

The background of the cover is a dark green circular radar screen. Overlaid on this is a circuit board pattern in a lighter green. In the upper left quadrant, there is a cluster of approximately 20 small, glowing yellow dots. A bright green, semi-transparent wedge-shaped beam originates from the center of the radar screen and points towards the upper right corner.

JACK MARS

TARGET

ZERO

AN AGENT ZERO SPY THRILLER—BOOK 2

An Agent Zero Spy Thriller

Jack Mars
Target Zero

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2019

Mars J.

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“One of the best thrillers I have read this year.” --Books and Movie Reviews (re Any Means Necessary) In this follow up to book #1 (AGENT ZERO) in the Kent Steele spy series, TARGET ZERO (Book #2) takes us on another wild, action-packed ride across Europe as elite CIA agent Kent Steele is summoned to stop a biological weapon before it devastates the world—all while grappling with his own memory loss. Life returns only fleetingly back to normal for Kent before he finds himself summoned by the CIA to hunt down terrorists and stop another international crisis—this one even more potentially devastating than the last. Yet with an assassin hunting him down, a conspiracy within, moles all around him and with a lover he can barely trust, Kent is setup to fail. His memory is quickly returning, though, and with it, flashes into the secrets of who he was, what he’d discovered, and why they are after him. His own identity, he realizes, may be the most perilous secret of all. TARGET ZERO is an espionage thriller that will keep you turning pages late into the night. “Thriller writing at its best.” --Midwest Book Review (re Any Means Necessary) Also available is Jack Mars’ #1 bestselling LUKE STONE THRILLER series (7 books), which begins with Any Means Necessary (Book #1), a free download with over 800 five star reviews!

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Содержание

PROLOGUE	7
CHAPTER ONE	13
CHAPTER TWO	19
CHAPTER THREE	24
CHAPTER FOUR	30
CHAPTER FIVE	34
CHAPTER SIX	38
CHAPTER SEVEN	41
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	44

Jack Mars

Target Zero (An Agent Zero Spy Thriller—Book #2)

Jack Mars

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

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

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Agent Zero – Book 1 Summary (recap sheet to be included in book 2)

A college professor and father of two rediscovers his forgotten past as a CIA field agent. He fights his way across Europe to find the answer of why his memory was suppressed while unraveling a terrorist plot to kill dozens of world leaders

Agent Zero: Professor Reid Lawson was kidnapped and an experimental memory suppressor was torn from his head, allowing his forgotten memories to return as CIA Agent Kent Steele, also known the world over as Agent Zero.

Maya and Sara Lawson: Reid's two teenage daughters, ages 16 and 14 respectively, are unaware of their father's past as a CIA agent.

Kate Lawson: Reid's wife and the mother of his two children passed away suddenly two years earlier from an ischemic stroke.

Agent Alan Reidigger: Kent Steele's best friend and fellow field agent, Reidigger helped him have the memory suppressor installed in the wake of a deadly rampage by Steele to track down a dangerous assassin.

Agent Maria Johansson: A fellow field agent and Kent Steele's former love interest in the wake of his wife's death, Johansson proved an unlikely but welcome ally as he recovered his memory and unearthed the terrorist plot.

Amun: The terrorist organization Amun is an amalgamation of several terrorist factions from around the world. Their masterstroke of bombing the World Economic Forum at Davos while authorities are distracted by the Winter Olympics was thwarted by Agent Zero.

Rais: An American expat turned assassin of Amun, Rais believes it is his destiny to kill Agent Zero. In their fight at the Winter Olympics at Sion, Switzerland, Rais was mortally wounded and left for dead.

Agent Vicente Baraf: Baraf, an Italian Interpol agent, was instrumental in helping Agents Zero and Johansson to stop Amun's plot to bomb Davos.

Agent John Watson: A stoic and professional CIA agent, Watson rescued Reid's girls from the hands of terrorists on a New Jersey pier.

PROLOGUE

“Tell me, Renault,” said the older man. His eyes twinkled as he watched the coffee bubble in the cap of the percolator between them. “Why did you come here?”

Dr. Cicero was a kind man, jovial, the sort who liked to describe himself as “fifty-eight years young.” His beard had turned gray in his late thirties and white in his forties, and though usually neatly trimmed, it had grown wispy and unruly in his time on the tundra. He wore a bright orange parka, but it did little to mute the youthful light in his blue eyes.

The young Frenchman was slightly taken aback by the question, but he knew his answer immediately, having rehearsed it in his head many times. “The WHO contacted the university for research assistants. They, in turn, offered it to me,” he explained in English. Cicero was native Greek, and Renault from the southern coast of France, so they conversed in a shared tongue. “To be honest, there were two others given the chance before me. They both turned it down. However, I saw it as a great opportunity to—”

“Bah!” the older man interjected with a simper. “I’m not asking about academics, Renault. I’ve read your transcript, as well as your thesis on forecasted influenza B mutation. It was quite good, I might add. I don’t think I could have written it better myself.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Cicero chuckled. “Save your ‘sir’ for boardrooms and fundraising. Out here, we are equal. Call me Cicero. How old are you, Renault?”

“Twenty-six, sir—uh, Cicero.”

“Twenty-six,” said the old man thoughtfully. He warmed his hands over the heat from the camp stove. “And nearly finished with your doctorate? That’s very impressive. But what I want to know is, why are you *here*? As I said, I’ve reviewed your file. You’re young, intelligent, admittedly handsome...” Cicero chuckled. “You could have gotten an internship anywhere in the world, I imagine. But these four days you’ve been with us, I haven’t heard you once talk about yourself. Why here, of all places?”

Cicero waved a hand as if to demonstrate his point, but it was wholly unnecessary. The Siberian tundra stretched in every direction as far as the eye could see, gray and white and utterly empty, save for the northeast where low-lying mountains sprawled lazily, capped in white.

Renault’s cheeks turned slightly pink. “Well, if I am being honest, Doctor, I came here to study by your side,” he admitted. “I am an admirer of yours. Your work in hindering the Zika virus outbreak was truly inspiring.”

“Well!” said Cicero warmly. “Flattery will get you everywhere—or at least some Belgian dark roast.” He pulled a thick mitten over his right hand, lifted the percolator from the butane-powered camp stove, and poured two plastic mugs of steaming, rich coffee. It was one of the very few luxuries they had available in the Siberian wilderness.

Home, for the last twenty-seven days of Dr. Cicero’s life, had been the small encampment established about a hundred and fifty meters from the shore of the Kolyma River. The settlement was comprised of four domed neoprene tents, a canvas canopy enclosed on one side to protect from the wind, and a semi-permanent Kevlar clean room. It was under the canvas canopy that the two men currently stood, making coffee over a two-burner camp stove amid the folding tables that held microscopes, samples of permafrost, archaeology equipment, two rugged all-weather computers, and a centrifuge.

“Drink up,” said Cicero. “It’s nearly time for our shift.” He sipped the coffee with his eyes closed, and a soft moan of pleasure escaped his lips. “Reminds me of home,” he said softly. “Do you have someone waiting for you, Renault?”

“I do,” answered the young man. “My Claudette.”

“Claudette,” Cicero repeated. “A lovely name. Married?”

“No,” Renault said simply.

“It’s important to have something to long for, in our line of work,” said Cicero wistfully. “It gives you perspective amid the detachment that is often necessary. Thirty-three years I’ve called Phoebe my wife. My work has taken me all over this earth, but she is always there for me when I return. While I’m away, I pine, but it is worth it; every time I come home it is like falling in love all over again. As they say, absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

Renault grinned. “I would not have pegged a virologist for a romantic,” he mused.

“The two are not mutually exclusive, my boy.” The doctor frowned slightly. “And yet... I don’t believe it is Claudette that haunts your mind most. You’re a pensive young man, Renault. More than once I’ve noticed you staring at the mountaintop as if looking for answers.”

“I think you may have missed your true calling, Doctor,” said Renault. “You should have been a sociologist.” The smile dissipated from his lips as he added, “You are right, though. I have accepted this assignment not only for the ability to work at your side, but also because I have dedicated myself to a cause... a cause predicated on belief. However, I have fears of where that belief might take me.”

Cicero nodded knowingly. “As I said, detachment is often necessary in our line of work. One must learn to be dispassionate.” He put a hand on the young man’s shoulder. “Take it from someone with some years behind him. Belief is a powerful motivation, to be certain, but sometimes emotions have the tendency to blur our judgment, dull our minds.”

“I’ll be wary. Thank you, sir.” Renault grinned sheepishly. “Cicero. Thank you.”

Suddenly the walkie-talkie squawked intrusively from the table beside them, shattering the introspective silence of the canopy.

“Dr. Cicero,” said a female voice edged with an Irish brogue. It was Dr. Bradlee, calling from the nearby excavation site. “We’ve unearthed something. You’re going to want to see this. Bring the box. Over.”

“We’ll be there momentarily,” Dr. Cicero said into the radio. “Over.” He smiled paternally at Renault. “It seems we’re being called in early. We should suit up.”

The pair of men set down the still-steaming mugs and hurried to the Kevlar clean room, stepping into the first antechamber to dress in the bright yellow decontamination suits the World Health Organization had provided. Gloves and plastic boots went on first, sealed at the wrists and ankles, before the full-body coveralls, hood, and finally, mask and respirator.

They dressed quickly but quietly, almost reverently, using the brief interim as not only one of physical transformation, but mental as well, from their pleasant and casual banter to the somber mindset required for their line of work.

Renault disliked the decontamination suits. They made movement slow and the work tedious. But they were absolutely necessary to conduct their research: locate and verify one of the most dangerous organisms known to mankind.

He and Cicero stepped out of the antechamber and made their way toward the bank of the Kolyma, the slow-moving icy river that ran south of the mountains and slightly east, toward the ocean.

“The box,” said Renault suddenly. “I’ll fetch it.” He hurried back to the canopy to retrieve the sample container, a stainless steel cube fastened shut with four clasps, a biohazard symbol emblazoned on each of its six sides. He trotted back to Cicero, and the two resumed their hasty trek to the excavation site.

“You know what occurred not far from here, yes?” Cicero asked through his respirator as they walked.

“I do.” Renault had read the report. Five months ago, a twelve-year-old boy from a local village had fallen sick shortly after fetching water from the Kolyma. At first it was thought that the river was contaminated, but as symptoms manifested, the picture became clearer. Researchers from the WHO were mobilized immediately upon hearing of the illness and an investigation was launched.

The boy had contracted smallpox. More specifically, he had fallen ill with a strain never before seen by modern man.

The investigation eventually led to the carcass of a caribou near the river's banks. After thorough testing, the hypothesis was confirmed: the caribou had died more than two hundred years earlier, and its body had become a part of the permafrost. The illness it carried froze with it, lying dormant—until five months ago.

"It is a simple chain reaction," said Cicero. "As the glaciers melt, the river's water level and temperature rise. That, in turn, thaws the permafrost. Who knows what diseases might lurk in this ice? Ancient strains the likes of which we have never seen before... it is entirely possible that some might even predate mankind." There was a tension in the doctor's voice that was not only concern, but an edge of excitement. It was, after all, his livelihood.

"I read that in 2016 they found anthrax in a water supply, caused by a melted icecap," Renault commented.

"It is true. I was called to that case. As well as the Spanish flu found in Alaska."

"What became of the boy?" the young Frenchman asked. "The smallpox case from five months ago." He knew that the boy, along with fifteen others in his village, had been quarantined, but that was where the report had ended.

"He passed," Cicero said. There was no emotion in his voice; not like when he spoke of his wife, Phoebe. After decades in his line of work, Cicero had learned the subtle art of detachment. "Along with four others. But out of that came a proper vaccine for the strain, so their deaths weren't for naught."

"Still," Renault said quietly, "a shame."

Less than a stone's throw from the river's shore was the excavation site, a twenty-square-meter patch of tundra cordoned by metal stakes and bright yellow procedural tape. It was the fourth such site the research team had created over their investigation so far.

Four other researchers in decontamination suits were inside the cordoned square, all hunched over a small patch of earth near its center. One of them saw the two men coming and hurried over.

It was Dr. Bradlee, an archaeologist on loan from the University of Dublin. "Cicero," she said, "we've found something."

"What is it?" he asked as he crouched low and sidled under the procedural tape. Renault followed.

"An arm."

"Pardon?" Renault blurted.

"Show me," said Cicero.

Bradlee led the way to the patch of excavated permafrost. Digging into the permafrost—and doing so carefully—was no easy task, Renault knew. The topmost layers of frozen earth commonly thawed in the summer, but the deeper layers were so-called because they were permanently frozen in the polar regions. The hole that Bradlee and her team had dug was nearly two meters deep and wide enough for a grown man to lie down in.

Not unlike a grave, Renault thought grimly.

And true to her word, the frozen remnants of a partially decomposed human arm were visible in the bottom of the hole, twisted, nearly skeletal, and blackened by time and soil.

"My God," Cicero said in a near-whisper. "Do you know what this is, Renault?"

"A body?" he ventured. At least he hoped that the arm was attached to more.

Cicero spoke quickly, gesticulating with his hands. "Back in the 1880s, a small settlement existed not far from here, right on the banks of the Kolyma. The original settlers were nomads, but as their numbers grew, they intended to build a village here. Then the unthinkable happened. A smallpox epidemic swept through them, killing forty percent of their tribe in a matter of days. They believed the river was cursed, and the survivors vacated quickly.

“But before they did, they buried their dead—right here, in a mass grave at the shore of the Kolyma River.” He pointed into the hole, at the arm. “The floodwaters are eroding the banks. The melting permafrost would soon uncover these bodies, and all it would take after that is some local fauna to pick at them and become a carrier before we could be facing an all-new epidemic.”

Renault forgot to breathe for a moment as he watched one of the yellow-clad researchers, down in the hole, scrape samples of the decomposing arm. The discovery was quite exciting; up until five months ago, the last known natural outbreak of smallpox had occurred in Somalia, in 1977. The World Health Organization had declared the disease eradicated in 1980. Yet they now stood at the edge of a literal grave known to be infected with a dangerous virus that could decimate the population of a major city in days—and their job was to dig it up, verify it, and send samples back to the WHO.

“Geneva will have to confirm it,” Cicero said quietly, “but if my speculation is correct, we have just unearthed an eight-thousand-year-old strain of smallpox.”

“Eight thousand?” Renault inquired. “I thought you said the settlement was in the late nineteenth century.”

“Ah, I did!” said Cicero. “But the question then becomes, how did they—an isolated nomadic tribe—contract it? In a similar fashion, I would imagine. Digging the ground and stumbling upon something long-since frozen. This strain found in the thawed caribou carcass five months ago dated all the way back to the start of the Holocene epoch.” The older virologist could not seem to take his eyes from the arm jutting from the frozen dirt below. “Renault, fetch the box, please.”

Renault retrieved the steel sample box and set it in the frozen earth near the edge of the hole. He unlocked the four clasps that sealed it and lifted the lid. Inside, where he had stowed it earlier, was a MAB PA-15. It was an old pistol, but not a heavy one, weighing about two pounds fully loaded with a fifteen-round magazine and one in the chamber.

The gun had belonged to his uncle, a veteran of the French Army who had fought in Maghreb and Somalia. The young Frenchman, however, disliked guns; they were too direct, too discriminate, and far too artificial for his tastes. Not like a virus—nature’s perfect machine, capable of wiping out entire species, both systematic and uncritical at the same time. Emotionless, unyielding, and precipitate; all of which he needed to be in the moment.

He reached into the steel box and wrapped his hand around the gun, but wavered slightly. He did not want to use the gun. He had, in fact, grown rather fond of Cicero’s infectious optimism and the twinkle in the older man’s eye.

But all things must come to an end, he thought. The next experience awaits.

Renault stood with the pistol in his palm. He toggled the safety and dispassionately shot the two researchers on either side of the hole, point-blank in the chest.

Dr. Bradlee let out a startled shriek at the sudden, jarring report of the gun. She scrambled backward, covering two paces before Renault fired twice into her. The English doctor, Scott, made a feeble attempt to climb out from the hole before the Frenchman made it his grave with a single shot into the top of his head.

The shots were thunderous, deafening, but there was no one around for a hundred miles to hear them. Almost no one.

Cicero was rooted to the spot, paralyzed with shock and fear. It had taken Renault only seven seconds to end four lives—only seven seconds for the research expedition to become a mass murder.

The older doctor’s lips trembled behind his respirator as he attempted to speak. At long last he stammered a single word: “Wh-why?”

Renault’s icy gaze was stoic, as detached as any virologist would have to be. “Doctor,” he said softly, “you are hyperventilating. Remove your respirator before you pass out.”

Cicero’s breath came ragged and quick, outpacing the respirator’s ability. His gaze flitted from the gun in Renault’s hand, held casually at his side, to the hole in which Dr. Scott now lay dead. “I...

I cannot,” Cicero stuttered. To remove his respirator would be to potentially subject himself to the disease. “Renault, please...”

“My name is not Renault,” said the young man. “It is Cheval—Adrian Cheval. There was a Renault, a university student who was awarded this internship. He is dead now. It is his transcript, and his paper, that you read.”

Cicero’s bloodshot eyes widened further. The edges of his vision grew fuzzy and dark with the threat of losing consciousness. “I don’t... I don’t understand... why?”

“Dr. Cicero, please. Remove the respirator. If you are going to die, would you not prefer it to be with some dignity? Facing the sunshine, rather than behind a mask? If you lose consciousness, I assure you, you will never wake up.”

Fingers quivering, Cicero slowly reached up and tugged down the tight yellow hood from over his white-streaked hair. Then he gripped the respirator and mask and pulled it off. The sweat that had beaded on his forehead chilled instantly and froze.

“I want you to know,” said the Frenchman, Cheval, “that I truly do respect you and your work, Cicero. I take no pleasure in this.”

“Renault—or Cheval, whoever you might be—listen to reason.” With the respirator off, Cicero regained enough of his faculties to make a plea. There could be only one motivation for the young man before him to commit such an atrocity. “Whatever it is you are planning to do with this, please, reconsider. It is extremely dangerous—”

Cheval sighed. “I am aware, Doctor. You see, I was indeed a student at Stockholm University, and I truly was pursuing my doctorate. Last year, however, I made an error. I forged faculty signatures on a request form to obtain samples of a rare enterovirus. They found out. I was expelled.”

“Then... then let me help you,” Cicero pleaded. “I-I can sign such a request. I can assist you with your research. Anything but this—”

“Research,” Cheval mused quietly. “No, Doctor. It is not research I am after. My people are waiting, and they are not patient men.”

Cicero’s eyes welled. “Nothing good will come of it. You know that.”

“You’re wrong,” said the young man. “Many will die, yes. But they will die nobly, paving the way for a much better future.” Cheval looked away. He did not want to shoot the kind old doctor. “You were right about one thing, though. My Claudette, she is real. And absence does indeed make the heart grow fonder. I must go now, Cicero, and so must you. But I respect you, and I am willing to grant a final request. Is there anything you would like to say to your Phoebe? You have my word I will deliver the message.”

Cicero shook his head slowly. “There is nothing so important to tell her that I would send a monster like you into her path.”

“Very well. Goodbye, Doctor.” Cheval raised the PA-15 and fired a single round into Cicero’s forehead. The wound frothed as the older doctor staggered and collapsed onto the tundra.

In the stunning silence that followed, Cheval took a moment and, kneeling, murmured a brief prayer. Then he set about his work.

He wiped the gun clean of prints and powder and hurled it into the flowing, icy Kolyma River. Next he rolled the four bodies into the hole to join Dr. Scott. With a shovel and pick, he spent ninety minutes covering them and the exposed, decomposing arm with partially frozen dirt. He disassembled the excavation site, pulling out the stakes and tearing down the procedural tape. He took his time, working meticulously—no one would even attempt to contact the research team for another eight to twelve hours, and it would be at least a full twenty-four before the WHO sent anyone to the site. An investigation would certainly yield the buried bodies, but Cheval was not keen to make it easy on them.

Lastly, he took the glass vials containing the samples from the decomposing arm and carefully slid them, one by one, into the secure foam tubes of the stainless steel box, all the while keenly aware

that any single one of them had the power to be staggeringly deadly. Then he sealed the four clasps and carried the samples back to the encampment.

In the makeshift clean room, Cheval stepped into the portable decontamination shower. Six nozzles sprayed him down from every angle with steaming hot water and a built-in emulsifier. Once finished, he carefully and methodically peeled off the yellow hazmat suit, leaving it on the floor of the tent. It was possible that his hairs or spittle, identifying factors, could be in the suit—but he had one last step to perform.

In the back of Cicero's all-terrain jeep were two rectangular red gasoline canisters. It would take only one for him to reach civilization again. The other he dumped liberally over the clean room, the four neoprene tents, and the canvas canopy.

Then he lit the fire. The blaze went up quickly and instantly, sending black, oily smoke roiling skyward. Cheval climbed into the jeep with the steel sample box and drove away. He did not speed, and he did not look in the rearview mirror to watch the site burn. He took his time.

Imam Khalil would be waiting. But the young Frenchman still had much to do before the virus was ready.

CHAPTER ONE

Reid Lawson peered through the blinds of his home office for the tenth time in less than two minutes. He was growing anxious; the bus should have arrived by now.

His office was on the second floor, the smallest of the three bedrooms of their new home on Spruce Street in Alexandria, Virginia. It was a welcome contrast to the cramped, boxy closet of a study he had in the Bronx. Half of his things were unpacked; the rest were still in boxes that lay scattered across the room. His bookshelves were constructed, but his books lay stacked in alphabetical order on the floor. The only things he had taken the time to completely build and organize were his desk and computer.

Reid had told himself that today was going to be the day that he finally got it together, nearly a full month after moving in, and finished unpacking the office.

He had gotten as far as opening a box. It was a start.

The bus is never late, he thought. It's always here between three twenty-three and three twenty-five. It's three thirty-one.

I'm calling them.

He snatched his cell phone from the desk and dialed Maya's number. He paced as it rang, trying not to think of all the awful things that could have happened to his girls between the school and home.

The call went to voicemail.

Reid hurried down the stairs to the foyer and pulled on a light jacket; March in Virginia was considerably more favorable than New York, but still a bit chilly. Car keys in hand, he punched in the four-digit security code on the wall panel to arm the alarm system to "away" mode. He knew the precise route the bus took; he could backtrack it all the way to the high school if he needed to, and...

As soon as he pulled the front door open, the bright yellow bus hissed to a stop at the end of his driveway.

"Busted," Reid murmured. He couldn't very well duck back into the house. He had undoubtedly been spotted. His two teenage girls stepped off the bus and down the walkway, pausing just shy of the door that he now blocked as the bus pulled away again.

"Hi, girls," he said as brightly as possible. "How was school?"

His eldest, Maya, shot him a suspicious look as she folded her arms across her chest. "Where you going?"

"Um... to get the mail," he told her.

"With your car keys?" She gestured to his fist, which was indeed gripping the keys to his silver SUV. "Try again."

Yup, he thought. Busted. "The bus was late. And you know what I said, if you're going to be late, you have to call. And why didn't you answer your phone? I tried to call—"

"Six minutes, Dad." Maya shook her head. "Six minutes isn't 'late.' Six minutes is traffic. There was a fender-bender on Vine."

He stepped aside as they entered the house. His younger daughter, Sara, gave him a brief hug and a murmur of, "Hi, Daddy."

"Hi, sweetheart." Reid closed the door behind them, locked it, and punched in the code to the alarm system again before turning back to Maya. "Traffic or not, I want you to let me know when you're going to be late."

"You're neurotic," she muttered.

"Excuse me?" Reid blinked in surprise. "You seem to be confusing neurosis with concern."

"Oh, please," Maya retorted. "You haven't let us out of your sight in weeks. Not since you've been back."

She was, as usual, right. Reid had always been a protective father, and he had grown more so when his wife and their mother, Kate, died two years earlier. But for the past four weeks, he had become a veritable helicopter parent, hovering and (if he was being honest) perhaps being a tad overbearing.

But he wasn't about to admit that.

"My dear, sweet child," he chided, "as you blossom into adulthood, you'll have to learn a very hard truth—that sometimes, you are wrong. And right now, you are wrong." He grinned, but she didn't. It was in his nature to try to diffuse tension with his kids using humor, but Maya wasn't having it.

"Whatever." She marched down the foyer and into the kitchen. She was sixteen, and staggeringly intelligent for her age—sometimes, it seemed, too much so for her own good. She had Reid's dark hair and penchant for dramatic discourse, but lately she seemed to have gained a proclivity toward teenage angst, or at the very least moodiness... likely brought on by a combination of Reid's constant loitering and obvious misinformation about the events that had occurred the month before.

Sara, the younger of his two, trudged up the stairs. "I'm gonna get started on my homework," she said quietly.

Left alone in the foyer, Reid sighed and leaned against a white wall. His heart broke for his girls. Sara was fourteen, and generally vibrant and sweet, but whenever the subject came up of what had happened in February she clammed up or quickly vacated the room. She simply didn't want to talk about it. Just a few days earlier, Reid had tried to invite her to see a therapist, a neutral third party that she could talk to. (Of course, it would have to be a CIA-affiliated doctor.) Sara declined with a simple and succinct "no thanks" and scurried out of the room before Reid could get another word in.

He hated keeping the truth from his kids, but it was necessary. Outside of the agency and Interpol, no one could know the truth—that barely more than a month ago he had recovered a portion of his memory as an agent in the CIA under the alias Kent Steele, also known to his peers and enemies as Agent Zero. An experimental memory suppressor in his head had caused him to forget all about Kent Steele and his work as an agent for nearly two years, until the device was torn from his skull.

Most of his memories as Kent were still lost to him. They were in there, locked away somewhere in the recesses of his brain, but they trickled in like a leaky faucet, usually when a visual or verbal prompt jarred them loose. The savage removal of the memory suppressor had done something to his limbic system that prevented the memories from returning all at once—and Reid was, for the most part, glad for it. Based on what little he knew about his life as Agent Zero, he wasn't sure he wanted them all back. His biggest trepidation was that he might remember something that he wouldn't want to be reminded of, some painful regret or awful act that Reid Lawson could never live with knowing.

Besides, he had been extremely busy ever since the activities in February. The CIA helped him relocate his family; upon his return to the US, he and his girls were sent to Alexandria in Virginia, a short drive from Washington, DC. The agency helped to secure him a position as an adjunct professor with Georgetown University.

Ever since then had been a whirlwind of activity: getting the girls enrolled in a new school, acclimating to his new job, and moving into the house in Virginia. But Reid had played a large part in keeping himself distracted by creating plenty of busywork for himself. He painted rooms. He upgraded appliances. He purchased new furniture and new school clothes for the girls. He could afford to; the CIA had awarded him a healthy sum for his involvement in stopping the terrorist organization called Amun. It was more than he made annually as a professor. They were delivering it in monthly installments to avoid scrutiny. The checks hit his bank account as a consulting fee from a fake publishing company that claimed to be creating a series of forthcoming history textbooks.

Between the money and his copious amounts of free time—he was only doing a few lectures a week at the moment—Reid kept himself as busy as he could. Because pausing for even a few

moments meant thinking, and thinking meant reflecting, not only on his fractured memory, but on other equally unpleasant things.

Like the nine names that he had memorized. The nine faces he had scrutinized. The nine lives that had been lost because of his failure.

“No,” he murmured quietly, alone in the foyer of their new home. “Don’t do that to yourself.” He didn’t want to be reminded of that now. Instead he headed into the kitchen, where Maya was digging through the refrigerator for something to eat.

“I think I’ll order some pizza,” he announced. When she said nothing, he added, “What do you think?”

She closed the fridge with a sigh and leaned against it. “It’s fine,” she said simply. Then she glanced around. “The kitchen is nicer. I like the skylight. Yard is bigger, too.”

Reid smiled. “I meant about the pizza.”

“I know,” she replied with a shrug. “You just seem to prefer avoiding the topic at hand lately, so I figured I would too.”

He recoiled again at her brashness. On more than one occasion she had pressed him for information about what had happened when he disappeared, but the conversation always ended in him insisting that his cover story was the truth, and her getting angry because she knew he was lying. Then she would drop it for a week or so before the vicious cycle began anew.

“There’s no need for that kind of attitude, Maya,” he said.

“I’m going to go check on Sara.” Maya spun on her heel and left the kitchen. A moment later he heard her feet pounding up the stairs.

He pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. It was times like these that he missed Kate the most. She always knew just what to say. She would have known how to handle two teenagers who had been through what his girls had been through.

His willpower to continue with the lie was growing weak. He couldn’t bring himself to recite the cover story yet again, the one the CIA had supplied him with to tell his family and colleagues where he had vanished to for a week. The story went that federal agents had come to his door, demanding his assistance on an important case. As an Ivy League professor, Reid was in a unique position to help them with research. As far as the girls were aware, he had spent most of that week in a conference room, poring over books and staring at a computer screen. That was all he was allowed to say, and he couldn’t share details with them.

He certainly couldn’t tell them about his clandestine past as Agent Zero, or that he had helped stop Amun from bombing the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. He couldn’t tell them that he had singlehandedly killed more than a dozen people in the course of only days, each and every one a known terrorist.

He had to stick to his vague cover story, not only for the sake of the CIA, but for the sake of the girls’ safety. While he was away dashing madcap all over Europe, his two daughters were forced to flee New York, spending several days on their own before being picked up by the CIA and brought to a safe house. They had very nearly been abducted by a pair of Amun radicals—a thought that still made the hairs on Reid’s neck stand on end, because it meant that the terrorist group had members in the United States. It certainly lent to his overly overprotective nature as of late.

The girls had been told that the two men who tried to accost them were members of a local gang that was abducting children in the area. Sara seemed slightly skeptical of the story, but accepted it on the grounds that her father wouldn’t lie to her (which, of course, made Reid feel even more awful). That, plus her total aversion to the topic, made it easy to skirt the issue and move on with life.

Maya, on the other hand, was downright dubious. Not only was she smart enough to know better, but she had been in contact with Reid via Skype during the ordeal and had seemingly gathered enough information on her own to make some assumptions. She herself had witnessed firsthand the deaths of the two radicals at Agent Watson’s hand, and she hadn’t been quite the same since.

Reid was at a complete loss about what to do, other than to try to continue with life with as much normalcy as possible.

Reid took out his cell phone and called the pizzeria up the street, putting in an order for two medium pies, one with extra cheese (Sara's favorite) and the other with sausage and green peppers (Maya's favorite).

As he hung up, he heard footfalls on the stairs. Maya returned to the kitchen. "Sara's taking a nap."

"Again?" It seemed that Sara had been sleeping a lot during the day lately. "Is she not sleeping at night?"

Maya shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe you should ask her."

"I tried. She won't tell me anything."

"Maybe it's because she doesn't understand what happened," Maya suggested.

"I told you both what happened." *Don't make me say it again*, he thought desperately. *Please don't make me lie to your face again.*

"Maybe she's scared," Maya pressed on. "Maybe because she knows her dad, who she's supposed to be able to trust, is *lying* to her—"

"Maya Joanne," Reid warned, "you want to choose your next words carefully..."

"Maybe she's not the only one!" Maya didn't seem to be backing down. Not this time. "Maybe I'm scared too."

"We're safe here," Reid told her firmly, trying to sound convincing even if he didn't fully believe it himself. A headache was forming in the front of his skull. He retrieved a glass from the cupboard and filled it with cold water from the tap.

"Yeah, and we *thought* we were safe in New York," Maya shot back. "Maybe if we knew what was going on, what you were really into, it would make things easier. But no." Whether it was his inability to leave them alone for twenty minutes or her suspicions about what had happened didn't matter. She wanted answers. "You know damn well what we went through. But we have *no* idea what happened to you!" She was nearly shouting now. "Where you went, what you did, how you got hurt—"

"Maya, I swear..." Reid set the glass on the counter and pointed a finger of warning in her direction.

"Swear what?" she snapped. "To tell the truth? Then just tell me!"

"I *can't* tell you the truth!" he yelled. As he did, he threw his arms out at his sides. One hand swept the glass of water off the countertop.

Reid didn't have time to think or ponder. His instincts kicked in and in a rapid, smooth gesture he bent low at the knees and snatched the glass out of the air before it could crash to the floor.

He immediately sucked in a regretful breath as the water sloshed, barely a drop spilled.

Maya stared, wide-eyed, though he didn't know whether her surprise was at his words or his actions. It was the first time that she had ever seen him move like that—and the first time he had ever acknowledged, out loud, that what he told them might not have been what had happened. It didn't matter if she knew it, or even just suspected it. He had blurted it out, and there was no taking it back now.

"Lucky catch," he said quickly.

Maya slowly folded her arms across her chest, with one eyebrow raised and her lips pursed. He knew that glare; it was an accusatory look she had inherited directly from her mother. "You may have Sara and Aunt Linda fooled, but I'm not buying it, not for a second."

Reid closed his eyes and sighed. She wasn't going to let him off the hook, so he lowered his tone and spoke carefully.

"Maya, listen. You are very intelligent—definitely enough to make certain suppositions about what happened," he said. "The most important thing to understand is that knowing specific things could be dangerous. The potential danger that you were in for that week I was away, you could be

in all the time, if you knew everything. I can't tell you if you're right or wrong. I won't confirm or deny anything. So for now, let's just say that... you can believe whatever assumptions you've made, so long as you're careful to keep them to yourself."

Maya nodded slowly. She stole a glance down the hall to make sure Sara wasn't there before she said, "You're not just a professor. You're working for someone, government-level—FBI, maybe, or CIA—"

"Jesus, Maya, I said keep it to yourself!" Reid groaned.

"The thing with the Winter Olympics, and the forum in Davos," she pressed on. "You had something to do with that."

"I told you, I won't confirm or deny anything—"

"And that terrorist group they keep talking about on the news, Amun. You helped stop them?"

Reid turned away, glancing out the small window that looked out over their backyard. It was too late, by then. He didn't have to confirm or deny anything. She could see it on his face.

"This isn't a game, Maya. It's serious, and if the wrong kind of people knew—"

"Did Mom know?"

Out of all the questions she could have asked, that one was a curveball. He was silent for a long moment. Once again his eldest had proven herself too smart, maybe even for her own good.

"I don't think so," he said quietly.

"And all that traveling you did, before," Maya said. "Those weren't conferences and guest lectures, were they?"

"No. They weren't."

"Then you stopped for a while. Did you quit after... after Mom...?"

"Yes. But then they needed me back." That was enough of a partial truth for him to not feel like he was lying—and hopefully enough to sate Maya's curiosity.

He turned back toward her. She stared at the tiled floor, her face etched in a frown. There was clearly more she wanted to ask. He hoped she didn't.

"One more question." Her voice was nearly a whisper. "Did this stuff have anything to do with... with Mom's death?"

"Oh, god. No, Maya. Of course not." He crossed the room quickly and put his arms around her tightly. "Don't think like that. What happened to Mom was medical. It could have happened to anyone. It wasn't... it had nothing to do with this."

"I think I knew that," she said quietly. "I just had to ask..."

"It's okay." That was the last thing he wanted her to think, that Kate's death was somehow linked to the secret life he had been involved in.

Something flashed across his mind—a vision. A recollection of the past.

A familiar kitchen. Their home in Virginia, before moving to New York. Before she died. Kate stands before you, every bit as beautiful as you remember—but her brow is furrowed, her gaze is hard. She's angry. Shouting. Gesturing with her hands toward something on the table...

Reid stepped back, releasing Maya's embrace as the vague memory spurned a dull headache in his forehead. Sometimes his brain tried to recall certain things from his past that were still locked away, and the forcible retrieval left him with a mild migraine at the front of his skull. But this time was different, stranger; the memory had clearly been one of Kate, some sort of argument they had that he couldn't recall having.

"Dad, you okay?" Maya asked.

The doorbell rang suddenly, startling them both.

"Uh, yeah," he murmured. "I'm fine. That must be the pizza." He looked at his watch and frowned. "That was really quick. I'll be right back." He crossed the foyer and glanced through the peephole. Outside was a young man with a dark beard and a half-vacant gaze, wearing a red polo shirt bearing the pizzeria's logo.

Even so, Reid checked over his shoulder to make sure Maya wasn't watching, and then he snaked a hand into the dark brown bomber jacket that hung on a hook near the door. In the inside pocket was a loaded Glock 22. He clicked the safety off and tucked it into the back of his pants before he opened the door.

"Delivery for Lawson," the pizza guy said, monotone.

"Yup, that's me. How much?"

The guy cradled the two boxes with one arm as he reached for his back pocket. Reid instinctively did too.

He saw movement from the corner of his eye and his gaze flitted left. A man with a military buzz cut was crossing his front lawn in a hurry—but more importantly, he was clearly wearing a holstered gun on his hip, and his right hand was on the grip.

CHAPTER TWO

Reid held up his arm like a crossing guard stopping traffic.

"It's okay, Mr. Thompson," he called out. "It's just pizza."

The older man on his front lawn, with his graying buzz cut and slight paunch, stopped in his tracks. The pizza guy glanced over his shoulder and, for the first time, showed some emotion—his eyes widened in shock when he saw the gun and the hand resting upon it.

"You sure, Reid?" Mr. Thompson eyed up the pizza guy suspiciously.

"I'm sure."

The delivery guy slowly pulled a receipt from his pocket. "Uh, it's eighteen," he said, bewildered.

Reid gave him a twenty and a ten and took the boxes from him. "Keep the change."

The pizza guy didn't have to be told twice. He jogged back to his waiting coupe, jumped in, and screeched away. Mr. Thompson watched him go, his eyes narrowed.

"Thank you, Mr. Thompson," Reid said. "But it's just pizza."

"I didn't like the look of that guy," his next-door neighbor growled. Reid liked the older man just fine—though he thought Thompson took on his new role of keeping a watchful eye on the Lawson family just a bit too seriously. Even so, Reid decidedly preferred having someone a bit overzealous to someone lackadaisical in their duties.

"Never can be too careful," Thompson added. "How are the girls?"

"They're doing fine." Reid smiled pleasantly. "But, uh... do you have to carry that around in plain sight all the time?" He gestured to the Smith & Wesson at Thompson's hip.

The older man looked confused. "Well... yes. My CHP expired, and Virginia is a legal open-carry state."

"...Right." Reid forced another smile. "Of course. Thanks again, Mr. Thompson. I'll let you know if we need anything."

Thompson nodded and then trotted back across the lawn to his house. Deputy Director Cartwright had assured Reid that the older man was quite capable; Thompson was a retired CIA agent, and even though he'd been out of the field for more than two decades he was clearly happy—if not a tad eager—to be useful again.

Reid sighed and closed the door behind him. He locked it and activated the security alarm again (which was becoming a ritual every time he opened or closed the door), and then turned to find Maya standing behind him in the foyer.

"What was *that* about?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing. Mr. Thompson just wanted to say hi."

Maya crossed her arms again. "And here I thought we were making such good progress."

"Don't be ridiculous." Reid scoffed at her. "Thompson is just a harmless old man—"

"Harmless? He carries a gun everywhere he goes," Maya protested. "And don't think I don't see him watching us from his window. It's like he's spying on—" Her mouth fell open a little. "Oh my god, does he know about you? Is Mr. Thompson a spy too?"

"Jeez, Maya, I am *not* a spy..."

Actually, he thought, *that's exactly what you are...*

"I don't believe this!" she exclaimed. "Is that why you have him babysit us when you leave?"

"Yes," he admitted quietly. He didn't have to tell her the unrequested truths, but there wasn't much point in hiding things from her when she was going to make such accurate guesses anyway.

He expected her to be angry and start throwing accusations again, but instead she shook her head and murmured, "Unreal. My dad is a spy, and our next-door nut-job is a bodyguard." Then,

to his surprise, she hugged him around the neck, almost knocking the pizza boxes from his hand. “I know you can’t tell me everything. All I wanted was some truth.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he muttered. “Just risking international security to be a good dad. Now go wake your sister before the pizza gets cold. And Maya? Not a *word* of this to Sara.”

He went into the kitchen and took out some plates and napkins, and poured three glasses of soda. A few moments later, Sara shuffled into the kitchen, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

“Hi, Daddy,” she mumbled.

“Hey, sweetheart. Have a seat. Are you sleeping okay?”

“Mm,” she murmured vaguely. Sara plucked up a piece of pizza and bit off the tip, chewing in slow, lazy circles.

He was worried about her, but he tried not to let on. Instead he grabbed a slice of the sausage-and-pepper pie. It was halfway to his mouth when Maya intervened, snatching it out of his hand.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she demanded.

“...Eating? Or trying to.”

“Um, no. You have a date, remember?”

“What? No, that’s tomorrow...” He trailed off, uncertain. “Oh, god, that is tonight, isn’t it?” He nearly smacked himself in the forehead.

“Sure is,” said Maya around a mouthful of pizza.

“Also, it’s not a date. It’s dinner with a friend.”

Maya shrugged. “Fine. But if you don’t go get ready, you’re going to be late for ‘dinner with a friend.’”

He looked at his watch. She was right; he was supposed to meet Maria at five.

“Go, shoo. Get changed.” She ushered him out of the kitchen and he hurried upstairs.

With everything going on and his continual attempts to elude his own thoughts, he’d nearly forgotten about the promise to meet with Maria. There had been several half-baked attempts to get together over the past four weeks, always with something getting in the way on one end or another—though, if he was being honest with himself, it was usually his end that made the excuses. Maria had seemed to finally grow tired of it and not only planned the outing, but chose a spot halfway between Alexandria and Baltimore, where she lived, if he would promise to see her.

He did miss her. He missed being around her. They weren’t just partners in the agency; there was a history there, but Reid couldn’t remember most of it. Barely any, in fact. All he knew was that when he was around her, there was a distinct feeling that he was in the company of someone who cared for him—a friend, someone he could trust, and perhaps even more than that.

He went into his closet and pulled out an ensemble he thought would work for the occasion. He was a fan of a classic style, though he was aware that his wardrobe probably dated him by at least a decade. He pulled on a pair of pleated khakis, a plaid button-down, and a tweed jacket with leather patches at the elbows.

“Is *that* what you’re wearing?” Maya asked, startling him. She was leaning against the door frame to his bedroom, munching casually on a pizza crust.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“What’s wrong with it is that you look like you just stepped out of a classroom. Come on.” She took him by the arm back to the closet and began rooting through his clothes. “Jeez, Dad, you dress like you’re eighty...”

“What was that?”

“Nothing!” she called back. “Ah. Here.” She pulled out a black sport coat—the only one he owned. “Wear this, with something gray under it. Or white. A T-shirt or a polo. Get rid of the dad-pants and put on some jeans. Dark ones. Slim fit.”

At the behest of his daughter, he changed his outfit while she waited in the hall. He supposed he should get used to this bizarre role reversal, he thought. One moment he was the overprotective father; the next he was caving in the face of his challenging, astute daughter.

"Much better," Maya said as he presented himself anew. "You almost look like you're ready for a date."

"Thank you," he said, "and this isn't a date."

"You keep saying that. But you're going for dinner and drinks with a mysterious woman that you claim is an old friend, even though you've never mentioned her and we've never met her..."

"She *is* an old friend—"

"And, I might add," Maya said over him, "she's quite attractive. We saw her get off the plane in Dulles. So if either of you are looking for something more than 'old friends,' this is a date."

"Good god, you and I are *not* talking about that." Reid winced. But in his mind, he was panicking slightly. *She's right. This is a date.* He had been doing so many mental gymnastics lately that he hadn't paused long enough to consider what "dinner and drinks" really meant to a pair of single adults. "Fine," he admitted, "let's just say it's a date. Um... what do I do?"

"You're asking me? I'm not exactly an expert." Maya grinned. "Talk to her. Get to know her better. And please, try your best to be interesting."

Reid scoffed and shook his head. "Excuse me, but I am plenty interesting. How many people do you know that can give an entire oral history of the Bulavin Rebellion?"

"Only one." Maya rolled her eyes. "And do *not* give this woman an entire oral history of the Bulavin Rebellion."

Reid chuckled and hugged his daughter.

"You'll be fine," she assured him.

"You will too," he said. "I'm going to call Mr. Thompson to come by for a while..."

"Dad, no!" Maya pulled away from his embrace. "Come on. I'm sixteen. I can watch Sara for a couple of hours."

"Maya, you know how important it is to me that you two aren't alone—"

"Dad, he smells like motor oil, and all he wants to talk about is 'the good ol' days' with the Marines," she said exasperatedly. "Nothing is going to happen. We're going to eat pizza and watch a movie. Sara will be in bed before you're back. We'll be fine."

"I still think that Mr. Thompson should come—"

"He can spy through the window like he usually does. We'll be okay. I promise. We have a great security system, and deadbolts on all the doors, and I know about the gun near the front door—"

"Maya!" Reid exclaimed. *How did she know about that?* "Do *not* mess with that, do you understand?"

"I'm not going to touch it," she said. "I'm just saying. I know it's there. Please. Let me prove I can do this."

Reid didn't like the idea of the girls being alone in the house, not at all, but she was practically begging. "Tell me the escape plan," he said.

"The whole thing?!" she protested.

"The whole thing."

"Fine." She flipped her hair over a shoulder, as she often did when she was annoyed. Her eyes rolled to the ceiling as she recited, monotone, the plan that Reid had enacted shortly upon their arrival in the new house. "If anyone comes to the front door, I should first make sure the alarm is armed, and the deadbolt and chain lock are on. Then I check the peephole to see if it's someone I know. If it's not, I call Mr. Thompson and have him investigate first."

"And if it is?" he prompted.

"If it's someone I know," Maya rattled on, "I check the side window—carefully—to see if there is anyone else with them. If there is, I call Mr. Thompson to come over and investigate."

“And if someone tries to force their way in?”

“Then we get down to the basement and go into the exercise room,” she recited. One of the first renovations Reid had made, upon moving in, was to have the door to the small room in the basement replaced with one with a steel core. It had three heavy deadbolts and aluminum alloy hinges. It was bulletproof and fireproof, and the CIA tech that had installed it claimed it would take a dozen SWAT battering rams to knock it down. It effectively turned the small exercise room into a makeshift panic room.

“And then?” he asked.

“We call Mr. Thompson first,” she said. “And then nine-one-one. If we forget our cell phones or can’t get to them, there’s a landline in the basement preprogrammed with his number.”

“And if someone breaks in, and you can’t get to the basement?”

“Then we go to the nearest available exit,” Maya droned. “Once outside, we make as much noise as possible.”

Thompson was a lot of things, but hard of hearing was not one of them. One night Reid and the girls had the TV on too loud while watching an action movie, and Thompson came running at the sound of what he thought might have been suppressed gunshots.

“But we should always have our phones with us, in case we need to make a call once we’re somewhere safe.”

Reid nodded approvingly. She had recited the entire plan—except one small, yet crucial, part. “You forgot something.”

“No, I didn’t.” She frowned.

“Once you’re somewhere safe, and after you call Thompson and the authorities...?”

“Oh, right. Then we call you right away and let you know what’s happened.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?” Maya raised an eyebrow. “Okay as in, you’ll let us be on our own for once?”

He still didn’t like it. But it was only for a couple of hours, and Thompson would be right next door. “Yes,” he said finally.

Maya breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you. We’ll be fine, I swear it.” She hugged him again, briefly. She turned to head back downstairs, but then thought of something else. “Can I get away with just one more question?”

“Sure. But I can’t promise I’ll tell you the answer.”

“Are you going to start... traveling, again?”

“Oh.” Once again her question took him by surprise. The CIA had offered him his job back—in fact, the Director of National Intelligence himself had demanded that Kent Steele be fully reinstated—but Reid hadn’t yet given them an answer, and the agency hadn’t yet demanded one of him. Most days he avoided thinking about it altogether.

“I... would really like to say no. But the truth is that I don’t know. I haven’t quite made up my mind.” He paused a moment before asking, “What would you think if I did?”

“You want my opinion?” she asked in surprise.

“Yes, I do. You’re honestly one of the smartest people I know, and your opinion matters a lot to me.”

“I mean... on the one hand, it’s pretty cool, knowing what I know now—”

“Knowing what you *think* you know,” Reid corrected.

“But it’s also pretty scary. I know there’s a very real chance that you could get hurt, or... or worse.” Maya was quiet for a while. “Do you like it? Working for them?”

Reid didn’t answer her directly. She was right; the ordeal that he’d been through had been terrifying, and had threatened his life more than once, as well as the lives of both his girls. He couldn’t bear it if anything happened to them. But the hard truth—and one of the bigger reasons why he kept himself so busy lately—was that he *did* enjoy it, and he did miss it. Kent Steele longed for the chase.

There was a time, when all this started, that he acknowledged that part of him as if it were a different person, but that wasn't true. Kent Steele was an alias. *He* longed for it. He missed it. It was a part of him, just as much as teaching and raising two girls. Though his memories were fuzzy, it was a part of his greater self, his identity, and not having it was like a sports star suffering a career-ending injury: it brought with it the question, *Who am I, if I'm not that?*

He didn't have to answer her question aloud. Maya could see it in his thousand-yard gaze.

"What's her name again?" she asked suddenly, changing the subject.

Reid smiled sheepishly. "Maria."

"Maria," she said thoughtfully. "All right. Enjoy your date." Maya headed downstairs.

Before following, Reid had a minor afterthought. He opened the top dresser drawer and rummaged around in the rear of it until he found what he was looking for—an old bottle of expensive cologne, one he hadn't worn in two years. It had been Kate's favorite. He sniffed the diffuser and felt a chill run down his spine. It was a familiar, musky scent that carried with it a flood of good memories.

He spritzed some on his wrist and dabbed each side of his neck. The scent was stronger than he remembered, but pleasant.

Then—another memory flashed across his vision.

The kitchen in Virginia. Kate is angry, gesturing at something on the table. Not just angry—she's frightened. "Why do you have this, Reid?" she asks accusingly. "What if one of the girls had found it? Answer me!"

He shook the vision loose before the inevitable migraine came on, but it didn't make the experience any less disturbing. He couldn't recall when or why that argument had happened; he and Kate had rarely argued, and in the memory, she looked scared—either scared of whatever they were arguing about, or possibly even scared of *him*. He had never given her a reason to be. At least not that he could remember...

His hands shook as a new realization struck him. He couldn't recall the memory, which meant that it might have been one that was suppressed by the implant. But why would any memories of Kate have been erased with Agent Zero?

"Dad!" Maya called from the bottom of the stairs. "You're going to be late!"

"Yeah," he muttered. "Coming." He would have to face the reality that either he sought a solution to his problem, or that the occasional resurfacing memories would continuously struggle forth, confusing and jarring.

But he would face that reality later. Right now he had a promise to keep.

He went downstairs, kissed each of his daughters on the top of their head, and headed out to the car. Before making his way down the walkway, he made sure that Maya set the alarm after him, and then he climbed into the silver SUV he'd bought just a couple weeks earlier.

Even though he was very nervous and certainly excited about seeing Maria again, he still couldn't shake the tight ball of dread in his stomach. He couldn't help but feel that leaving the girls alone, even for a short time, was a very bad idea. If the events of the previous month had taught him anything, it was first and foremost that there was no shortage of threats that wanted to see him suffer.

CHAPTER THREE

“How are you feeling tonight, sir?” the overnight nurse asked politely as she entered his hospital room. Her name was Elena, he knew, and she was Swiss, though she spoke to him in accented English. She was petite and young, most would say pretty, even, and quite cheerful.

Rais said nothing in response. He never did. He merely stared as she set a Styrofoam cup on his bedside table and set about carefully inspecting his wounds. He knew that her cheerfulness was overcompensation for her fear. He knew that she did not like being in the room with him, despite the pair of armed guards behind her, watching his every move. She did not like treating him, or even speaking to him.

No one did.

The nurse, Elena, inspected his wounds cautiously. He could tell she was nervous being that close to him. They knew what he had done; that he had killed in the name of Amun.

They would be a lot more afraid if they knew how many, he thought wryly.

“You’re healing nicely,” she told him. “Faster than expected.” She told him that every night, which he took as code to mean “hopefully you’ll leave here soon.”

That was not good news for Rais, because when he was finally well enough to leave he would likely be sent to a dank, horrible hole in the ground, some CIA black site in the desert, to sustain more wounds while they tortured him for information.

As Amun, we endure. That had been his mantra for more than a decade of his life, but that was no longer the case. Amun was no more, as far as Rais knew; its plot in Davos had failed, its leaders had been either detained or killed, and every law enforcement agency in the world knew about the brand, the glyph of Amun that its members burned into their skin. Rais was not allowed to watch television, but he got his news from his armed police guards, who talked often (and at great length, often to Rais’s annoyance).

He himself had sliced the brand from his skin before being taken to the hospital in Sion, but it ended up being for naught; they knew who he was and at least some of what he had done. Even so, the jagged, mottled pink scar where the brand had once been on his arm was a daily reminder that Amun was no more, and so it only seemed fitting that his mantra change.

I endure.

Elena took the Styrofoam cup, filled with ice water and a straw. “Would you like something to drink?”

Rais said nothing, but he leaned forward slightly and parted his lips. She guided the straw toward him cautiously, her arms fully extended and locked at the elbows, her body reclined back on an angle. She was afraid; four days earlier Rais had tried to bite Dr. Gerber. His teeth had scraped the doctor’s neck, not even broken the skin, but still it warranted a crack across the jaw from one of his guards.

Rais did not try anything this time. He took long, slow sips through the straw, enjoying the girl’s fear and the tight anxiousness of the two police officers who watched behind her. When he’d had his fill, he leaned back again. She audibly sighed with relief.

I endure.

He had endured quite a bit in the past four weeks. He had endured a nephrectomy to remove his punctured kidney. He had endured a second surgery to extract a portion of his lacerated liver. He had endured a third procedure to ensure that none of his other vital organs had been damaged. He had endured several days in the ICU before being moved to a medical-surgical unit, but he never left the bed to which he was shackled by both wrists. The nurses turned him and changed his bedpan and kept him as comfortable as they were able, but he was never allowed to rise, to stand, to move around of his own volition.

The seven stab wounds in his back and one in his chest had been sutured and, as the night nurse Elena continuously reminded him, were healing well. Still, there was little the doctors could do about the nerve damage. Sometimes his entire back would go numb, up to his shoulders and occasionally even down his biceps. He would feel nothing, as if those parts of his body belonged to another.

Other times he would wake from a solid sleep with a scream in his throat as searing pain ripped through him like an angry lightning storm. It never lasted long, but it was acute, intense, and came irregularly. The doctors called them “stingers,” a side effect sometimes seen in those with nerve damage as extensive as his. They assured him that these stingers often faded and stopped entirely, but they could not say when that would happen. Instead they told him he was lucky there was no damage to his spinal cord. They told him he was lucky to have survived his wounds at all.

Yes, lucky, he thought bitterly. Lucky that he was recovering only to be thrust into the waiting arms of a CIA black site. Lucky to have had everything he worked for torn away in the course of a single day. Lucky to have been bested not once, but twice by Kent Steele, a man whom he hated, loathed, with every possible fiber of his being.

I endure.

Before leaving his room, Elena thanked the two officers in German and promised to bring them coffee when she returned later. Once she was gone, they resumed their post just outside his door, which was always open, and resumed their conversation, something about a recent football match. Rais was fairly well-versed in German, but the particulars of the Swiss-German dialect and the speed with which they spoke eluded him at times. The day-shift officers often conversed in English, which was how he got much of his news about the goings-on outside his hospital room.

Both men were members of the Swiss Federal Office of Police, which mandated that he have two guards on his room at all times, twenty-four hours a day. They rotated in eight-hour shifts, with an entirely different set of guards on Fridays and the weekend. There were always two, always; if one officer had to use the restroom or get something to eat, they would first have to call down to have one of the hospital’s security guards sent to them, and then wait for their arrival. Most patients in his condition and this far along in their recovery would likely have been transferred to a lower-level trauma center, but Rais had remained in the hospital. It was a more secure facility, with its locked units and armed guards.

There were always two. Always. And Rais had determined that it could work to his advantage.

He had had a lot of time to plan his escape, especially in the last several days, when his medication levels were decreased and he could think lucidly. He ran through several scenarios in his head, over and over. He memorized schedules and eavesdropped on conversations. It would not be long before they discharged him—a matter of days, at most.

He had to act, and he decided he would do it tonight.

His guards had grown complacent over the weeks posted outside his door. They called him “terrorist,” and they knew he was a killer, but besides the minor incident with Dr. Gerber a few days prior, Rais had done nothing but lie there silently, mostly unmoving, and allow the staff to perform their duties. If no one was in the room with him, the guards barely paid any attention other than to occasionally glance in on him.

He had not tried to bite the doctor out of spite or malice, but out of necessity. Gerber had been leaning over him, inspecting the wound on his arm where he had sliced off the brand of Amun—and the pocket of the doctor’s white lab coat had brushed the fingers of Rais’s shackled hand. He lunged, snapping his jaws, and the doctor leapt back in fright as teeth grazed his neck.

And a fountain pen had remained firmly clutched in Rais’s fist.

One of the officers on duty had given him a solid smack on the face for it, and in the moment the blow landed, Rais slid the pen under his sheets, stowing it beneath his left thigh. There it had stayed for three days, obscured under the sheets, until just the night before. He had taken it out while the guards chatted in the hall. With one hand, unable to see what he was doing, he separated the two

halves of the pen and removed the cartridge, working slowly and steadily so the ink did not spill. The pen was a classic-style gold-tipped nib pen that came to a dangerous point. He slipped that half back under the sheet. The back half had a gold pocket clip, which he carefully pried back and away with his thumb until it snapped off.

The restraint on his left wrist allowed a little less than a foot of mobility for his arm, but if he stretched his hand to its limit he could reach the first few inches of the bedside stand. Its tabletop was simple, smooth particle board, but the underside was rough as sandpaper. Over the course of a grueling, aching four hours the night prior, Rais gently rubbed the pen's clip back and forth along the table's underside, careful not to make much noise. With every motion he feared the clip might slip from his fingers, or the guards would notice the movement, but his room was dark and they were deep in conversation. He worked and worked until he had sharpened the clip to a needle-like point. Then the clip disappeared beneath the sheets as well, next to the nib tip.

He knew from snippets of conversation that there would be three night nurses on the med-surg unit tonight, Elena included, with another two on-call if need be. They, plus his guards, meant at least five people he would have to deal with, and a maximum of seven.

No one among the medical staff liked to attend to him much, knowing what he was, so they checked in fairly infrequently. Now that Elena had come and gone, Rais knew he had somewhere between sixty and ninety minutes before she might return.

His left arm was held with a standard hospital restraint, what professionals sometimes refer to as "four-pointers." It was a soft blue cuff around his wrist with a tight, white, buckled nylon strap around that, the other end firmly attached to the steel railing of his bed. Because of the severity of his crimes, his right wrist was handcuffed.

The pair of guards outside were conversing in German. Rais listened carefully; the one on the left, Luca, seemed to be complaining that his wife was getting fat. Rais almost scoffed; Luca was far from fit himself. The other, a man named Elias, was younger and athletic, but drank coffee in doses that should have been lethal to most humans. Every night, between ninety minutes and two hours into their shift, Elias would call the night guard up so that he could relieve himself. While away, Elias would step outside for a cigarette, so that with the bathroom break meant he was usually gone between eight and eleven minutes. Rais had spent the last several nights silently counting the seconds of Elias's absences.

It was a very narrow window of opportunity, but one for which he was prepared.

He reached beneath his sheets for the sharpened clip and held it in the fingertips of his left hand. Then, carefully, he tossed it in an arc over his body. It landed deftly in the palm of his right hand.

Next would come the hardest part of his plan. He pulled his wrist so that the handcuff chain was taut, and while holding it that way he twisted his hand and worked the sharpened tip of the clip into the keyhole of the cuff around the steel railing. It was difficult and awkward, but he had escaped handcuffs before; he knew the catch mechanism inside was designed so that a universal key could open nearly any pair, and knowing the inner workings of a lock meant simply making the right adjustments to trigger the pins inside. He had to keep the chain taut, though, to keep the cuff from clanking against the railing and alerting his guards.

It took him nearly twenty minutes of twisting, turning, taking short breaks to alleviate his aching fingers and trying anew, but finally the lock clicked and the cuff slid open. Rais carefully unhooked it from the railing.

One hand was free.

He reached over and hastily unbuckled the restraint on his left.

Both hands were free.

He stowed the clip under the sheets and removed the top half of the pen, gripping it in his palm so that only the sharp nib was exposed.

Outside his door, the younger officer stood suddenly. Rais held his breath and pretended to be asleep as Elias peered in on him.

“Call Francis, would you?” Elias said in German. “I’ve got to piss.”

“Sure,” Luca said with a yawn. He radioed down to the hospital’s night guard, who was ordinarily stationed behind the front desk on the first floor. Rais had seen Francis plenty of times; he was an older man, late fifties, early sixties perhaps, with a thin frame. He carried a gun but his movements were slow.

It was exactly what Rais had been hoping for. He didn’t want to have to fight the younger police officer in his still-recovering state.

Three minutes later Francis appeared, in his white uniform and black tie, and Elias hurried off to the bathroom. The two men outside the door exchanged pleasantries as Francis took Elias’s plastic seat with a heavy sigh.

It was time to act.

Rais carefully slid to the end of the bed and put his bare feet to the cold tile. It had been some time since he had used his legs, but he was confident that his muscles had not atrophied to a state beyond what he needed them for.

He stood carefully, quietly—and then his knees buckled. He gripped the edge of the bed for support and shot a glance toward the door. No one came; the voices continued. The two men hadn’t heard anything.

Rais stood shakily, panting, and took a few silent steps. His legs were weak, to be sure, but he had always been strong when needed, and he needed to be strong now. His hospital gown flowed around him, open at the back. The immodest garment would only impede him, so he tugged it off, standing unabashedly naked in the hospital room.

The nib cap in his fist, he took a position just behind the open door, and he let out a low whistle.

Both men heard it, apparent by the sudden scraping of chair legs as they rose from their seats. Luca’s frame filled the doorway as he peered into the dark room.

“*Mein Gott!*” he murmured as he hastily entered, noticing the empty bed.

Francis followed, his hand on the holster of his gun.

As soon as the older guard was past the threshold, Rais leapt forward. He jammed the nib cap into Luca’s throat and twisted, tearing a berth in his carotid. Blood sprayed liberally from the open wound, some of it splashing the opposite wall.

He let go of the nib and rushed Francis, who was struggling to free his gun. *Unclip, unholster, safety off, aim*—the older guard’s reaction was slow, costing him several precious seconds that he simply did not have.

Rais struck two blows, the first one upward just below the belly button, immediately followed by a downward blow to the solar plexus. One forced air into the lungs, while the other forced air out, and the sudden, jarring effect it had on a confused body was generally blurred vision and sometimes loss of consciousness.

Francis staggered, unable to breathe, and sank to his knees. Rais spun behind him, and with one clean motion he broke the guard’s neck.

Luca gripped his throat with both hands as he bled out, gurgles and slight gasps rising in his throat. Rais watched and counted the eleven seconds until the man lost consciousness. Without stopping the blood flow he would be dead in under a minute.

He quickly relieved both guards of their guns and put them on the bed. The next phase of his plan would not be easy; he had to sneak down the hall, unseen, to the supply closet where there would be spare scrubs. He couldn’t very well leave the hospital in Francis’s recognizable uniform, or Luca’s now-blood-soaked one.

He heard a male voice from down the hall and froze.

It was the other officer, Elias. *So soon?* Anxiety rose in Rais's chest. Then he heard a second voice—the night nurse, Elena. Apparently Elias had skipped his cigarette break to chat with the pretty young nurse, and now they were both heading down the hall toward his room. They would pass by it in mere moments.

He would prefer not to have to kill Elena. But if it was a choice between him and her, she would have die.

Rais grabbed one of the guns from the bed. It was a Sig P220, all black, .45 caliber. He took it in his left hand. The weight of it felt welcome and familiar, like an old flame. With his right he gripped the open half of the handcuffs. And then he waited.

The voices in the hall fell silent.

"Luca?" Elias called out. "Francis?" The young officer unclipped the strap of his holster and had a hand on his pistol as he entered the darkened room. Elena crept in behind him.

Elias's eyes went wide with horror at the sight of the two dead men.

Rais slammed the hook of the open handcuff into the side of the young man's neck, and then yanked his arm backward. The metal bit into his wrist, and the wounds in his back burned, but he ignored the pain as he tore the young man's throat from his neck. A substantial amount of blood spattered and ran down the assassin's arm.

With his left hand he pressed the Sig against Elena's forehead.

"Do not scream," he said quickly and quietly. "Do not cry out. Stay silent and live. Make a sound and die. Do you understand?"

A small squeak erupted from Elena's lips as she stifled the sob rising from it. She nodded, even as tears welled in her eyes. Even as Elias fell forward, flat on his face on the tiled floor.

He looked her up and down. She was petite, but her scrubs were somewhat baggy and the waistband elastic. "Take off your clothes," he told her.

Elena's mouth fell open in horror.

Rais scoffed. He could understand the confusion, though; he was, after all, still nude. "I am not that type of monster," he assured her. "I need clothes. I won't ask again."

Trembling, the young woman tugged off the scrub top and slid out of her pants, removing them over her white sneakers, as she was standing in the pool of Elias's blood.

Rais took them and put them on, a bit awkwardly with one hand while he kept the Sig trained on the girl. The scrubs were snug, and the pants a bit short, but they would suffice. He tucked the pistol in the back of his pants, and retrieved the other from the bed.

Elena stood in her underwear, hugging her arms over her midsection. Rais noticed; he plucked up his hospital gown and held it out to her. "Cover yourself. Then get on the bed." As she did what he asked, he found a ring of keys on Luca's belt and unlocked his other cuff. Then he looped the chain around one of the steel railings and cuffed Elena's hands.

He set the keys on the farthest edge of the bedside table, beyond her grasp. "Someone will come and free you after I've gone," he told her. "But first I have questions. I need you to be honest, because if you're not, I will come back and kill you. Do you understand?"

She nodded frantically, tears rolling over her cheeks.

"How many other nurses are on this unit tonight?"

"P-please don't hurt them," she stammered.

"Elena. How many other nurses are on this unit tonight?" he repeated.

"T-two..." She sniffled. "Thomas and Mia. But Tom is at break. He would be downstairs."

"Okay." The name tag clipped to his chest was about the size of a credit card. It had a small photo of Elena, and on the reverse, a black stripe running its length. "Is this a locked unit at night? And your badge, it is the key?"

She nodded and sniffled again.

“Good.” He tucked the second gun into the waistband of the scrub pants and knelt by Elias’s body. Then he tugged off both shoes and wiggled his feet into them. They were somewhat tight, but close enough to make an escape. “One last question. Do you know what Francis drives? The night guard?” He gestured to the dead man in the white uniform.

“I-I’m not sure. A... a truck, I think.”

Rais dug into Francis’s pockets and came out with a set of keys. There was an electronic fob; that would help locate the vehicle. “Thank you for your honesty,” he told her. Then he tore a strip from the edge of the bed sheet and stuffed it in her mouth.

The corridor was empty and brightly lit. Rais held the Sig in his grip but kept it obscured behind his back as he crept down the hall. It opened onto a wider floor with a U-shaped nurses’ station and, beyond that, the exit to the unit. A woman in round spectacles with a brunette bob typed away on a computer, her back to him.

“Turn around, please,” he told her.

The startled woman spun to find their patient/prisoner in scrubs, one arm bloodied, pointing a gun at her. She lost her breath and her eyes bulged.

“You must be Mia,” Rais said. The woman was likely around forty, matronly, with dark circles under her wide eyes. “Hands up.”

She did so.

“What happened to Francis?” she asked quietly.

“Francis is dead,” Rais told her dispassionately. “If you wish to join him, do something brash. If you want to live, listen carefully. I am going to leave through that door. Once it closes behind me, you are going to slowly count to thirty. Then you are going to go to my room. Elena is alive but she needs your assistance. After that, you may do whatever it is you’re trained to do in a situation like this. Do you understand?”

The nurse nodded once tightly.

“Do I have your word you will follow those instructions? I prefer not to kill women when I can avoid it.”

She nodded again, slower.

“Good.” He circled around the station, tugging the badge from the scrub top as he did, and swiped it through the card slot to the right of the door. A small light turned from red to green and the lock clicked. Rais pushed the door open, shot one more look at Mia, who had not moved, and then watched the door close behind him.

And then he ran.

He hurried down the hall, tucking the Sig into his pants as he did. He took the stairs down to the first floor two at a time, and burst out a side door and into the Swiss night. Cool air washed over him like a cleansing shower, and he took a moment to breathe freely.

His legs wavered and threatened to give out again. The adrenaline of his escape was wearing off rapidly, and his muscles were still quite weak. He tugged Francis’s key fob from the scrub pocket and pressed the red panic button. The alarm on an SUV screeched, the headlights flashing. He quickly turned it off and hurried over to it.

They would be looking for this car, he knew, but he wouldn’t be in it for long. He would soon have to ditch it, find new clothes, and come morning he would head toward the Hauptpost, where he had everything he would need to escape Switzerland under a fake identity.

And as soon as he was able, he would find and kill Kent Steele.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reid was barely out of the driveway on his way to meet with Maria before he called Thompson to ask him to keep watch on the Lawson home. “I decided to give the girls a little independence tonight,” he explained. “I won’t be gone too long. But even so, keep an eye out and an ear to the ground?”

“Sure thing,” the old man agreed.

“And, uh, if there’s any cause for alarm, of course, head right over.”

“I will, Reid.”

“You know, if you can’t see them or something, you can knock on the door, or call the house phone...”

Thompson chuckled. “Don’t worry, I got it. And so do they. They’re teenagers. They need some space now and then. Enjoy your date.”

With Thompson’s watchful eye and Maya’s determination to prove herself responsible, Reid thought he could rest easy knowing the girls would be safe. Of course, part of him knew that was just another example of his mental gymnastics. He’d be thinking about it the whole night.

He had to bring the GPS map up on his phone to find the place. He wasn’t yet familiar with Alexandria or the area, though Maria was, thanks to its proximity to Langley and CIA headquarters. Even so, she had chosen a place that she had never been to before either, likely as a way to level the playing field, so to speak.

On the drive over, he missed two turns despite the GPS voice telling him which way to go and when. He was thinking of the strange flashback he’d now had twice—first when Maya asked if Kate knew about him, and again when he smelled the cologne that his late wife had loved. It was gnawing at the back of his mind, so much so that even when he tried to pay attention to the directions he quickly grew distracted again.

The reason it was so bizarre was that every other memory of Kate was so vivid in his mind. Unlike Kent Steele, she had never left him; he remembered meeting her. He remembered dating. He remembered vacations and buying their first home. He remembered their wedding and the births of their children. He even remembered their arguments—at least he thought he did.

The very notion of losing any part of Kate shook him. The memory suppressor had already proved to have some side effects, like the occasional headache spurned by a stubborn memory—it was an experimental procedure, and the method of removal was far from surgical.

What if more than just my past as Agent Zero had been taken from me?

He didn’t like the thought at all. It was a slippery slope; before long he was considering the possibility that he might have lost memories of times with his girls as well. And even worse was that there was no way for him to know the answer to that without restoring his full memory.

It was all too much, and he felt a fresh headache coming on. He switched on the radio and turned it up in an attempt to distract himself.

The sun was setting by the time he pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant, a gastropub called The Cellar Door. He was a few minutes late. He quickly got out of the car and trotted around to the front of the building.

Then he stopped in his tracks.

Maria Johansson was third-generation Swedish-American, and her CIA cover was that of a certified public accountant from Baltimore—though Reid thought it should have been as a cover model, or maybe a centerfold. She was an inch or two shy of his five-eleven height, with long, straight blonde hair that cascaded around her shoulders effortlessly. Her eyes were slate-gray, yet somehow intense. She stood outside in the fifty-five-degree weather in a simple navy-blue dress with a plunging V neck and a white shawl over her shoulders.

She spotted him as he approached and a smile grew on her lips. “Hey. Long time no see.”

“I... wow,” he blurted. “I mean, uh... you look great.” It occurred to him that he had never seen Maria in makeup before. The blue eye shadow matched her dress and made her eyes seem nearly luminescent.

“Not so bad yourself.” She nodded approvingly at his choice of apparel. “Should we go in?”

Thanks, Maya, he thought. “Yeah. Of course.” He grabbed the door for her and pulled it open. “But before we do, I have a question. What the hell is a ‘gastropub’?”

Maria laughed. “I think it’s what we used to call a dive bar, but with fancier food.”

“Got it.”

Inside was cozy, if not a bit small, with brick interior walls and exposed wood beams in the ceiling. The lighting was hanging Edison bulbs, which provided a warm, dim ambience.

Why am I nervous? he thought as they were seated. He knew this woman. Together they had stopped an international terrorist organization from murdering hundreds, if not thousands, of people. But this was different; it wasn’t an op or a mission. This was pleasure, and somehow that made all the difference.

Get to know her, Maya had told him. *Be interesting.*

“So, how’s work?” he ended up asking. He groaned internally at his halfhearted attempt.

Maria smiled with half her mouth. “You should know I can’t really talk about that.”

“Right,” he said. “Of course.” Maria was an active CIA field agent. Even if he was active too she wouldn’t be able to share details of an op unless he was on it with her.

“How about you?” she asked. “How’s the new job?”

“Not bad,” he admitted. “I’m adjunct, so it’s part-time for now, a few lectures a week. Some grading and whatnot. But it’s not terribly interesting.”

“And the girls? How are they doing?”

“Eh... they’re coping,” Reid said. “Sara doesn’t talk about what happened. And Maya actually was just...” He stopped himself before he said too much. He trusted Maria, but at the same time he didn’t want to admit that Maya had guessed, very accurately, what it was that Reid was involved in. His cheeks turned pink as he said, “She was teasing me. About this being a date.”

“Isn’t it?” Maria asked point-blank.

Reid felt his face flush anew. “Yeah. I guess it is.”

She smirked again. It seemed she was enjoying his awkwardness. In the field, as Kent Steele, he had proven he could be confident, capable, and collected. But here, in the real world, he was just as awkward as anyone might be after nearly two years of celibacy.

“What about you?” she asked. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m good,” he said. “Fine.” As soon as he said it, he regretted it. Had he not just learned from his daughter that honesty was the best policy? “That’s a lie,” he said immediately. “I guess I haven’t been doing that great. I keep myself busy with all these unnecessary tasks, and I make excuses, because if I stop long enough to be alone with my thoughts, I remember their names. I see their faces, Maria. And I can’t help but think that I didn’t do enough to stop it.”

She knew exactly what he was referring to—the nine people who had been killed in the single successful explosion set off by Amun in Davos. Maria reached over the table and took his hand. Her touch sent an electric tingle up his arm, and even seemed to calm his nerves. Her fingers were warm and soft against his.

“That’s the reality we face,” she said. “We can’t save everyone. I know you don’t have all your memories back as Zero, but if you did, you would know that.”

“Maybe I don’t want to know that,” he said quietly.

“I get it. We still try. But to think that you can keep the world safe from harm will make you crazy. Nine lives were taken, Kent. It happened, and there’s no way to go back. But it could have been hundreds. It could have been a thousand. That’s the way you need to look at it.”

“What if I can’t?”

“Then... find a good hobby, maybe? I knit.”

He couldn’t help but laugh. “You knit?” He couldn’t imagine Maria knitting. Using knitting needles as a weapon to cripple an insurgent? Certainly. But actually knitting?

She held her chin high. “Yes, I knit. Don’t laugh. I just made a blanket that’s softer than anything you ever felt in your whole life. My point is, find a hobby. You need something to keep your hands and mind busy. What about your memory? Any improvements there?”

He sighed. “Not really. I guess I haven’t had much going on to jog it. It’s still kind of jumbled.” He set the menu aside and wrung his hands on the tabletop. “Although, since you mention it... I did have something strange happen just earlier today. A fragment of something came back. It was about Kate.”

“Oh?” Maria bit her lower lip.

“Yeah.” He was quiet for a long moment. “Things with Kate and me... before she passed. They were okay, right?”

Maria stared straight at him, her slate-gray eyes boring into his. “Yes. As far as I know, things were always great between you two. She really loved you, and you her.”

He found it hard to hold her gaze. “Yeah. Of course.” He scoffed at himself. “God, listen to me. I’m actually talking about my late wife on a date. Please don’t tell my daughter.”

“Hey.” Her fingers found his again across the table. “It’s okay, Kent. I get it. You’re new to this and it feels strange. I’m not exactly an expert here either, so... we’ll figure it out together.”

Her fingers lingered on his. It felt good. No, it was more than that—it felt right. He chuckled nervously, but his grin faded to a perplexed frown as a bizarre notion struck him; that Maria still called him Kent.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Nothing. I was just thinking... I don’t even know if Maria Johansson is your real name.”

Maria shrugged coyly. “It might be.”

“That’s not fair,” he protested. “You know mine.”

“I’m not saying it *isn’t* my real name.” She was enjoying this, toying with him. “You can always call me Agent Marigold, if you prefer.”

He laughed. Marigold was her code name, to his Zero. It was almost a silly thing to him, to use code names when they knew each other personally—but then again, the name Zero did seem to strike fear into many he’d encountered.

“What was Reidigger’s code name?” Reid asked quietly. It almost stung him to ask. Alan Reidigger had been Kent Steele’s best friend—*no*, Reid thought, *he was my best friend*—a man of seemingly unyielding loyalty. The only problem was that Reid barely remembered anything about him. All memories of Reidigger had gone with the memory implant, which Alan had helped coordinate.

“You don’t remember?” Maria smiled pleasantly at the thought. “Alan gave you the name Zero, did you know that? And you gave him his. God, I haven’t thought about that night in years. We were in Abu Dhabi, I think, just coming off an op, drunk at some hoity-toity hotel bar. He called you ‘Ground Zero’—like the point of a bomb’s detonation, because you tended to leave a mess behind you. That shortened up to just Zero, and it stuck. And you called him—”

A phone rang, interrupting her story. Reid instinctively glanced at his own cell, lying on the table, expecting to see the house number or Maya’s cell displayed on the screen.

“Relax,” she said, “it’s me. I’ll just ignore it...” She looked at her phone and her brow knitted perplexedly. “Actually, that’s work. Just a sec.” She answered. “Yes? Mm-hmm.” Her somber gaze lifted and met Reid’s. She held it as her frown grew deeper. Whatever was being said on the other end of the line was clearly not good news. “I understand. Okay. Thank you.” She hung up.

“You look troubled,” he noted. “I know, I know, you can’t talk about work stuff—”

“He escaped,” she murmured. “The assassin from Sion, the one in the hospital? Kent, he got out, less than an hour ago.”

“Rais?” Reid said in astonishment. Cold sweat immediately broke out on his brow. “How?”

“I don’t have details,” she said hastily as she stuffed her cell phone back into her clutch. “I’m so sorry, Kent, but I have to go.”

“Yeah,” he murmured. “I understand.” Truthfully, he felt a hundred miles away from their cozy table in the small restaurant. The assassin that Reid had left for dead—not once, but twice—was still alive, and now at large.

Maria rose and, before leaving, leaned over and pressed her lips to his. “We’ll do this again soon, I promise. But right now, duty calls.”

“Of course,” he said. “Go and find him. And Maria? Be careful. He’s dangerous.”

“So am I.” She winked, and then hurried out of the restaurant.

Reid sat there alone for a long moment. When the waitress came over, he didn’t even hear her words; he just waved vaguely to indicate that he was fine. But he was far from fine. He hadn’t even felt the nostalgic electric tingle when Maria kissed him. All he could feel was a knot of dread forming in his stomach.

The man who believed it was his destiny to kill Kent Steele had escaped.

CHAPTER FIVE

Adrian Cheval was still awake despite the late hour. He sat upon a stool in the kitchen, staring blurry-eyed and unblinking at the laptop computer screen in front of him, his fingers typing away frenetically.

He paused long enough to hear Claudette padding softly down the carpeted stairs from the loft in her bare feet. Their flat in Marseille was small but cozy, an end unit on a quiet street a short five-minute walk from the sea.

A moment later her slight frame and fiery hair appeared in his periphery. She put her hands on his shoulders, sliding them up and around, down his chest, her head coming to rest upon his upper back. “*Mon chéri*,” she purred. “My love. I cannot sleep.”

“Neither can I,” he replied softly in French. “There is too much to be done.”

She bit him gently on the earlobe. “Tell me.”

Adrian pointed at his screen, displayed on which was the cyclical double-stranded RNA structure of *variola major*—the virus known to most as smallpox. “This strain from Siberia is... it is incredible. I’ve never seen anything quite like it. By my calculations, the virulence of it would be staggering. I am convinced that the only thing that might have stopped it from eradicating early humanity thousands of years ago was the glacial period.”

“A new Deluge,” Claudette moaned a soft sigh in his ear. “How long until it is ready?”

“I must mutate the strain, while still maintaining the stability and virility,” he explained. “No simple task, but a necessary one. The WHO obtained samples of this same virus five months ago; there is no doubt that a vaccine is being developed, if one hasn’t been already. Our strain must be unique enough that their vaccines will be ineffective.” The process was known as lethal mutagenesis, manipulating the RNA of the samples he had acquired in Siberia to increase virulence and reduce the incubation period. At his calculations, Adrian suspected the mortality rate of the mutated *variola major* virus could reach as high as seventy-eight percent—nearly three times that of the naturally occurring smallpox that had been eradicated by the World Health Organization in 1980.

Upon returning from Siberia, Adrian had first visited Stockholm and used the deceased student Renault’s ID to access their facilities, where he ensured that the samples were inactive while he worked. But he could not linger under someone else’s identity, so he stole the necessary equipment and returned to Marseille. He set up his laboratory in the unused basement of a tailor’s shop three blocks from their flat; the kindly old tailor believed that Adrian was a geneticist, researching human DNA and nothing more, and Adrian kept the door secured with a padlock when he was not present.

“Imam Khalil will be pleased,” Claudette breathed in his ear.

“Yes,” Adrian agreed quietly. “He will be pleased.”

Most women would likely not be terribly keen to find their significant other working with a substance as volatile as a highly virulent strain of smallpox—but Claudette was not most women. She was petite, standing only five-foot-four to Adrian’s six-foot figure. Her hair was a fiery red and her eyes as deep green as the densest jungle, suggesting a certain irascibility.

They had met only the year prior, when Adrian was at his lowest. He had just been expelled from Stockholm University for attempting to obtain samples of a rare enterovirus; the same virus that had taken his mother’s life only weeks earlier. At the time, Adrian had been determined to develop a cure—obsessed, even—so that no one else would suffer as she did. But he was discovered by university faculty and summarily dismissed.

Claudette found him in an alley, lying in a puddle of his own desolation and vomit, half-unconscious from drink. She took him home, cleaned him up, and fed him water. The next morning Adrian had awoken to find a beautiful woman sitting at his bedside, smiling upon him as she said, “I know exactly what you need.”

He swiveled on his kitchen stool to face her and ran his hands up and down her back. Even sitting he was nearly her height. “It is interesting you mention the Deluge,” he noted. “You know, there are scholars who say that if the Great Flood truly did occur, it would have been approximately seven to eight thousand years ago... nearly the same epoch as this strain. Perhaps the Flood was a metaphor, and it was this virus that cleansed the world of its wicked.”

Claudette laughed at him. “Your constant endeavors to blend science and spirituality are not lost on me.” She took his face gently in her hands and kissed his forehead. “But you still do not understand that sometimes faith is all you need.”

Faith is all you need. That was what she had prescribed to him the year before, when he awoke from his drunken stupor. She had taken him in and allowed him to stay in her flat, the very same one that they occupied still. Adrian was not a believer in love at first sight before Claudette, but she came to hold many influences on his way of thinking. Over the course of some months, she introduced him to the tenets of Imam Khalil, an Islamic holy man from Syria. Khalil considered himself neither Sunni nor Shiite, but simply a devotee of God—even to the point that he allowed his fairly small sect of followers to call Him by whatever name they chose, for Khalil believed that each individual’s relationship with their creator was strictly personal. For Khalil, that god’s name was Allah.

“I want you to come to bed,” Claudette told him, stroking his cheek with the back of her hand. “You need your rest. But first... do you have the sample prepared?”

“The sample.” Adrian nodded. “Yes. I have it.”

There was but a single, tiny vial, barely larger than a thumbnail, of the active virus, hermetically sealed in glass and nestled between two cubes of foam, those inside a stainless steel biohazard container. The box itself was sitting, quite conspicuously, on the countertop of their kitchen.

“Good,” Claudette purred. “Because we are expecting visitors.”

“Tonight?” Adrian’s hands fell away from the small of her back. He hadn’t expected it to happen so soon. “At this hour?” It was nearly two o’clock in the morning.

“Any moment,” she said. “We made a promise, my love, and we must keep it.”

“Yes,” Adrian murmured. She was right, as always. Vows must not be broken. “Of course.”

A brusque, heavy rapping on the door of their flat startled them both.

Claudette padded quickly to the door, leaving the chain lock on and opening it only two inches. Adrian followed, peering over her shoulder to see the pair of men on the other side. Neither looked friendly. He did not know their names, and had come to think of them only as “the Arabs”—though, for all he knew, they could have been Kurds or even Turkmen.

One of them spoke quickly to Claudette in Arabic. Adrian did not understand; his Arabic was rudimentary at best, limited to a handful of phrases that Claudette had taught him, but she nodded once, slid the chain aside, and granted them entry.

Both were fairly young, their mid-thirties or so, and sported short black beards over their mocha-tinted cheeks. They wore European clothing, jeans and T-shirts and light jackets against the chilly night air; Imam Khalil did not require any religious garb or coverings of his followers. In fact, ever since their displacement from Syria, he preferred that his people blend in whenever possible—for reasons that were obvious to Adrian, considering what the two men were there to procure.

“Cheval.” One of the Syrian men nodded to Adrian, almost reverently. “Forward? Tell us.” He spoke in extremely broken French.

“Forward?” Adrian repeated, confused.

“He means to ask for your progress,” Claudette said gently.

Adrian smirked. “His French is terrible.”

“So is your Arabic,” Claudette retorted.

Fair point, Adrian thought. “Tell him that the process takes time. It is meticulous, and requires patience. But the work is going well.”

Claudette relayed the message in Arabic, and the pair of Arabs nodded their approval.

“Small piece?” the second man asked. It seemed they were intent to practice their French on him.

“They’ve come for the sample,” Claudette told Adrian, though he had gathered that much from context. “Will you retrieve it?” It was clear to him that Claudette had no interest in touching the biohazard container, sealed or not.

Adrian nodded, but he did not move. “Ask them why Khalil did not come himself.”

Claudette bit her lip and touched him gently on the arm. “Darling,” she said quietly, “I am sure he is busy elsewhere—”

“What could be more important than this?” Adrian insisted. He had fully expected the Imam to show up.

Claudette asked the question in Arabic. The pair of Syrians frowned and glanced at each other before responding.

“They tell me that he is visiting the infirm tonight,” Claudette told Adrian in French, “praying for their release from this physical world.”

Adrian’s mind flashed to a memory of his mother, only days before her death, lying on the bed with her eyes open but unaware. She was barely conscious from the medication; without it she would have been in constant torment, yet with it she was practically comatose. In the weeks leading up to her departure, she had no concept of the world around her. He had prayed often for her recovery, there at her bedside, though as she neared the end his prayers changed and he found himself wishing her only a quick, painless death.

“What will he do with it?” Adrian asked. “The sample.”

“He will ensure that your mutation works,” Claudette said simply. “You know this.”

“Yes, but...” Adrian paused. He knew it was not his place to question the Imam’s intent, but suddenly he had a powerful urge to know. “Will he test it privately? Somewhere remote? It is important not to show our hand too soon. The rest of the batch is not ready...”

Claudette said something quickly to the pair of Syrian men, and then she took Adrian by the hand and led him to the kitchen. “My love,” she said quietly, “you are having doubts. Tell me.”

Adrian sighed. “Yes,” he admitted. “This is only a very tiny sample, not quite as stable as the others will be. What if it does not work?”

“It will.” Claudette wrapped her arms around him. “I have every confidence in you, as does Imam Khalil. You have been gifted this opportunity. You are blessed, Adrian.”

You are blessed. Those were the same words Khalil had used when they met. Three months earlier, Claudette had taken Adrian on a trip to Greece. Khalil, like so many Syrians, was a refugee—but not a political one, nor a byproduct of the war-torn nation. He was a religious refugee, chased out by Sunnis and Shiites alike for his idealistic notions. Khalil’s brand of spirituality was an amalgamation of Islamic tenets and some of the esoteric philosophical influences from Druze, such as truthfulness and transmigration of the soul.

Adrian had met the holy man in a hotel in Athens. Imam Khalil was a gentle man with a pleasant smile, wearing a brown suit with his dark hair and beard combed and neat. The young Frenchman was mildly taken aback when, upon meeting for the first time, the Imam asked Adrian to pray with him. Together they sat upon a carpet, facing Mecca, and prayed silently. There was a calmness that hung in the air around the Imam like an aura, a placidity that Adrian had not experienced since being a young boy in his then-healthy mother’s arms.

After prayer, the two men smoked from a glass hookah and drank tea while Khalil spoke of his ideology. They discussed the importance of being true to oneself; Khalil believed that the only way for humanity to absolve their sins was absolute truthfulness, which would allow the soul to reincarnate as a pure being. He asked many questions of Adrian, about science and spirituality alike. He asked about Adrian’s mother, and promised him that somewhere on this earth she had been born anew, pure and beautiful and healthy. The young Frenchman took great solace in it.

Khalil then spoke of Imam Mahdi, the Redeemer and the last of the Imam, the holy men. Mahdi would be the one who would bring about the Day of Judgment and rid the world of evil. Khalil believed that this would occur very soon, and after the Mahdi's redemption would come utopia; every being in the universe would be flawless, genuine, and untainted.

For several hours the two men sat together, well into the night, and when Adrian's head was as foggy as the thick, smoky air that swirled around them he finally asked the question that had been on his mind.

"Is it you, Khalil?" he asked the holy man. "Are you the Mahdi?"

Imam Kahlil had smiled wide at that. He took Adrian's hand in his own and said gently, "No, my son. *You* are. You are blessed. I can see it as clearly as I see your face."

I am blessed. In the kitchen of their Marseille flat, Adrian pressed his lips to Claudette's forehead. She was right; they had made a promise to Khalil and it must be kept. He retrieved the steel biohazard box from the countertop and carried it to the waiting Arabs. He unclasped the lid and lifted the top half of the foam cube to show them the tiny, hermetically sealed glass vial nestled inside.

There did not appear to be anything in the vial—which was part of the nature of it being one of the most dangerous substances the world over.

"Darling," Adrian said as he replaced the foam and clasped the lid firmly again. "I need you to tell them, in no uncertain terms, that under no circumstances whatsoever should they touch this vial. It must be handled with the utmost care."

Claudette relayed the message in Arabic. Suddenly the Syrian man holding the box appeared far less comfortable than a moment earlier. The other man nodded his thanks to Adrian and murmured a phrase in Arabic, one that Adrian understood—"Allah is with you, peace be upon you"—and without another word, the two men left the flat.

Once they were gone, Claudette twisted the deadbolt and put the chain back on, and then turned to her lover with a dreamy, satisfied expression on her lips.

Adrian, however, stood rooted to the spot, his face dour.

"My love?" she said cautiously.

"What have I just done?" he murmured. He already knew the answer; he had put a deadly virus in the hands of not Imam Khalil, but two strangers. "What if they do not deliver it? What if they drop it, or open it, or—"

"My love." Claudette slid her arms around his waist and pressed her head to his chest. "They are followers of the Imam. They will exercise caution and get it to where it needs to be. Have faith. You have taken the first step towards changing the world for the better. You are the Mahdi. Do not forget that."

"Yes," he said softly. "Of course. You are right, as always. And I must finish." If his mutation did not work as it should, or if he did not produce the completed batch, he had no doubt that he would be a failure not only in the eyes of Khalil, but in Claudette's as well. Without her he would crumble. He needed her as he needed air, food, or sunlight.

Even so, he could not help but wonder what they would do with the sample—if Imam Khalil would test it privately, at a remote location, or if it would be released publicly.

But he would find out soon enough.

CHAPTER SIX

“Dad, you don’t need to walk me to the door every time,” Maya griped as they crossed Dahlgren Quad toward Healy Hall on the Georgetown campus.

“I know I don’t have to,” Reid said. “I *want* to. What, are you ashamed to be seen with your dad?”

“It’s not that,” Maya muttered. The ride over had been quiet, Maya staring pensively out the window while Reid tried to think of something to talk about but fell short.

Maya was approaching the end of her junior year of high school, but she had already tested out of her AP classes and started taking a few courses a week at the Georgetown campus. It was a good jump toward college credit and looked great on an application—especially since Georgetown was her current top choice. Reid had insisted not only on driving Maya to the college but also walking her to her classroom.

The night prior, when Maria had been forced to suddenly cut their date short, Reid had hurried home to his girls. He was extremely disturbed by the news of Rais’s escape—his fingers had trembled against the steering wheel of his car—but he forced himself to stay calm and tried to think logically. The CIA was already in pursuit and likely Interpol as well. He knew the protocol; every airport would be watched, and roadblocks would be established on Sion’s major thoroughfares. And Rais had no allies left to turn to.

Besides, the assassin had escaped in Switzerland, more than four thousand miles away. Half a continent and an entire ocean spanned between him and Kent Steele.

Even so, he knew he would feel a lot better when he received word that Rais had been detained again. He was confident in Maria’s ability, but he wished he would have had the foresight to ask her to keep him updated as best she could.

He and Maya reached the entrance to Healy Hall and Reid lingered. “All right, I guess I’ll see you after class?”

She glanced back at him suspiciously. “You’re not going to walk me in?”

“Not today.” He had a feeling he knew why Maya was so quiet that morning. He had given her an ounce of independence the night before, but today he was right back to his usual ways. He had to remind himself that she wasn’t a little girl anymore. “Listen, I know I’ve been kind of crowding you a bit lately...”

“A bit?” Maya scoffed.

“...And I’m sorry for that. You are a capable, resourceful, and intelligent young woman. And you just want some independence. I recognize that. My overprotective nature is my problem, not yours. It’s not anything you did.”

Maya tried to hide the smirk on her face. “Did you just use the ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ line?”

He nodded. “I did, because it’s true. I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if something happened to you and I wasn’t there.”

“But you’re not always going to be there,” she said, “no matter how hard you try to be. And I need to be able to take care of problems myself.”

“You’re right. I will try my best to back off a bit.”

She arched an eyebrow. “You promise?”

“I promise.”

“Okay.” She stretched on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “See you after classes.” She headed toward the door, but then had another thought. “You know, maybe I should learn how to shoot, just in case...”

He pointed a stern finger her way. “Don’t push it.”

She grinned and vanished into the hall. Reid loitered outside for a couple of minutes. God, his girls were growing up too fast. In two short years Maya would be a legal adult. Soon there would be cars, and college tuition, and... and sooner or later there would be boys. Thankfully that hadn't happened yet.

He distracted himself by admiring the campus architecture as he headed toward Copley Hall. He wasn't sure he would ever grow tired of walking around the university, enjoying the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century structures, many built in the Flemish Romanesque style that flourished in the European Middle Ages. It certainly helped that mid-March in Virginia was a turning point for the season, the weather coming around and rising into the fifties and even sixties on nicer days.

His role as an adjunct was typically taking on smaller classes, twenty-five to thirty students at a time and primarily history majors. He specialized in lessons on warfare, and often subbed in for Professor Hildebrandt, who was tenured and traveled frequently for a book he was writing.

Or maybe he's secretly in the CIA, Reid mused.

"Good morning," he said loudly as he entered the classroom. Most of his students were already there when he arrived, so he hurried to the front, set his messenger bag on the desk, and shrugged out of his tweed coat. "I'm a few minutes late, so let's jump right in." It felt good being in the classroom again. This was his element—at least one of them. "I'm sure someone in here can tell me: what was the most devastating event, by death toll, in European history?"

"World War Two," someone called out immediately.

"One of the worst worldwide, to be sure," Reid replied, "but Russia fared a lot poorer than Europe did, by the numbers. What else you got?"

"The Mongol conquest," said a brunette girl in a ponytail.

"Another good guess, but you guys are thinking armed conflicts. What I'm thinking is less anthropogenic; more biological."

"Black Death," muttered a blond kid in the front row.

"Yes, that is correct, Mister....?"

"Wright," the kid answered.

Reid grinned. "Mr. Wright? I bet you use that as a pickup line."

The kid smiled sheepishly and shook his head.

"Yes, Mr. Wright is right—the Black Death. The pandemic of the bubonic plague started in Central Asia, traveled down the Silk Road, was carried to Europe by rats on merchant ships, and in the fourteenth century it killed an estimate seventy-five to two hundred *million* people." He paced for a moment to punctuate his point. "That's a huge disparity, isn't it? How could those numbers be so far spread?"

The brunette in the third row raised her hand slightly. "Because they didn't have a census bureau seven hundred years ago?"

Reid and a few other students chuckled. "Well, sure, there's that. But it's also because of how quickly the plague spread. I mean, we're talking about more than a third of Europe's population gone inside of two years. To put it in perspective, that would be like having the entire East Coast *and* California wiped out." He leaned against his desk and folded his arms. "Now I know what you're thinking. 'Professor Lawson, aren't you the guy that comes in and talks about war?' Yes, and I'm getting to that right now.

"Someone mentioned the Mongol conquest. Genghis Khan had the largest contiguous empire in history for a brief time, and his forces marched on Eastern Europe during the years of the plague in Asia. Khan is credited as one of the first to use what we now classify as biological warfare; if a city would not yield to him, his army would catapult plague-infected bodies over their ramparts, and then... they'd just have to wait a while."

Mr. Wright, the blond kid in the front row, wrinkled his nose in disgust. "That can't be real."

“It is real, I assure you. Siege of Kafa, in what is now Crimea, 1346. See, we want to think that something like biological warfare is a new concept, but it is not. Before we had tanks, or drones, or missiles, or even guns in the modern sense, we, uh... they, uh...”

“Why do you have this, Reid?” she asks accusingly. Her eyes are more afraid than they are angry.

At his mention of the word “guns,” a memory suddenly flashed across his mind—the same memory as before, but clearer now. In the kitchen of their former home in Virginia. Kate had found something while cleaning dust from one of the air conditioning ducts.

A gun on the table—a small one, a silver nine-millimeter LC9. Kate gestures at it like a cursed object. “Why do you have this, Reid?”

“It’s... just for protection,” you lie.

“Protection? Do you even know how to use it? What if one of the girls had found it?”

“They wouldn’t—”

“You know how inquisitive Maya can be. Jesus, I don’t even want to know how you got it. I don’t want this thing in our house. Please, get rid of it.”

“Of course. I’m sorry, Katie.” Katie—the name you reserve for when she’s angry.

You gingerly take the gun from the table, as if you’re not sure how to handle it.

After she leaves for work you’ll have to retrieve the other eleven hidden throughout the house. Find better spots for them.

“Professor?” The blond kid, Wright, glanced at Reid in concern. “You okay?”

“Um... yeah.” Reid straightened and cleared his throat. His fingers ached; he’d gripped the edge of the desk hard when the memory struck him. “Yeah, sorry about that.”

There was no doubt now. He was certain he had lost at least one memory of Kate.

“Um... sorry, guys, but suddenly I’m not feeling so great,” he told the class. “It just kind of hit me. Let’s, uh, leave off there for today. I’ll give you some reading, and we’ll pick it up on Monday.”

His hands shook as he recited the page numbers. Sweat prickled on his brow as students filed out. The brunette girl from the third row paused by his desk. “You don’t look so good, Professor Lawson. Do you need us to call someone?”

A migraine was forming at the front of his skull, but he forced a smile that he hoped was pleasant. “No, thank you. I’ll be fine. Just need some rest.”

“Okay. Feel better, Professor.” She too left the classroom.

As soon as he was alone, he dug in the desk drawer, found some aspirin, and swallowed them with water from a bottle in his bag.

He sat in the chair and waited for his heart rate to slow. The memory hadn’t just had a mental or emotional impact on him—it had a very real physical effect as well. The thought of losing any part of Kate from his memory at all, when she had already been taken from his life, was nauseating.

After a few minutes the sick feeling in his gut began to subside, but not the thoughts swirling in his mind. He couldn’t make any more excuses; he had to make a decision. He would have to determine what he was going to do. Back at home, in a box in his office, he had the letter that told him where he could go for help—a Swiss doctor named Guyer, the neurosurgeon who had installed the memory suppressor in his head in the first place. If anyone could help to restore his memories, it would be him. Reid had spent the last month vacillating back and forth on whether or not he should at least attempt to regain his full memory.

But parts of his wife were gone, and he had no way of knowing what else might have been washed out with the suppressor.

Now he was ready.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Look at me,” said Imam Khalil in Arabic. “Please.”

He took the boy by the shoulders, a paternal gesture, and knelt slightly so that he was eye to eye with him. “Look at me,” he said again. It was not a demand, but a gentle request.

Omar had difficulty looking Khalil in the eye. Instead he looked at his chin, at the trimmed black beard, shaved delicately at the neckline. He looked at the lapels of his dark brown suit, by no means expensive yet finer than any clothes Omar had ever worn. The older man smelled pleasant and he spoke to the boy as if they were equals, with a respect unlike anyone else had ever shown him before. For all of those reasons, Omar could not bring himself to look Khalil in the eye.

“Omar, do you know what a martyr is?” he asked. His voice was clear but not loud. The boy had never once heard the Imam shout.

Omar shook his head. “No, Imam Khalil.”

“A martyr is a type of hero. But he is more than that; he is a hero who gives himself fully to a cause. A martyr is remembered. A martyr is celebrated. You, Omar, *you* will be celebrated. You will be remembered. You will be loved forever. Do you know why?”

Omar nodded slightly, but he did not speak. He believed in the Imam’s teachings, had clung to them like a life preserver, even more so after the bombing that killed his family. Even after being forced from his homeland of Syria by dissidents. He had some trouble, however, believing what Imam Khalil had told him only a few days ago.

“You are blessed,” said Khalil. “Look at me, Omar.” With much difficulty, Omar lifted his gaze to meet Khalil’s brown eyes, soft and friendly yet somehow intense. “You are the Mahdi, the last of the Imam. The Redeemer that will rid the world of its sinners. You are a savior, Omar. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Imam.”

“And do you *believe* it, Omar?”

The boy was not sure he did. He did not feel special, or important, or blessed by Allah, but still he answered, “Yes, Imam. I believe it.”

“Allah has spoken to me,” Khalil said softly, “and he has told me what we must do. Do you remember what you are supposed to do?”

Omar nodded. His mission was quite simple, though Khalil had made sure that the boy had no misgivings about what it would mean for him.

“Good. Good.” Khalil smiled wide. His teeth were perfectly white and shining in the bright sun. “Before we part, Omar, would you do me the honor of praying with me for a moment?”

Khalil held out his hand, and Omar took it. It was warm and smooth in his. The Imam closed his eyes and his lips moved with silent words.

“Imam?” said Omar in a near-whisper. “Should we not face Mecca?”

Again Khalil smiled broadly. “Not this day, Omar. The one true God grants me a request; today, I face *you*.”

The two men stood there for a long moment, praying silently and facing each other. Omar felt the warm sunshine on his face and, for the silent minute that followed, he thought he felt something, as if the invisible fingers of God were caressing his cheek.

Khalil knelt slightly as they stood in the shadow of a small white airplane. The plane could fit only four people and had propellers over the wings. It was the closest Omar had ever been to one—other than the ride from Greece to Spain, which was the only time that Omar had ever been in a plane, either.

“Thank you for that.” Khalil slipped his hand from the boy’s. “I must go now, and you must as well. Allah is with you, Omar, peace be upon Him, and peace be upon you.” The older man smiled once more at him, and then he turned and stepped up the short ramp onto the plane.

The engines started, whining at first and then rising to a roar. Omar took several steps back as the plane pulled forward down the small airstrip. He watched as it gathered speed, faster and faster, until it rose into the air and eventually disappeared.

Alone, Omar looked straight up, enjoying the sunshine on his face. It was a warm day, warmer than most this time of year. Then he started the four-mile hike that would take him into Barcelona. As he walked, he reached into his pocket, his fingers gently but protectively wrapping around the tiny glass vial there.

Omar could not help but wonder why Allah had not come to him directly. Instead, His message had been passed along through the Imam. *Would I have believed it?* Omar thought. *Or would I have thought it just a dream?* Imam Khalil was holy and wise, and he recognized the signs when they presented themselves. Omar was a youthful, naïve boy of only sixteen who knew little of the world, particularly the West. Perhaps he was not fit to hear the voice of God.

Khalil had given him a fistful of euros to take with him into Barcelona. “Take your time,” the older man had said. “Enjoy a good meal. You deserve this.”

Omar spoke no Spanish, and only a few rudimentary English phrases. Besides, he wasn’t hungry, so instead of eating when he arrived in the city, he found a bench looking upon the city. He sat upon it, wondering why here, of all places.

Have faith, Imam Khalil would say. Omar decided he would.

To his left was the Hotel Barceló Raval, a strange round building adorned in purple and red lights, with well-dressed young people coming and going from its doors. He did not know it by its name; he knew only that it looked like a beacon, attracting opulent sinners as a flame attracts moths. It gave him strength to sit before it, reinforcing his belief so that he would be able to do what must come next.

Omar carefully took the glass vial from his pocket. It did not look like there was anything inside it, or perhaps whatever was in it was invisible, like air or gas. It didn’t matter. He knew well what he was supposed to do with it. The first step was complete: enter the city. The second step he performed on the bench in the shadow of the Raval.

He pinched the conical glass tip of the vial between two fingers and, in a small but swift movement, snapped it off.

A tiny shard of glass stuck in his finger. He watched as a bead of blood formed, but resisted the urge to stick the finger in his mouth. Instead, he did as he was told to do—he put the vial to one nostril and inhaled deeply.

As soon as he did, a knot of panic gripped his gut. Khalil had not told him anything specific about what to expect after that. He had simply been told to wait a short while, so he waited and did his best to remain calm. He watched more people enter and leave the hotel, each dressed in lavish, ostentatious clothing. He was very much aware of his humble garb; his threadbare sweater, his patchy cheeks, his hair that was growing too long, unruly. He reminded himself that vanity was a sin.

Omar sat and he waited for something to happen, to feel it working its way inside him, whatever “it” was.

He felt nothing. There was no difference.

A full hour went by on the bench, and then at last he rose and walked at a leisurely pace northwestward, away from the purple cylindrical hotel and further into the city proper. He took the stairs down to the first subway station he found. He certainly could not read Spanish, but he didn’t need to know where he was going.

He bought a ticket using the euros Khalil had given him and stood on the platform idly until a train came. Still he did not feel any different. Perhaps he had misjudged the nature of the delivery. Still, there was one last thing for him to do.

The doors whooshed open and he stepped inside, moving nearly elbow to elbow with the boarding crowd. The subway train was quite busy; all of the seats were taken, so Omar stood and held onto one of the metal bars that ran parallel to the train's length, just over his head.

His final instruction was the simplest of all, though also the most confusing to him. Khalil had told him to board a train and "ride it until you cannot anymore." That was all.

At the time Omar was unsure of what that meant. But as his head began to prickle with sweat, his body temperature rising, and nausea rose in his stomach, he began to have a suspicion.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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