sense, mocking him.

Then that poised, assertive personality, the one just beneath the surface, spoke up. *You'll be fine*, it told him. *Nothing you haven't done before*. His hand reached instinctively for the grip of the Beretta tucked into the back of his pants, concealed by his new jacket. *You know all this*.

Before leaving the drug store, he picked up a few more items: a cheap watch, a bottle of water, and two candy bars. Outside on the sidewalk, he devoured both chocolate bars. He wasn't sure how much blood he had lost and he wanted to keep his sugar level up. He drained the entire bottle of water, and then asked a passerby for the time. He set the watch and slipped it around his wrist.

It was half past six. He had plenty of time to get to the rendezvous place early and prepare.

\*

It was nearly nightfall before he reached the address he'd been given over the phone. The sunset over Paris cast long shadows down the boulevard. 187 Rue de Stalingrad was a bar in the 10th arrondissement called Féline, a dive of a joint with painted-over windows and a cracked façade. It was situated on a street otherwise populated by art studios, Indian restaurants, and bohemian cafes.

Reid paused with his hand on the door. If he entered, there would be no turning back. He could still walk away. No, he decided, he couldn't. Where would he go? Back home, so they could find him all over again? And living with these strange visions in his head?

He went inside.

The bar's walls were painted black and red and covered with fifties-era posters of grim-faced women and cigarette holders and silhouettes. It was too early, or perhaps too late, for the place to be busy. The few patrons that milled about spoke in hushed tones, hunched protectively over their drinks. Melancholy blues music played softly from a stereo behind the bar.

Reid scanned the place left to right and back again. No one looked his way, and certainly no one there looked like the types that had taken him hostage. He took a small table near the rear and sat facing the door. He ordered a coffee, though it mostly sat in front of him steaming.

A hunched old man slid from a stool and limped across the bar toward the restrooms. Reid found his gaze quickly drawn to the movement, scanning the man. *Late sixties. Hip dysplasia. Yellowish fingers, labored breathing—a cigar smoker*. His eyes flitted to the other side of the bar without moving his head, where two rough-looking men in overalls were having a hushed but fervent conversation about sports. *Factory workers. The one on the left isn't getting enough sleep, likely a father to young children. Man on the right was in a fight recently, or at least threw a punch; his knuckles are bruised*. Without thinking, he found himself examining the cuffs of their pants, their sleeves, and the way they held their elbows on the table. *Someone with a gun will protect it, try to conceal it, even unconsciously*.

Reid shook his head. He was getting paranoid, and these persistent foreign thoughts weren't helping. But then he remembered the strange occurrence with the pharmacy, the recollection of its location just by mere mention of needing to find one. The academic in him spoke up. *Maybe there's something to be learned from this. Maybe instead of fighting it, you should try opening up to it*.

The waitress was a young, tired-looking woman with a knotty brunette mane. “*Stylo?*” he asked as she passed him by. “*Ou crayon?*” Pen or pencil? She reached into the tangle of hair and found a pen. “*Merci.*”

He smoothed a cocktail napkin and set the tip of the pen to it. This wasn’t some new skill he’d never learned; this was a Professor Lawson tactic, one he had used many times in the past to recall and strengthen memory.

He thought back to his conversation, if he could call it that, with the three Arabic captors. He tried not to think of their dead eyes, the blood on the floor, or the tray of sharp implements intended to cut whatever truth they thought he had out of him. Instead he focused on the verbal details and wrote the first name that came to mind.

Then he muttered it aloud. “Sheikh Mustafar.”

*A Moroccan black site. A man who spent his entire life in wealth and power, treading on those less fortunate than him, crushing them beneath his shoe—now scared shitless because he knows you can bury him to his neck in the sand and no one would ever find his bones.*

*“I’ve told you all I know!” he insists.*

*Tut-tut. “My intel says otherwise. Says you might know a hell of a lot more, but you may be afraid of the wrong people. Tell you what, Sheikh... my friend in the next room? He’s getting antsy. See, he’s got this hammer—it’s just a little thing, a rock hammer, like a geologist would use? But it does wonders on small bones, knuckles...”*

*“I swear it!” The sheikh wrings his hands nervously. You recognize it as a tell. “There were other conversations about the plans, but they were in German, Russian... I didn’t understand!”*

*“You know, Sheikh... a bullet sounds the same in every language.”*

Reid snapped back to the dive bar. His throat felt dry. The memory had been intense, as vivid and lucid as any he knew he had actually experienced. And it had been *his* voice in his head, threatening casually, saying things he would never dream of saying to another person.

Plans. The sheikh had definitely said something about plans. Whatever terrible thing was nagging at his subconscious, he had the distinct feeling it had not yet happened.

He took a sip of the now-lukewarm coffee to calm his nerves. “Okay,” he told himself. “Okay.” During his interrogation in the basement, they had asked about fellow agents in the field, and three names had flashed across his mind. He wrote one, and then read it out loud. “Morris.”

A face immediately came to him, a man in his early thirties, handsome and knowing it. A cocky half-smirk with only one side of his mouth. Dark hair, styled to make him look young.

*A private airstrip in Zagreb. Morris sprints alongside you. You both have your guns drawn, barrels pointed downward. You can’t let the two Iranians reach the plane. Morris aims between strides and pops off two shots. One clips a calf and the first man falls. You gain on the other, tackling him brutally to the ground...*

Another name. “Reidigger.”

A boyish smile, neatly combed hair. A bit of a paunch. He’d wear the weight better if he was a few inches taller. The butt of a lot of ribbing, but takes it good-naturedly.

*The Ritz in Madrid. Reidigger covers the hall as you kick in the door and catch the bomber off guard. The man goes for the gun on the bureau, but you’re faster. You snap his wrist... Later Reidigger tells you he heard the sound from out in the corridor. Turned his stomach. Everyone laughs.*

The coffee was cold now, but Reid barely noticed. His fingers were trembling. There was no doubt about it; whatever was happening to him, these were memories—*his* memories. Or someone’s. The captors, they had cut something out of his neck and called it a memory suppressor. That couldn’t be true; this wasn’t him. This was someone else. He had someone else’s memories mingling with his own.

Reid set the pen to the napkin again and wrote the final name. He said it aloud: “Johansson.” A shape swam into his mind. Long blonde hair, conditioned to a sheen. Smooth, shapely cheekbones. Full lips. Gray eyes, the color of slate. A vision flashed...

*Milan. Night. A hotel. Wine. Maria sits on the bed with her legs folded under her. The top three buttons of her shirt are open. Her hair is tousled. You’ve never noticed how long her eyelashes are before. Two hours ago you watched her kill two men in a gunfight, and now it’s Sangiovese and Pecorino Toscano. Your knees almost touch. Her gaze meets yours. Neither of you speak. You can see it in her eyes, but she knows you can’t. She asks about Kate...*

Reid winced as a headache came on, spreading through his cranium like a storm cloud. At the same time, the vision blurred and faded. He squeezed his eyes shut and gripped his temples for a full minute until the headache receded.

*What the hell was that?*

For some reason, it seemed that the memory of this woman, Johansson, had triggered the brief migraine. Even more unsettling, however, was the bizarre sensation that gripped him in the wake of the headache. It felt like... desire. No, it was more than that—it felt like passion, reinforced by excitement and even a bit of danger.

He couldn’t help but wonder who the woman was, but he shook it off. He didn’t want to incite another headache. Instead he set the pen to the napkin again, about to write the final name—Zero. That’s what the Iranian interrogator had called him. But before he could write it or recite it, he felt a bizarre sensation. The hairs on the nape of his neck stood on end.

He was being watched.

When he glanced up again, he saw a man standing in Féline’s dark doorway, his gaze locked on Reid like a hawk eyeing a mouse. Reid’s blood ran cold. He was being watched.

This was the man he was here to meet, he was certain of it. Did he recognize him? The Arabic men hadn’t seemed to. Was this man expecting someone else?

He set the pen down. Slowly and surreptitiously, he crumpled the napkin and dropped it into his half-empty cold coffee.

The man nodded once. Reid nodded back.

Then the stranger reached behind him, for something tucked in the back of his pants.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Reid stood with such force that his chair nearly toppled. His hand immediately wrapped around the textured grip of the Beretta, warm from his lower back. His mind screamed at him frantically. *This is a public place. There are people here. I've never fired a gun before.*

Before Reid drew his pistol, the stranger pulled a billfold from his back pocket. He grinned at Reid, apparently amused by his jumpy nature. No one else in the bar seemed to have noticed, except the waitress with the rat's nest of hair, who simply raised an eyebrow.

The stranger approached the bar, slid a bill across the table, and muttered something to the bartender. Then he made his way to Reid's table. He stood behind the empty chair for a long moment, a thin smirk on his lips.

He was young, thirty at best, with close-cropped hair and a five o'clock shadow. He was quite lanky and his face was gaunt, making his sharp cheekbones and jutting chin look almost caricature-ish. Most disarming was the black horn-rimmed glasses he wore, looking for all the world as if Buddy Holly had grown up in the eighties and discovered cocaine.

He was right-handed, Reid could tell; he held his left elbow close to his body, which likely meant he had a pistol hanging from a shoulder holster in his armpit so he could draw with his right, if need be. His left arm pinned his black suede jacket closed to hide the gun.

"*Mogu sjediti?*" the man asked finally.

*Mogu...*? Reid didn't immediately understand the way he had with Arabic and French. It wasn't Russian, but it was close enough for him to derive the meaning from context. The man was asking if he could sit down.

Reid gestured to the empty chair across from him, and the man sat, keeping his left elbow tucked all the while.

As soon as he was seated, the waitress brought a glass of dark amber beer and set it before him. "*Merci,*" he said. He grinned at Reid. "Your Serbian is not so good?"

Reid shook his head. "No." Serbian? He had assumed the man he would be meeting would be Arabic, like his captors and the interrogator.

"In English, then? *Ou francais?*"

"Dealer's choice." Reid was surprised at how calm and even his voice sounded. His heart was nearly bursting out of his chest from fear and... and if he was being honest, at least a shred of anxious excitement.

The Serbian man's grin widened. "I enjoy this place. It is dark. It is quiet. It is the only bar that I know of in this arrondissement that serves Franziskaner. It is my favorite." He took a long swig from his glass, his eyes closed, and a grunt of pleasure escaped his throat. "*Que delicioso.*" He opened his eyes and added, "You are not what I expected."

A surge of panic rose in Reid's gut. *He knows*, his mind screamed at him. *He knows you're not who he's supposed to meet, and he has a gun.*

*Relax*, said the other side, the new part. *You can handle this.*

Reid gulped, but somehow managed to maintain his icy demeanor. "Nor are you," he replied.

The Serbian chuckled. "That is fair. But we are many, yes? And you—you are American?"

"Expat," Reid answered.

"Are not we all?" Another chuckle. "Before you I met only one other American in our, um... what is the word... conglomerate? Yes. So for me, it is not so strange." The man winked.

Reid tensed. He couldn't tell if it was a joke or not. What if he knew that Reid was a fake and was leading him on or buying time? He placed his hands in his lap to hide his trembling fingers.

"You may call me Yuri. What may I call you?"

“Ben.” It was the first name that came to mind, the name of a mentor from his days as an assistant professor.

“Ben. How did you come to work for the Iranians?”

“With,” Reid corrected. He narrowed his eyes for effect. “I work *with* them.”

The man, this Yuri, took another sip of his beer. “Sure. With. How did that come to be? Despite our mutual interests, they tend to be a, uh... closed group.”

“I’m trustworthy,” Reid said without blinking. He had no idea where these words were coming from, nor the conviction with which they were coming. He said them as easily as if he’d rehearsed it.

“And where is Amad?” Yuri asked casually.

“Couldn’t make it,” Reid replied evenly. “Sends his regards.”

“All right, Ben. You say the deed is done.”

“Yes.”

Yuri leaned forward, his eyes narrowed. Reid could smell the malt on his breath. “I need to hear you say it, Ben. Tell me, is CIA man dead?”

Reid froze for a moment. CIA? As in, *the* CIA? Suddenly all the talk of agents in the field and visions of detaining terrorists on airfields and in hotels made more sense, even if the entirety of the matter didn’t. Then he remembered the gravity of his situation and hoped that he hadn’t given any cues to betray his charade.

He too leaned forward and said slowly, “Yes, Yuri. CIA man is dead.”

Yuri leaned back casually and grinned again. “Good.” He plucked up his glass. “And the information? You have it?”

“He gave us everything he knew,” Reid told him. He couldn’t help but notice that his fingers were no longer trembling beneath the table. It was as if someone else was in control now, as if Reid Lawson was taking a backseat in his own brain. He decided not to fight it.

“The location of Mustafar?” Yuri asked. “And all he told them?”

Reid nodded.

Yuri blinked a few times expectantly. “I am waiting.”

A realization struck Reid like a heavy weight as his mind put the little knowledge he had together. The CIA was involved. There was some sort of plan that would get a lot of people killed. The sheikh knew about it, and told them—told *him*—everything. These men, they needed to know what the sheikh knew. That’s what Yuri wanted to know. Whatever this was, it felt big, and Reid had stumbled into its midst... though he certainly felt as if this was not the first time.

He did not speak for a long time, long enough for the smile to evaporate from Yuri’s lips into an expectant thin-lipped stare. “I don’t know you,” Reid said. “I don’t know who you represent. You expect me to give you everything I know, and walk away, and trust that it gets to the right place?”

“Yes,” said Yuri, “that is exactly what I expect, and precisely the reason for this meeting.”

Reid shook his head. “No. See, Yuri, it occurs to me that this information is too important to play whisper-down-the-alley and hope it gets to the right ears in the right order. What’s more is that as far as you’re concerned, there’s only one place it exists—right here.” He tapped his own left temple. It was true; the information they were looking for was, presumably, somewhere in the recesses of his mind, waiting to be unlocked. “It also occurs to me,” he continued, “that now that they have this information, our plans will have to change. I’m done being the messenger. I want in. I want a real role.”

Yuri just stared. Then he let out a sharp, braying laugh and at the same time slapped the table so hard it jarred several nearby patrons. “You!” he exclaimed, wagging a finger. “You may be an expat, but you still have that American ambition!” He laughed again, sounding very much like a donkey. “What is it you want to know, Ben?”

“Let’s start with who you represent in this.”

“How do you know I represent anyone? For what you know, I could be the boss. The brains behind the master plan!” He held both hands up in a grand gesture and laughed again.

Reid smirked. “I don’t think so. I think you’re in the same position I am, ferrying information, swapping secrets, having meetings in shitty bars.” *Interrogation tactic—relate to them on their level.* Yuri was clearly a polyglot, and seemed to lack the same hardened demeanor as his captors. But even if he was low-level, he still knew more than Reid did. “How about a deal? You tell me what you know, and I’ll tell you what I know.” He lowered his voice to nearly a whisper. “And trust me. You want to know what I know.”

Yuri stroked his chin stubble thoughtfully. “I like you, Ben. Which is, how do you say, um... conflicting, because Americans usually make me ill.” He grinned. “Sadly for you, I cannot tell you what I do not know.”

“Then point me to who can.” The words flowed out of him as if they bypassed his brain and went straight to his throat. The logical part of him (or more appropriately, the Lawson part of him) screamed a protest. *What are you doing?! Get what you can and get out of here!*

“Would you care to go for a ride with me?” Yuri’s eyes flashed. “I will take you to see my boss. There, you can tell him what you know.”

Reid hesitated. He knew he shouldn’t. He knew he didn’t want to. But there was that bizarre sense of obligation, and there was that steely reserve in the back of his mind that told him again, *Relax.* He had a gun. He had some sort of skill set. He had come this far, and judging by what he now knew, this went way beyond a few Iranian men in a Parisian basement. There was a plan, and the involvement of the CIA, and somehow he knew that the endgame was a lot of people being hurt or worse.

He nodded once, his jaw clenched tightly.

“Great.” Yuri drained his glass and stood, still keeping his left elbow tucked in. “*Au revoir.*” He waved to the bartender. Then the Serbian led the way toward the rear of Féline, through a small dingy kitchen, and out through a steel door facing a cobblestone alley.

Reid followed him into the night, surprised to see that it had grown so dark so quickly while he was in the bar. At the mouth of the alley was a black SUV, idling gently, with windows tinted nearly as dark as the paint job. The rear door opened before Yuri reached it, and two goons climbed out. Reid didn’t know how else to think of them; each was broad-shouldered, imposing, and doing nothing to try to hide the TEC-9 automatic pistols swinging from harnesses at their armpits.

“Relax, my friends,” said Yuri. “This is Ben. We take him to see *Otets.*”

*Otets. Phonetic Russian for “father.” Or, on the most technical level, “maker.”*

“Come,” Yuri said pleasantly. He clapped a hand on Reid’s shoulder. “It is a very nice ride. We will drink champagne on the way. Come.”

Reid’s legs did not want to work. It was risky—too risky. If he got in this car with these men and they discovered who he was, or even that he wasn’t who he said he was, he might very well be a dead man. His girls would be orphans, and they would likely never know what became of him.

But what choice did he have? He couldn’t very well act like he’d changed his mind suddenly; that would be far too suspicious. It was likely he had already taken two steps past the point of no return simply by following Yuri out here. And if he could keep up the charade long enough, he could find the source—and discover what was going on in his own head.

He took a step forward toward the SUV.

“Ah! *Un momento, por favor.*” Yuri wagged a finger at his brawny escorts. One of them forced Reid’s arms up at his sides, while the other patted him down. First he found the Beretta, tucked into the back of his jeans. Then he dug into Reid’s pockets with two fingers and pulled out the wad of euros and the burner phone, and handed all three to Yuri.

“This you can keep.” The Serbian gave him back the cash. “These, however, we will hang onto. Security. You understand.” Yuri tucked the phone and the gun into the inside pocket of his suede jacket, and for the briefest of moments, Reid saw the brown hilt of a pistol.

“I understand,” Reid said. Now he was unarmed and without any way to call for help if he needed to. *I should run*, he thought. *Just start sprinting and don't look back...*

One of the goons forced his head low and pushed him forward, into the back of the SUV. Both of them climbed in after him and Yuri followed, pulling the door behind him. He sat beside Reid, while the hunched goons, nearly shoulder to shoulder, sat in a custom rear-facing seat opposite them, right behind the driver. A dark-tinted partition separated them from the front seat of the car.

One of the pair knocked on the driver's partition with two knuckles. “*Otets*,” he said gruffly.

A heavy, telltale click locked the rear doors, and with it came a stark comprehension of what Reid had done. He had gotten into a car with three armed men with no idea where he was going and very little idea of who he was supposed to be. Fooling Yuri hadn't been all that difficult, but now he was being taken to some boss... would they know that he wasn't who he said he was? He fought down the urge to jump forward, yank open the door, and leap out of the car. There was no escape from this, at least not at the moment; he would have to wait until they arrived at their destination and hope that he could get out in one piece.

The SUV rolled forward through the streets of Paris.



## CHAPTER SIX

Yuri, who had been so talkative and animated in the French bar, was uncharacteristically silent during the car ride. He opened a compartment alongside his seat and took out a well-worn book with a torn cover—Machiavelli's *The Prince*. The professor in Reid wanted to scoff out loud.

The two goons across from him sat silently, eyes directed straight ahead as if they were trying to stare holes through Reid. He quickly memorized their features: the man on the left was bald, white, with a dark handlebar mustache and beady eyes. He had a TEC-9 beneath his shoulder and a Glock 27 tucked in an ankle holster. A jagged pale scar over his left eyebrow suggested a shoddy patch job (not all that dissimilar from what Reid was likely due for once his super-glue intervention healed). He couldn't tell the man's nationality.

The second goon was a few shades darker, with a full, unkempt beard and a sizable paunch. His left shoulder appeared to be sagging slightly, as if he was favoring his opposite hip. He too had an automatic pistol tucked under one arm, but no other weapons that Reid could discern.

He could, however, see the mark on his neck. The skin there was puckered and pink, raised slightly from being burned. It was the same brand he had seen on the Arabic brute in the Paris basement. A glyph of some sort, he was certain, but not one that he recognized. The mustached man did not appear to have one, though much of his neck was hidden by his shirt.

Yuri did not have a brand either—at least not one that Reid could see. The collar of the Serbian's suede jacket rode high. *Could be a status symbol*, he thought. *Something that had to be earned.*

The driver directed the vehicle onto A4, leaving Paris behind and heading northeast toward Reims. The tinted windows made the night all the darker; once they left the City of Lights, it was difficult for Reid to make out landmarks. He had to rely on the route markers and signs to know where they were heading. The landscape slowly shifted from the bright urban locale to an idle, bucolic topography, the highway gently sloping with the lay of the land and farms stretching on either side.

After an hour of driving in utter silence, Reid cleared his throat. "Is it much further?" he asked.

Yuri put a finger to his lips and then grinned. "*Oui.*"

Reid's nostrils flared, but he said nothing more. He should have asked just how far they would be taking him; for all he knew, they were going clear to Belgium.

Route A4 became A34, which in turn became A304 as they climbed ever further north. The trees that dotted the pastoral countryside grew thicker and closer, wide umbrella-like spruces that swallowed the open farmland and became indistinguishable forests. The gradient of the road increased as the sloping hills turned to small mountains.

He knew this place. Rather, he knew the region, and not because of any flashing vision or implanted memory. He had never been here, but he knew from his studies that they had reached the Ardennes, a mountainous stretch of forest shared between northeastern France, southern Belgium, and northern Luxembourg. It was in the Ardennes that the German army, in 1944, attempted to launch their armored divisions through the densely forested region in an attempt to capture the city of Antwerp. They were thwarted by American and British forces near the river Meuse. The ensuing conflict was dubbed the Battle of the Bulge, and it was the last major offensive of the Germans in World War II.

For some reason, despite how dire his situation was or might soon become, he found some small measure of comfort in thinking about history, his former life, and his students. But then his thoughts again transitioned to his girls being alone and scared and not having any idea where he was or what he had gotten himself into.

Sure enough, Reid soon saw a sign that warned of an approach to the border. *Belgique*, the sign read, and below that, *Belgien, België, Belgium*. Less than two miles later, the SUV slowed to a stop at a single small booth with a concrete awning overhead. A man in a thick coat and wool-knit cap

peered out at the vehicle. Border security between France and Belgium was a far cry from what most Americans were used to. The driver rolled down the window and spoke to the man, but the words were muted by the closed partition and windows. Reid squinted through the tint and saw the driver's arm reach out, passing something to the border officer—a bill. A bribe.

The man in the cap waved them through.

Only a few miles down N5, the SUV pulled off of the highway and onto a narrow road that cut parallel to the main thoroughfare. There was no exit sign and the road itself was barely paved; it was an access road, likely one that was created for logging vehicles. The car jostled over the deep ruts in the dirt. The two goons bumped against one another opposite Reid, but still they continued to stare straight forward at him.

He checked the cheap watch he had bought at the pharmacy. Two hours and forty-six minutes they had been traveling. Last night he had been in the US, and then woken up in Paris, and now he was in Belgium. *Relax, his subconscious coaxed. Nowhere you haven't been before. Just pay attention and keep your mouth shut.*

Both sides of the road appeared to be nothing but thick trees. The SUV continued on, climbing up the side of a curving mountain and down again. All the while Reid peered out the window, pretending to be idle but looking for any sort of landmark or sign that would tell him where they were—ideally something he could recount later to the authorities, if need be.

There were lights ahead, though at his angle he could not see the source. The SUV slowed again and rolled to a gentle stop. Reid saw a black wrought-iron fence, each post topped in a dangerous spike, stretching to either side and vanishing into the darkness. Alongside their vehicle was a small guard house made of glass and dark brick, a fluorescent light illuminating the inside. A man emerged. He wore slacks and a pea coat, the collar flipped up around his neck and a gray scarf knotted at his throat. He made no attempt to hide the silenced MP7 hanging from a strap over his right shoulder. In fact, as he stepped toward the car, he gripped the automatic pistol, though he did not raise it.

*Heckler & Koch, production variant MP7A1*, said the voice in Reid's head. *Seven-point-one-inch suppressor. Elcan reflex sight. Thirty-round magazine.*

The driver rolled down his window and spoke with the man for just a few seconds. Then the guard rounded the SUV and pulled open the door on Yuri's side. He bent and peered into the cab. Reid caught the scent of rye whiskey and felt the sting of the frigid rush of air that came with it. The man glanced at each of them in turn, his gaze lingering on Reid.

*"Kommunikator,"* said Yuri. *"Chtoby uvidet' nachal'nika."* Russian. *Messenger, to see the boss.*

The guard said nothing. He closed the door again and returned to his post, pressing a button on a small console. The black-iron gate hummed as it rolled aside, and the SUV pulled through.

Reid's throat tightened as the full gravity of his situation pressed in on him. He had gone to the meeting with the intention of getting information about whatever was happening—not just to him, but with all the talk of plans and sheikhs and foreign cities. He had gotten into the car with Yuri and the two goons in the heat of finding a source. He had let them take him out of the country and into the middle of a dense forested region, and now they were behind a tall, guarded, spiked gate. He had no idea how he might get out of this if something went awry.

*Relax. You've done this before.*

*No I haven't!* he thought desperately. *I'm a college professor from New York. I don't know what I'm doing. Why did I do this? My girls...*

*Just give in to it. You'll know what to do.*

Reid took a deep breath, but it did little to calm his nerves. He peered out the window. In the darkness, he could just barely make out their surroundings. There were no trees behind the gate, but rather rows upon rows of stout vines, climbing and weaving through waist-high latticework... It was a vineyard. Whether it was actually a vineyard or merely a front, he wasn't sure, but it was at least something recognizable, something that could be seen by helicopter or a drone flyover.

*Good. That'll come in handy later.*

*If there is a later.*

The SUV drove slowly over the gravel road for another mile or so before the vineyard ended. Before them was a palatial estate, practically a castle, built in gray stone with arching windows and ivy climbing up the southern façade. For the briefest of moments, Reid appreciated the beautiful architecture; it was likely two hundred years old, maybe more. But they did not stop there; instead, the car circled around the grand home and behind it. After another half mile, they pulled into a small lot and the driver cut the engine.

They had arrived. But where they had arrived to, he had no idea.

The goons exited first, and then Reid climbed out, followed by Yuri. The bitter cold took his breath away. He clenched his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering. Their two large escorts seemed to not be bothered by it at all.

About forty yards from them was a large, squat structure, two stories tall and several times as wide; windowless and made of corrugated steel painted beige. Some sort of facility, Reid reasoned—perhaps for winemaking. But he doubted it.

Yuri groaned as he stretched his limbs. Then he grinned at Reid. “Ben, I understand we are now very good friends, but still...” He pulled from his jacket pocket a narrow length of black fabric. “I must insist.”

Reid nodded once, tightly. What choice did he have? He turned so that Yuri could tie the blindfold over his eyes. A strong, meaty hand gripped his upper arm—one of the goons, no doubt.

“Now then,” Yuri said. “Onwards to Otets.” The strong hand pulled him forward and guided him as they walked in the direction of the steel structure. He felt another shoulder brush against his own on the opposite side; the two large goons had him flanked.

Reid breathed evenly through his nose, trying his best to remain calm. *Listen*, his mind told him.

*I am listening.*

*No, listen. Listen, and give in.*

Someone banged three times on a door. The sound of it was dull and hollow as a bass drum. Though he couldn't see, Reid imagined in his mind's eye Yuri banging with the flat of his fist against the heavy steel door.

*Ca-chunk.* A deadbolt sliding aside. A *whoosh*, a rush of warm air as the door opened. Suddenly, a mélange of noises—glass clinking, liquid sloshing, belts whirring. Vintner's equipment, by the sound of it. Strange; he hadn't heard anything from outside. *The building's exterior walls are soundproofed.*

The heavy hand guided him inside. The door closed again and the deadbolt was slid back into place. The floor beneath him felt like smooth concrete. His shoes slapped against a small puddle. The acetous odor of fermentation was strongest, and just under that, the sweeter familiar scent of grape juice. *They really are making wine here.*

Reid counted his paces across the floor of the facility. They passed through another set of doors, and with it came an assortment of new sounds. *Machinery—hydraulic press. Pneumatic drill. The clinking chain of a conveyor.* The fermentation scent gave way to grease, motor oil, and... *Powder. They're manufacturing something here; most likely munitions.* There was something else, something familiar, past the oil and powder. It was somewhat sweet, like almonds... *Dinitrotoluene. They're making explosives.*

“Stairs,” said Yuri's voice, close to his ear, as Reid's shin bumped against the bottommost step. The heavy hand continued to guide him as four sets of footfalls climbed the steel stairs. *Thirteen steps. Whoever built this place must not be superstitious.*

At the top was yet another steel door. Once it was closed behind them, the sounds of machinery were drowned out—another soundproofed room. Classical piano music played from nearby. *Brahms. Variations on a Theme of Paganini.* The melody was not rich enough to be coming from an actual piano; a stereo of some kind.

“Yuri.” The new voice was a stern baritone, slightly rasped from either shouting often or too many cigars. Judging by the scent of the room, it was the latter. Possibly both.

“Otets,” said Yuri obsequiously. He spoke rapidly in Russian. Reid did his best to follow along with Yuri’s accent. “I bring you good news from France...”

“Who is this man?” the baritone demanded. With the way he spoke, Russian seemed to be his native tongue. Reid couldn’t help but wonder what the connection might be between the Iranians and this Russian man—or the goons in the SUV, for that matter, and even the Serbian Yuri. *An arms deal, maybe*, said the voice in his head. *Or something worse.*

“This is the Iranians’ messenger,” Yuri replied. “He has the information we seek for—”

“You brought him here?” the man interjected. His deep voice rose to a roar. “You were supposed to go to France and meet with the Iranians, not drag men back to me! You would compromise everything with your stupidity!” There was a sharp crack—a solid backhand across a face—and a gasp from Yuri. “Must I write your job description on a bullet to get it through your thick skull?!”

“Otets, please...” Yuri stammered.

“Do not call me that!” the man shouted fiercely. A gun cocked—a heavy pistol, by the sound of it. “Do not call me by any name in the presence of this stranger!”

“He is no stranger!” Yuri yelped. “He is Agent Zero! I have brought you Kent Steele!”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Kent Steele.*

Silence reigned for several seconds that felt like minutes. A hundred visions flashed quickly through Reid's mind as if they were being machine-fed. *The CIA. National Clandestine Service, Special Activities Division, Special Operations Group. Psych ops.*

*Agent Zero.*

*If you're exposed, you're dead.*

*We don't talk. Ever.*

*Impossible.*

His fingers were trembling again.

It was simply impossible. Things like memory wipes or implants or suppressors were the stuff of conspiracy theories and Hollywood films.

It didn't matter now anyway. They knew who he was the whole time—from the bar to the car ride and all the way to Belgium, Yuri had known that Reid was not who he said he was. Now he was blindfolded and trapped behind a steel door with at least four armed men. No one else knew where he was or who he was. A heavy knot of dread formed deep in his stomach and threatened to make him nauseous.

"No," said the baritone voice slowly. "No, you are mistaken. Stupid Yuri. This is not the CIA man. If it was, you would not be standing here!"

"Unless he came here to find you!" Yuri countered.

Fingers grabbed at the blindfold and yanked it off. Reid squinted in the sudden harshness of the overhead fluorescent lights. He blinked in the face of a man in his fifties, with salt-and-pepper hair, a full beard shorn close to the cheek, and sharp, discerning eyes. The man, presumably Otets, wore a charcoal gray suit, the top two buttons of his shirt undone and curling gray chest hairs peeking out from beneath it. They stood in an office, the walls painted dark red and adorned with gaudy paintings.

"You," the man said in accented English. "Who are you?"

Reid took a jagged breath and fought the urge to tell the man that he simply didn't know anymore. Instead, in a tremulous voice, he said, "My name is Ben. I'm a messenger. I work with the Iranians."

Yuri, who was on his knees behind Otets, leapt to his feet. "He lies!" the Serbian screeched. "I know he lies! He says that the Iranians sent him, but they would never trust an American!" Yuri leered. A thin rivulet of blood eked from the corner of his mouth where Otets had struck him. "But I know more. See, I asked you about Amad." He shook his head as he bared his teeth. "There is no Amad among them."

It seemed odd to Reid that these men seemed to know the Iranians, but not who they worked with or who they might send. They were certainly connected somehow, but what that connection might be, he had no idea.

Otets muttered curses under his breath in Russian. Then in English he said, "You tell Yuri you are messenger. Yuri tells me you are the CIA man. What am I to believe? You certainly do not look like I imagined Zero to be. Yet my idiot errand boy speaks one truth: the Iranians despise Americans. This does not look good for you. You tell me the truth, or I will shoot you in your kneecap." He hefted the heavy pistol—a TIG Series Desert Eagle.

Reid lost his breath for a moment. It was a very large gun.

*Give in,* his mind prodded.

He wasn't sure how to do that. He wasn't sure what would happen if he did. The last time these new instincts took over, four men ended up dead, and he, quite literally, had blood on his hands. But there was no way out of this for him—that is, for Professor Reid Lawson. But Kent Steele, whoever

that might be, might find a way. Maybe he didn't know who he was, but it wouldn't matter much if he didn't survive long enough to find out.

Reid closed his eyes. He nodded once, a silent acquiescence to the voice in his head. His shoulders went slack and his fingers stopped trembling.

"I am waiting," said Otets flatly.

"You wouldn't want to shoot me," Reid said. He was surprised to hear his own voice so calm and even. "A point-blank shot from that gun wouldn't blow out my knee. It would sever my leg, and I'd bleed out on the floor of this office in seconds."

Otets shrugged one shoulder. "What is it you Americans like to say? You cannot make omelet without—"

"I have the information you need," Reid cut him off. "The sheikh's location. What he gave me. Who I gave it to. I know all about your plot, and I'm not the only one."

The corners of Otets's mouth curled into a smirk. "Agent Zero."

"I told you!" said Yuri. "I did well, yes?"

"Shut up," Otets barked. Yuri shrank like a beaten dog. "Take him downstairs and get all of what he knows. Start by removing fingers. I don't want to waste time."

On any ordinary day, the threat of having his fingers cut off would have sent a shock of fear through Reid. His muscles tensed for a moment, the small hairs on the nape of his neck standing on end—but his new instinct fought against it and forced him to relax. *Wait*, it told him. *Wait for an opportunity...*

The bald goon nodded curtly and grabbed onto Reid's arm again.

"Idiot!" Otets snapped. "Bind him first! Yuri, go to file cabinet. There should be something there."

Yuri hurried to the three-drawer oak cabinet in the corner and rifled through it until he found a bundled length of coarse twine. "Here," he said, and he tossed it to the bald brute.

All eyes instinctively moved skyward toward the bundle of twine spinning in the air—both goons, Yuri, and Otets.

But not Reid's. He had a shot, and he took it.

He cupped his left hand and arced it upward at a sharp angle, striking the bald man's windpipe with the meaty side of his palm. He felt the throat give beneath his hand.

As the first blow landed, he kicked out his left boot heel behind him and struck the bearded thug in the hip—the same hip the man had been favoring on the ride to Belgium.

A wet choking gasp escaped the bald man's lips as his hands flew to his throat. The bearded brute grunted as his large body spun and collapsed.

*Down!*

The twine slapped the floor. So did Reid. In one motion he fell into a crouch and yanked the Glock from the bald man's ankle holster. Without looking up, he leapt forward and tucked into a roll.

As soon as he jumped, a thunderous report tore across the small office, impossibly loud. The shot from the Desert Eagle left an impressive dent in the office's steel door.

Reid came out of the roll only a few feet from Otets and propelled himself forward, toward him. Before Otets could pivot to aim, Reid grabbed his gun hand from underneath—*never grab the top slide, that's a good way to lose a finger*—and pushed it up and away. The gun went off again, a piercing boom only a couple of feet from Reid's head. His ears rang, but he ignored it. He twisted the gun down and to the side, keeping the barrel pointed away from him as he brought it to his hip—and Otets's hand with it.

The older man threw back his head and screamed as his trigger finger snapped. The sound nauseated Reid as the Desert Eagle clattered to the floor.

He spun and wrapped one arm around Otets's neck, using him as a shield as he aimed at the two goons. The bald man was out of commission, gasping for breath in vain against a crushed windpipe,

but the bearded man had loosened his TEC-9. Without hesitating, Reid fired three shots in quick succession, two in the chest and one in the forehead. A fourth shot put the bald man out of his misery.

Reid's conscience screamed at him from the back of his mind. *You just killed two men. Two more men.* But this new consciousness was stronger, pushing his nausea and sense of preservation back.

*You can panic later. You're not finished here.*

Reid spun fully around, with Otets in front of him as if they were dancing, and leveled the Glock at Yuri. The hapless messenger was struggling to free a Sig Sauer from his shoulder harness.

"Stop," Reid commanded. Yuri froze. "Hands up." The Serbian messenger slowly put his hands up, palms out. He grinned wide.

"Kent," he said in English, "we are very good friends, are we not?"

"Take my Beretta out of your left jacket pocket and set it on the floor," Reid instructed.

Yuri licked the blood from the corner of his mouth and wiggled the fingers of his left hand. Slowly, he reached into the pocket and pulled out the small black pistol. But he didn't set it on the floor. Instead he held it, barrel pointed downward.

"You know," he said, "it occurs to me that if you want information, you need at least one of us alive. Yes?"

"Yuri!" Otets growled. "Do as he asks!"

"On the floor," Reid repeated. He didn't take his gaze off of Yuri, but he was concerned that others in the facility might have heard the roar of the Desert Eagle. He had no idea how many people were downstairs, but the office was soundproofed and there was machinery running elsewhere. It was possible no one had heard it—or perhaps they were used to the sound and thought little of it.

"Maybe," said Yuri, "I take this gun and I shoot Otets. Then you need *me*."

"Yuri, *nyet*!" Otets cried, this time more stunned than angry.

"See, Kent," said Yuri, "this is not *La Cosa Nostra*. This is more like, uh... disgruntled employee. You see how he treats me. So maybe I shoot him, and you and I, we work something out..."

Otets clenched his teeth and hissed a flurry of curses at Yuri, but the messenger only grinned wider.

Reid was growing impatient. "Yuri, if you don't put the gun down now, I'll be forced to—"

Yuri's arm moved, just the slightest bit of an indication of rising. Reid's instinct kicked in like an engine shifting gears. Without thinking he aimed and fired, just once. It happened so quickly that the report of the pistol startled him.

For a half-second, Reid thought he might have missed. Then dark blood erupted from a hole in Yuri's neck. He fell first to his knees, one hand weakly trying to stanch the flow, but it was far too late for that.

*It can take up to two minutes to bleed out from a severed carotid artery.* He didn't want to know how he knew that. *But it takes only seven to ten seconds to pass out from blood loss.*

Yuri slumped forward. Reid immediately spun toward the steel door with the Glock aimed at center mass. He waited. His own breath was stable and smooth. He hadn't even broken a sweat. Otets took sharp, gasping breaths, cradling his fractured finger with his good hand.

No one else came.

*I just shot three men.*

*No time for that now. Get the hell out of here.*

"Stay," Reid growled at Otets as he released his hold on him. He kicked the Desert Eagle into the far corner. It skittered under the file cabinet. He had no use for a cannon like that. He also left the TEC-9 automatic pistols that the thugs had; they were largely inaccurate, good for little more than spraying bullets over a wide area. Instead, he shoved Yuri's body aside with his foot and grabbed up the Beretta. He kept the Glock, tucking a pistol, and his hands, into each of his jacket pockets.

“We’re getting out of here,” Reid told Otets, “you and me. You’ll go first, and you’ll pretend that nothing is wrong. You’re going to walk me outside and to a decent car. Because these?” He gestured to his hands, each stuffed into a pocket and wrapped around a pistol. “These will both be aimed at your spine. Make one single misstep, or say a word out of line, and I’ll bury a bullet between your L2 and L3 vertebrae. If you’re lucky enough to live, you’ll be paralyzed for the rest of your life. Understand?”

Otets glared at him, but he was smart enough to nod.

“Good. Then lead the way.”

The Russian man paused at the steel door of the office. “You won’t get out of here alive,” he said in English.

“You’d better hope I do,” Reid growled. “Because I’ll make sure you don’t either.”

Otets pulled the door open and stepped out onto the landing. The sounds of machinery instantly came roaring back. Reid followed him out of the office and onto the small steel platform. He glanced downward over the railing, looking out over the shop floor below. His thoughts—*Kent’s thoughts?*—were correct; there were two men working a hydraulic press. One at a pneumatic drill. One more stood at a short conveyor, inspecting electronic components as they slowly rolled toward a steel surface at the end. Two others wearing goggles and latex gloves sat at a melamine table, carefully measuring some sort of chemicals. Oddly, he noticed they were an assortment of nationalities—three were dark-haired and white, likely Russian, but two were definitely Middle Eastern. The man at the drill was African.

The almond-like scent of the dinitrotoluene floated up to him. They were making explosives, as he had discerned earlier from the odor and sounds.

*Six in all. Likely armed. None of them so much as looked up toward the office. They won’t shoot in here—not with Otets in the open and volatile chemicals around.*

*But neither can I,* Reid thought.

“Impressive, no?” said Otets with a smirk. He’d noticed Reid inspecting the floor.

“Move,” he commanded.

Otets stepped down, his shoe clanking against the first metal stair. “You know,” he said casually, “Yuri was right.”

*Get outside. Get to the SUV. Crash the gate. Drive it like you stole it.*

*“You do need one of us.”*

*Get back on the highway. Find a police station. Get Interpol involved.*

*“And poor Yuri is dead...”*

*Give them Otets. Force him to talk. Clear your name in the murders of seven men.*

*“So it occurs to me that you cannot kill me.”*

*I’ve murdered seven men.*

*But it was self-defense.*

Otets reached the bottom step, Reid right behind him with both hands stuffed in the pockets of his jacket. His palms were sweaty, each gripping a pistol. The Russian stopped and glanced slightly over his shoulder, not quite looking at Reid. “The Iranians. They are dead?”

“Four of them,” Reid said. The din of the machinery nearly drowned out his voice.

Otets clucked his tongue. “Shame. But then again... it means I am not wrong. You have no leads, no one else to go to. You need me.”

He was calling Reid’s bluff. Panic rose in his chest. The other side, the Kent side, fought it back down, like dry-swallowing a pill. “I have everything the sheikh gave us—”

Otets chuckled softly. “The sheikh, yes. But you already know that Mustafar knew so little. He was a bank account, Agent. He was soft. Did you think we would trust him with our plan? If so, then why did you come here?”



Sweat prickled on Reid's brow. He had come here in the hopes of finding answers, not only about this supposed plan but about who he was. He had found much more than he bargained for. "Move," he demanded again. "Toward the door, slowly."

Otets stepped off the staircase, moving slowly, but he did not walk toward the door. Instead, he took a step toward the shop floor, toward his men.

"What are you doing?" Reid demanded.

"Calling your bluff, Agent Zero. If I am wrong, you will shoot me." He grinned and took another step.

Two of the workers glanced up. From their perspective, it looked like Otets was simply chatting with some unknown man, perhaps a business associate or representative from another faction. No reason for alarm.

The panic rose again in Reid's chest. He didn't want to let go of the guns. Otets was only two paces away, but Reid couldn't very well grab him and force him to the door—not without alerting the six men. He couldn't risk shooting in a room full of explosives.

"*Do svidaniya*, Agent." Otets grinned. Without taking his eyes off of Reid he shouted in English, "Shoot this man!"

Two more of the workers looked up, glancing between each other and Otets in confusion. Reid got the impression that these men were laborers, not foot soldiers or bodyguards like the pair of dead goons upstairs.

"Idiots!" Otets roared over the machinery. "This man is CIA! Shoot him!"

That got their attention. The pair of men at the melamine table rose quickly and reached for shoulder holsters. The African man at the pneumatic drill reached down near his feet and lifted an AK-47 to his shoulder.

As soon as they moved, Reid sprang forward, at the same time yanking both hands—and both pistols—out of his pockets. He spun Otets by the shoulder and held the Beretta to the Russian's left temple, and then leveled the Beretta at the man with the AK, his arm resting on Otets's shoulder.

"That wouldn't be very wise," he said loudly. "You know what might happen if we start shooting in here."

The sight of a gun to their boss's head prompted the rest of the men into action. He was right; they were all armed, and now he had six guns on him with only Otets between them. The man holding the AK glanced nervously at his compatriots. A thin bead of sweat ran down the side of his forehead.

Reid took a small step backward, coaxing Otets along with him with a nudge from the Beretta. "Nice and easy," he said quietly. "If they start shooting in here, this whole place could go up. And I don't think you want to die today."

Otets clenched his teeth and murmured a curse in Russian.

Little by little they backed away, tiny steps at a time, toward the doors of the facility. Reid's heart threatened to pound out of his chest. His muscles tightened nervously, and then went slack as the other side of him forced him to relax. *Keep the tension out of your limbs. Tight muscles will slow your reactions.*

For each tiny step that he and Otets took back, the six men took one forward, maintaining a short distance between them. They were waiting for an opportunity, and the farther they stepped from the machines, the less likely setting off an inadvertent explosion would be. Reid knew it was only the threat of accidentally killing Otets that kept them from shooting. No one spoke, but the machines droned on behind them. The tension in the air was palpable, electric; he knew that any moment someone might get antsy and start firing.

Then his back touched the double doors. Another step and he pushed them open, nudging Otets along with him with a shove from the Beretta's barrel.

Before the doors swung shut again, Otets growled at his men. "He does not leave here alive!"

Then they closed, and the pair of them were in the next room, the wine-making room, with bottles clinking and the sweet smell of grapes. As soon as they were through, Reid whipped around, the Glock aimed at chest level—still keeping the Beretta trained on Otets.

A bottling and corking machine was running, but it was mostly automated. The only person in the entire wide room was a single tired-looking Russian woman wearing a green headscarf. At the sight of the gun, and Reid, and Otets, her weary eyes went wide in terror and she threw both hands up.

“Turn those off,” Reid said in Russian. “Do you understand?”

She nodded vigorously and threw two levers on the control panel. The machines whirred down, slowing to a halt.

“Go,” he told her. She gulped and backed away slowly toward the exit door. “Quickly!” he shouted harshly. “Get out!”

“*Da*,” she murmured. The woman scurried to the heavy steel exit, threw it open, and dashed out into the night. The door slammed shut again with a resonant boom.

“Now what, Agent?” Otets grunted in English. “What is your plan of escape?”

“Shut up.” Reid leveled the gun at the double doors to the next room. Why hadn’t they come through yet? He couldn’t very well keep going without knowing where they were. If there was a back door to the facility, they might be outside waiting for him. If they followed, there was no way he could get Otets into the SUV and drive away without getting shot. In here there was no threat of explosives; they could take a shot if they had it. Would they risk killing Otets to get to him? Jangled nerves and a gun were not an ideal combination for anyone, even their boss.

Before he could decide on his next move, the powerful fluorescent lights overhead went out. In an instant they were plunged into darkness.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Reid couldn't see a thing. There were no windows in the facility. The workers in the other room must have thrown some breakers, because even the sounds of the machinery in the next room faded and fell silent.

He quickly reached out for the place he knew Otets to be and grabbed onto the Russian's collar before he could make a run for it. Otets made a small choking sound as Reid yanked him backward. In the same moment, a red emergency light came on, just a bare bulb jutting from the wall just over the door. It bathed the room in a soft, eerie glow.

"These men are not fools," Otets said quietly. "You will not make it out of this alive."

His mind raced. He needed to know where they were—or better yet, he needed them to come to him.

*But how?*

*It's simple. You know what to do. Stop fighting it.*

Reid took a deep breath through his nose, and then he did the only thing that made sense in the moment.

He shot Otets.

The sharp report of the Beretta echoed in the otherwise silent room. Otets screamed in pain. Both hands flew to hold his left thigh—the bullet had only grazed him, but it bled liberally. He spat a long, angry slur of Russian curses.

Reid grabbed onto Otets's collar again and yanked him backward, nearly off his feet, and forced him down behind the bottling conveyor. He waited. If the men were still inside, they would have definitely heard the shot and would come running. If no one came, they were outside somewhere, lying in wait.

He got his answer a few seconds later. The swinging double doors were kicked open from the other side hard enough to smack against the wall behind them. The first through was the man with the AK, tracking the barrel left and right quickly in a wide sweep. Two others were right behind him, both armed with pistols.

Otets groaned in pain and gripped his leg tightly. His people heard it; they came around the corner of the bottling machine with their weapons raised to find Otets sitting on the floor, hissing through his teeth with his wounded leg prostrate.

Reid, however, was not there.

He stole quickly around the other side of the machine, staying in a crouch. He pocketed the Beretta and grabbed an empty bottle from the conveyor. Before they could even turn, he smashed the bottle over the head of the nearest worker, a Middle Eastern man, and then jammed the jagged bottleneck into the throat of the second. Warm blood ran over his hand as the man sputtered and fell.

*One.*

The African with the AK-47 spun, but not fast enough. Reid used his forearm to shove the barrel aside, even as a fusillade of bullets ripped through the air. He stepped forward with the Glock, pressed it beneath the man's chin, and pulled the trigger.

*Two.*

One more shot finished off the first terrorist—since clearly that's what he was dealing with, he decided—still lying unconscious on the floor.

*Three.*

Reid breathed hard, trying to will his heart into slowing down. He didn't have time to be horrified by what he had just done, nor did he really want to think about it. It was as if Professor Lawson had gone into shock, and the other part had taken over completely.

*Movement. To the right.*

Otets crawled from behind the machine and made a grab for the AK. Reid turned quickly and kicked him in the stomach. The force of it sent the Russian rolling over, holding his side and groaning.

Reid took up the AK. *How many rounds were fired? Five? Six.* It was a thirty-two-round magazine. If the clip was full, he still had twenty-six rounds.

“Stay put,” he told Otets. Then, much to the Russian’s surprise, Reid left him there and went back through the double doors to the other side of the facility.

The bomb-making room was bathed in a similar red glow from an emergency light. Reid kicked open the door and immediately dropped to one knee—in case anyone had a gun trained on the entrance—and swept left and right. There was no one there, which meant there had to be a back door. He found it quickly, a steel security door between the stairs and the southern-facing wall. Likely it only opened from the inside.

The other three were out there somewhere. It was a gamble—he had no way to tell if they were waiting for him right on the other side of the door, or if they had tried to circle around to the front of the building. He needed a way to hedge his bet.

*This is, after all, a bomb-making facility...*

In the far corner on the opposite side, past the conveyor, he found a long wooden crate roughly the size of a coffin and filled with packing peanuts. He sifted through them until he felt something solid and hauled it out. It was a black matte plastic case, and he already knew what was inside it.

He set it on the melamine table carefully and opened it. More to his chagrin than surprise, he recognized it immediately as a suitcase bomb, set with a timer but able to be bypassed by a dead man’s switch as a fail-safe.

Sweat beaded on his forehead. *Am I really going to do this?*

New visions flashed across his mind—Afghani bomb-makers missing fingers and entire limbs from poorly built incendiaries. Buildings going up in smoke from one wrong move, a single misconnected wire.

*What choice do you have? It’s either this, or get shot.*

The dead man’s switch was a small green rectangle about the size of a pocketknife with a lever on one side. He picked it up in his left hand and held his breath.

Then he squeezed it.

Nothing happened. That was a good sign.

He made sure to hold the lever closed in his fist (releasing it would immediately detonate the bomb) and he set the suitcase’s timer for twenty minutes—he wouldn’t need that long anyway. Then he plucked up the AK in his right hand and got the hell out of there.

He winced; the rear security door squealed on its hinges as he shoved it open. He leapt out into the darkness with the AK leveled. There was no one there, not behind the building, but they had certainly heard the telltale squeak of the door.

His throat was dry and his heart was still pounding like a kettledrum, but he kept his back to the steel façade and carefully eased his way to the corner of the building. His hand was sweating, gripping the dead man’s switch in a death grip. If he released it now, he would most certainly be dead in an instant. The amount of C4 packed into that bomb would blow the walls of the building out and flatten him, if he wasn’t incinerated first.

*Yesterday my biggest problem was keeping my students’ attention for ninety minutes.* Today he was white-knuckling a lever to a bomb while trying to elude Russian terrorists.

*Focus.* He reached the corner of the building and peered around its edge, sticking to the shadows as best he could. There was a silhouette of a man, a pistol in his grip, standing sentry on the eastern façade.

Reid made sure he had a solid grip on the switch. *You can do this.* Then he stepped out into plain sight. The man spun quickly and began to raise his pistol.

“Hey,” Reid said. He lifted his own hand—not the one holding the gun, but the other. “Do you know what this is?”

The man paused and cocked his head slightly. Then his eyes went so wide with fear that Reid could see the whites of them by the moonlight. “Switch,” the man muttered. His gaze fluttered from the switch to the building and back again, seeming to come to the same conclusion that Reid already had—if he released that lever, they’d both be dead in a heartbeat.

The bomb-maker abandoned his plan of shooting Reid, and instead sprinted away toward the front of the building. Reid followed hastily. He heard shouts in Arabic—“Switch! He has the switch!”

He rounded the corner to the front of the facility with the AK aimed forward, the stock rested in the crook of his elbow, and his other hand holding the dead man’s switch high over his head. The sprinting bomb-maker hadn’t stopped; he kept running, up the gravel road that led away from the building and screaming himself hoarse. The other two bomb-makers were gathered near the front door, apparently ready to go in and finish Reid off. They stared in bewilderment as he came around the corner.

Reid quickly surveyed the scene. The other two men held pistols—*Sig Sauer P365, thirteen-round capacity with fully extended grips*—but neither pointed them. As he had presumed, Otets had made his escape through the front door and was, at the moment, halfway to the SUV, limping along while holding his hurt leg and supported under one shoulder by a short, portly man in a black cap—the driver, Reid assumed.

“Guns down,” Reid commanded, “or I’ll blow it.”

The bomb-makers carefully set their weapons in the dirt. Reid could hear shouts in the distance, more voices. There were others coming from the direction of the old estate house. Likely the Russian woman had tipped them off.

“Run,” he told them. “Go tell them what’s about to happen.”

The two men didn’t have to be told twice. They broke into a brisk run in the same direction their cohort had just gone.

Reid turned his attention to the driver, helping along the lamed Otets. “Stop!” he roared.

“Do not!” Otets screamed in Russian.

The driver hesitated. Reid dropped the AK and pulled the Glock from his jacket pocket. They had gotten a little more than halfway to the car—*about twenty-five yards. Easy.*

He took a few steps closer and called out, “Before today, I didn’t think I had ever fired a gun before. Turns out I’m a really good shot.”

The driver was a sensible man—or perhaps a coward, or even both. He released Otets, unceremoniously dropping his boss to the gravel.

“Keys,” Reid demanded. “Drop them.”

The driver’s hands shook as he fetched the keys to the SUV from his inner jacket pocket. He tossed them at his own feet.

Reid motioned with the barrel of his pistol. “Go.”

The driver ran. The black cap flew off his head but he paid it no mind.

“Coward!” Otets spat in Russian.

Reid retrieved the keys first, and then stood over Otets. The voices in the distance were getting closer. The estate house was a half mile away; it would have taken the Russian woman about four minutes to reach it on foot, and then another few minutes for the men to get down here. He figured he had less than two minutes.

“Get up.”

Otets spat on his shoes in response.

“Have it your way.” Reid pocketed the Glock, grabbed Otets by the back of his suit jacket, and hauled him toward the SUV. The Russian cried out in pain as his gunshot leg dragged across the gravel.

“Get in,” Reid ordered, “or I’ll shoot your other leg.”

Otets grumbled under his breath, hissing through the pain, but he climbed into the car. Reid slammed the door, circled around quickly, and got behind the wheel. His left hand still held the dead man’s switch.

He slammed the SUV into drive and stomped the gas. The tires spun, kicking up gravel and dirt behind it, and then the vehicle lurched forward with a jolt. As soon as he pulled back onto the narrow access road, shots rang out. Bullets smacked the passenger side with a series of heavy thuds. The window—just to the right of Otets’s head—splintered in a spider web of cracked glass, but held.

“Idiots!” Otets screamed. “Stop shooting!”

*Bullet-resistant*, Reid thought. *Of course it is.* But he knew that wouldn’t last long. He pressed the accelerator to the floor and the SUV lurched again, roaring past the three men on the side of the road as they fired on the car. Reid rolled down his window as they rolled by the two bomb-makers, still running for their lives.

Then he tossed the switch out the window.

The explosion rocked the SUV, even at their distance. He didn’t hear the detonation so much as he felt it, deep in his core, shaking his innards. A glance in the rearview mirror showed nothing but intense yellow light, like staring directly into the sun. Spots swam in his vision for a moment and he forced himself to look ahead at the road. An orange fireball rolled into the sky, sending up an immense plume of black smoke with it.

Otets let out a jagged, groaning sigh. “You have no idea what you’ve just done,” he said quietly. “You are a dead man, Agent.”

Reid said nothing. He did realize what he had just done—he had destroyed a significant amount of evidence in whatever case might be built against Otets once he was brought to the authorities. But Otets was wrong; he was not a dead man, not yet anyway, and the bomb had helped him get away.

This far, anyhow.

Up ahead, the estate house loomed into view, but there was no pausing to appreciate its architecture this time around. Reid kept his eyes straight ahead and zoomed past it as the SUV bounced over the ruts in the road.

A glimmer in the mirror caught his attention. Two pairs of headlights swung into view, pulling out from the driveway of the house. They were low to the ground and he could hear the high-pitched whine of the engines over the roar of his own. Sports cars. He hit the gas again. They would be faster, but the SUV was better equipped to handle the uneven road.

More shots cracked the air as bullets pounded the rear fender. Reid gripped the steering wheel with both hands, the veins standing out stark with the tension in his muscles. He had control. He could do this. The iron gate couldn’t be far. He was doing fifty-five through the vineyard; if he could maintain his speed, it might be enough to crash the gate.

The SUV rocked violently as a bullet struck the rear driver’s side tire and exploded. The front end veered wildly. Reid instinctively counter-steered, his teeth gritted. The back end skidded out, but the SUV didn’t roll.

“God save me,” Otets moaned. “This lunatic will be the death of me...”

Reid wrenched the wheel again and righted the vehicle, but the steady, pounding *thum-thum-thum* of the tire told him they were riding on the rim and shreds of rubber. His speed dropped to forty. He tried to give it gas again but the SUV quaked, threatening to veer again.

He knew they couldn’t maintain enough speed to break the gate. They would bounce right off it.

*It’s an electronic gate*, he thought suddenly. It was controlled by the guard outside—who would no doubt at this point be aware of his escape attempt and be ready with the dangerous MP7—but that meant there *had* to be another exit to this compound.

Bullets continued to pound against the fender as his two pursuers fired on them. He flicked on the high beams and saw the iron gate coming up fast.

“Hang onto something,” Reid warned. Otets grabbed the handle over his window and muttered a prayer under his breath as Reid yanked the wheel hard to the right. The SUV skidded sideways in the gravel. He felt the two passenger-side tires come off the ground and, for a moment, his heart leapt into his throat with the notion that they might roll right over.

But he held control, and the tires set down again. He stomped the accelerator and drove right into the vineyard, crashing through the thin wooden trellises as if they were toothpicks and rolling grapevines flat.

“What the hell are you doing?!” Otets screeched in Russian. He bounced heavily in his seat as they drove over the planted rows. Behind him, the pair of sports cars squealed to a halt. They couldn’t follow, not through the field—but they were probably aware of what he was looking for, and they knew where to find it.

“Where’s the other exit?” Reid demanded.

“What exit?”

He yanked the Beretta from his jacket pocket (no easy feat, with the violent bouncing of the car) and pressed it against Otets’s already-shot leg. The Russian screamed in pain. “That way!” he cried, pointing a crooked finger to the northwestern edge of the compound.

Reid held his breath. *Please hold together*, he thought desperately. The SUV was sturdy, but so far they had been lucky they hadn’t broken an axle.

Then, mercifully, the vineyard ended abruptly and they were back on a gravel road. The headlights shined on a second gate—made of the same wrought iron, but on wheels and held together by a single link of chain.

*This is it.* Reid clenched his jaw and slammed the gas once more. The SUV lurched. Otets howled some indistinguishable curse. The front end collided with the iron gate and smashed it open, knocking one side right off its hinges.

Reid breathed an intense sigh of relief. Then the headlights flashed again in his rearview—the cars were back. They had doubled back and taken the other road, likely branching from the opposite side of the estate house.

“Dammit,” Reid muttered. He couldn’t keep going like this forever, and if they shot out the other rear tire he’d be dead in the water. The road here was straight, and seemed to be inclining upward. It was also better paved than behind the gate, which only meant that the sports cars would catch up that much faster.

The trees were thinning on the right side of the road. Reid’s gaze flitted from the road to the passenger window. He could have sworn, through the cracked glass, he saw a shimmer, like... like water.

A rush of memory came to him, but not the flashing visions of his new mind. These were actual memories, Professor Lawson’s memories. *We’re in the Ardennes. The Battle of the Bulge took place here. American and British forces held the bridges against German panzer divisions on the river...*

“Meuse,” he murmured aloud. “We’re on the river Meuse.”

“What?” Otets exclaimed. “What are you babbling about?” Then he ducked instinctively as bullets splintered their rear windshield.

Reid ignored him, and the bullets. His mind raced. What was it he recalled reading about the Meuse? It sliced through the mountains, yes. And they were on an incline, heading upward. There were quarries here. Red marble quarries. Sheer cliffs and steep drops.

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