



JACK MARS

RECALL

ZERO

AN AGENT ZERO SPY THRILLER—BOOK 6

An Agent Zero Spy Thriller

Jack Mars  
**Recall Zero**

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2019

## **Mars J.**

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“You will not sleep until you are finished with AGENT ZERO. A superb job creating a set of characters who are fully developed and very much enjoyable. The description of the action scenes transport us into a reality that is almost like sitting in a movie theater with surround sound and 3D (it would make an incredible Hollywood movie). I can hardly wait for the sequel.” --Roberto Mattos, Books and Movie Reviews In RECALL ZERO (Book #6), the President’s translator is the only one privy to a secret conversation that can change the world. She is targeted for assassination and hunted down, and Agent Zero, called back into the line of duty, may just be the only one who can save her. Agent Zero, trying to get his life back in order and to win back the trust of his girls, vows not to return to service. But when he is needed to save the life of this defenseless translator, he can’t say no. Yet the translator, he realizes, is as intriguing as the secrets she keeps, and Zero, on the run with her, just might be falling for her. What secret is she keeping? Why are the most powerful organizations in the world trying to kill her for it? And will Zero be able to save her in time? RECALL ZERO (Book #6) is an un-putdownable espionage thriller that will keep you turning pages late into the night. Book #7 in the AGENT ZERO series will be available soon. “Thriller writing at its best.” --Midwest Book Review (re Any Means Necessary) “One of the best thrillers I have read this year.” --Books and Movie Reviews (re Any Means Necessary) Also available is Jack Mars’ #1 bestselling LUKE STONE THRILLER series (7 books), which begins with Any Means Necessary (Book #1), a free download with over 800 five star reviews!

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# Jack Mars

## Recall Zero (An Agent Zero Spy Thriller—Book #6)

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 seven books (and counting).

ANY MEANS NECESSARY (book #1), which has over 800 five star reviews, is available as a [free download on Google Play!](#)

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

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### **FILE ZERO (Book #5) – Summary**

*As an international crisis threatens to spark a new world war, shadows within the highest levels of the US government work to further their own plot. The only person outside their ranks that knows about it is CIA Agent Kent Steele, who makes a desperate bid to save the lives of millions while keeping those close to him out of the hands of those whose interests would be served.*

**Agent Zero:** His lost memories now restored, Zero took what he knew from years earlier to the highest level, the President of the United States—which only inspired those working behind the scenes to target the president and blame the assassination on Iran. Zero successfully stopped the assassination attempt, and in the process discovered that his friend and ally, Agent John Watson, was the one that killed Zero’s wife and the mother of his children, at the behest of CIA superiors.

**Maya and Sara Lawson:** Both of Zero’s daughters have grown keen and capable in the wake of multiple threats on their lives, but they are unaware of the harrowing details surrounding their mother’s demise that their father recently discovered.

**Agent Maria Johansson:** Maria’s cooperation with the Ukrainians was based on discovering whether her father, a high-ranking member of the National Security Council, was involved in the conspiracy. She discovered that he was not, and after helping Zero stop the assassination attempt, broke ties with the Ukrainian FIS. Her father was named as interim CIA director in the wake of the scandal and ensuing arrests.

**Alan Reidigger:** Zero’s best friend and a fellow CIA agent that all thought was long dead, Reidigger reappears under the guise of Mitch, the burly mechanic that helped Zero previously. His appearance has been drastically altered, but with Zero’s memories back, he was quickly able to recognize his old friend.

**Deputy Director Shawn Cartwright:** Though Zero was dubious about Cartwright’s innocence in the plot to initiate a war in the Middle East, Cartwright proved himself loyal when he helped Zero escape from The Division. However, Cartwright was gunned down in a basement while holding the mercenaries off.

**Deputy Director Ashleigh Riker and Director Mullen:** The two heads of the CIA that were involved in the plot and actively working against Zero were both arrested in the wake of the assassination attempt, along with dozens of others that included much of the president’s cabinet.

## PROLOGUE

Karina Pavlo watched as the two men on either side of her at the conference table rose from their seats. She rose as well, because she knew she was supposed to, though her legs felt weak and tremulous. She watched as they smiled amiably at one another, these two men in expensive suits, these starkly contrasting heads of state. She said nothing as they concluded their business by shaking hands across the table.

Karina was still in shock over what she had just heard; over the words that had spilled from her own lips.

She had never been to the White House before, but the part of the structure that she was visiting was one rarely in the public eye. The basement (if it could even be called that, since it hardly resembled anyone's idea of a basement) beneath the North Portico contained all manner of impedimenta, including but not at all limited to a bowling alley, laundry facilities, carpenter's shop, dental office, the Situation Room, the president's workspace, three conference rooms, and a comfortable waiting area into which Karina had been ushered upon her arrival.

It was there in that waiting room that a Secret Service agent had taken her personal items, her cell phone and a small black clutch, and then asked that she remove her dark blazer. The agent had checked it thoroughly, every pocket and seam, and then performed a thorough yet mechanical pat-down with her arms held out at ninety degrees. He asked her to open her mouth, to lift her tongue, to remove her shoes, and to remain still while he ran a metal-detecting wand over her.

The only things Karina had been allowed to bring into the meeting were the clothes on her back and the pearl stud earrings she wore. Yet the rigor of the security was not out of the ordinary; Karina had been an interpreter for some years now, had served in chambers of the United Nations and translated for multiple heads of state. Born in Ukraine, Russian-educated in Volgograd, and having spent enough time in the US to qualify for a permanent visa, Karina considered herself a citizen of the world. She was fluent in four languages and conversational in three more. Her security clearance was as high as any civilian's could be.

Yet this was the big time. The opportunity to visit the White House to interpret a meeting between the new presidents of both Russia and the United States had seemed, not twenty minutes earlier, as if it would become the new pinnacle of her career.

How very wrong she was.

To her left, Russian President Aleksandr Kozlovsky buttoned the topmost button of his suit jacket, a fluid and practiced gesture that appeared irrationally casual to Karina, considering what she had just heard uttered only moments prior. At six-foot-three, Kozlovsky towered over the both of them, his thin build and long-limbed gait giving him the appearance of a cellar spider. His features were bland, his face smooth and wrinkle-free, as if it were still a work in progress.

Eighteen months ago, the former Russian president, Dmitri Ivanov, had retired. At least that's what they were calling it. In the wake of the enormity of the American scandal, it was simultaneously discovered that the Russian government had been colluding, not only lending their support to the US in the Middle East, but biding their time and waiting for the world's focus to be on the Strait of Hormuz so they could seize Ukrainian oil-producing assets in the Baltic Sea.

No arrests had been made in Russia. No sentence handed down, no prison time served. Under pressure from the UN and the world at large, Ivanov simply resigned from his position and was summarily replaced by Kozlovsky, who Karina knew was far more of an understudy than he was any sort of political rival, as the media made him out to be.

Kozlovsky smiled smugly. "A pleasure, President Harris." To Pavlo, he simply gave a curt nod before turning sharply and striding out of the room.

Twenty minutes earlier, the Secret Service man had escorted Karina to the smallest of three conference rooms in the White House basement, inside which was a long dark table of some exotic wood, eight leather chairs, a television screen, and nothing else. Not a soul. When Karina had been tasked as interpreter, she had assumed the meeting would involve cameras, news reporters, members of both governments' cabinets, the press and media.

But it had been only her, and then Kozlovsky, and then Samuel Harris.

President of the United States Samuel Harris, standing to her right, was seventy years old, half bald, his face creased with age and stress and his shoulders perpetually slumped from a back injury he had sustained while serving in Vietnam. Yet he moved with great purpose, and his husky voice was far more commanding than anyone would have assumed he could muster.

Harris had easily defeated the former president, Eli Pierson, in the election the previous November. Despite some sympathy from the public due to the assassination attempt on Pierson's life eighteen months earlier, as well as the former president's fairly noble efforts to rebuild his cabinet in the wake of the Iranian scandal that had come to light, America had lost their faith in him.

To Karina, Harris was reminiscent of a vulture, made all the more apt by the way he had swooped in and stolen the votes from Pierson like a carrion bird tearing entrails from the carcass of far too many mistakes and trust in the wrong people. Harris, as the Democratic candidate, had barely had to make any promises other than to unearth and promptly end any further corruption in the White House. But as Karina Pavlo had only just discovered, the further corruption in the White House was entrenched firmly—and perhaps solely—in the office of the presidency.

The visit from Russian President Kozlovsky was well publicized, covered by nearly every media outlet in the US. It was the first time since the deceitful cabal in both governments had been revealed that the two new world leaders had met face to face. There had been press conferences, constant media coverage, meetings with a hundred cameras in the room to discuss how the two nations might move forward from near catastrophe in an amiable and aligned manner.

But Karina now knew it was all a sham. The last several minutes that she had spent with the two world leaders, the spider and the vulture, had proven that. Kozlovsky's English was rudimentary at best and Harris spoke not a lick of Russian, so her presence had been warranted and their speech became hers.

It had started off innocently enough, pleasantries exchanged, English passing from Harris to her and then from her to Kozlovsky in Russian as if Karina were a translating automaton. The two men held each other's gaze, not once asking her questions or even acknowledging her presence once the meeting began. She mechanically regurgitated their words like a processor, entering her ears in one language and exiting her throat as another.

It was not until the sinister motivation for the private meeting unveiled itself that Karina realized that this—this handful of minutes in a locked room in the subterranean level of the White House with only the two of them and an interpreter present—was the real reason for the Russian president's visit to the United States. It was all she could do to translate as dispassionately as possible and desperately hope that her own expression hadn't betrayed her.

Suddenly Karina Pavlo became quite aware that she was unlikely to leave the White House basement alive.

With Kozlovsky having exited the room, President Harris turned to her, flashing his leering smile as if the conversation she'd been privy to hadn't just happened, as if this was nothing more than a formality. "Thank you, Ms. Pavlo," he said paternally. "Your experience and expertise have been appreciated and invaluable."

Perhaps it was the shock of what she had just learned that prompted her to force a smile of her own. Or perhaps it was the ease with which Harris seemed to summon such a polite demeanor while full well knowing that the interpreter had just heard every single word, and in fact had repeated each

and every one of them to the other party. In any case, Karina found her lips curling upward against her will and her voice saying, “Thank you for the opportunity, Mr. President.”

He smiled again. She did not like it, his smile; there was no mirth in it. It was more leering than cheerful. She had seen it a hundred times on television, on his campaign trail, but in person it was even more awkward to witness. It made it seem as if he knew something that she did not—which was certainly true.

An alarm blared in her head. She wondered how far she might get if she shoved him and made a run for it. Not far, she imagined; she had seen at least six Secret Service agents in the corridors of the basement, and she was equally certain that the route she’d taken down there would be guarded.

The president cleared his throat. “You know,” Harris told her, “there was no one else in this room for good reason. As I’m sure you can imagine.” He chuckled slightly, as if the threat to global security of which Karina had just been apprised was a joke. “You are the only one in the entire world that is aware of the content of this conversation. If it were to leak, I would know who leaked it. And things would not go well for that person.”

The smile remained on Harris’s face, but it was in no way reassuring.

She forced her lips to smile graciously. “Of course, sir. Discretion is one of my best qualities.”

He reached over and patted her hand. “I believe you.”

*I know too much.*

“And I trust you’ll remain silent.”

*He’s placating me. There’s no way they’re going to let me live.*

“In fact, I’m certain I’ll have a need for your skills again in the near future.”

There was nothing Harris could say to dissuade her instincts. The president could have asked for her hand in marriage right there on the spot and still the prickling sensation at the nape of her neck that told her she was in imminent danger would linger.

Harris stood and buttoned his suit jacket. “Come along. I’ll walk you out.” He led the way out of the room and Karina followed. Her knees felt weak. She was in one of the most secure places on the planet, surrounded by trained agents of the Secret Service. As they reached the corridor she saw that the half dozen agents were posted there, standing with their backs to the walls with their hands clasped in front of them, waiting for the president.

Or possibly for her.

*Stay calm.*

“Joe.” Harris motioned for the agent who had first retrieved her from the waiting room. “See to it that Ms. Pavlo here gets back to her hotel safely, yes? Best car we’ve got.”

“Yes sir,” said the agent with a slight nod. A strange nod, to her. A nod of understanding.

“Thank you,” she said as graciously as she could muster, “but I can take a cab. My hotel is not far.”

“Nonsense,” Harris said pleasantly. “What’s the point of working for the president if you can’t enjoy some of the perks?” He chuckled. “Thank you again. It was a pleasure meeting you. We’ll be in touch.”

He shook her hand. She shook his. His smile lingered, but his eyes betrayed him.

Karina had little choice. She followed the Secret Service agent, the man called Joe (if that was his real name), through the White House sublevel. Every muscle in her body was taut, anxious, ready at a moment’s notice for fight or flight to kick in. But to her surprise, the agent actually escorted her up a set of stairs and down a hall and to another door that led outside. He guided her wordlessly to a small parking garage with a private fleet of vehicles, and then he opened the passenger door of a black SUV for her.

*Don’t get in.*

She got in. If she fought now or tried to run she’d never even make it to the gate.

Two minutes later they were off of White House property, driving down Pennsylvania Avenue. *He's taking me somewhere to do it. They'll get rid of me elsewhere. Somewhere no one will ever find me.*

"You can just drop me off at the downtown Hilton," she said casually.

The Secret Service agent smiled coyly. "We're the US government, Ms. Pavlo. We know where you're staying."

She chuckled lightly, trying to keep the nervous edge out of her voice. "I'm sure. But I'm meeting a friend for dinner at the Hilton."

"Even so," the agent replied, "the president's orders were to take you back to your hotel, so that's what I have to do. For security reasons." He sighed then, as if he commiserated with her plight even though she was fairly certain he was going to kill her. "I'm sure you understand."

"Oh," she said suddenly. "My things? My phone and my clutch?"

"I have them." Joe patted the breast pocket of his suit.

After a long moment of silence Karina followed up with, "May I have them...?"

"Of course," he said brightly. "Just as soon as we arrive."

"I'd really like them back now," she pressed.

The agent smiled again, though he kept his eyes forward on the road. "We'll be there in just a few minutes," he said placidly, as if she were a petulant toddler. Karina very much doubted that he had her things in his jacket.

She settled into her seat, or at least gave the appearance of doing so, trying to seem relaxed as the SUV eased to a stop at a red light. The Secret Service agent dug around in the center console for a pair of black sunglasses and put them on.

The light turned green.

The car in front of them started forward.

The agent took his foot off the brake, pressed the gas.

In one swift movement, Karina Pavlo pressed the release of her seat belt with one hand while shoving open her door with the other. She leapt out of the moving SUV, her heels hitting the asphalt. One of them broke. She lurched forward, hitting pavement with her elbows, rolling, and then staggered to her feet. She kicked both shoes off and sprinted down the street in her stockings.

"What the hell?!" The Secret Service agent slammed the brake, threw the vehicle into park right there in the middle of the street. He didn't bother shouting for her to come back, and he certainly didn't just let her go—both indicators that she was absolutely right about her notion.

Drivers honked and shouted as the agent leapt out of the car, but by that time she was more than half a block away, practically barefoot as her stockings tore, ignoring the occasional stone that stung the soles of her feet.

She turned the corner sharply and darted down the first opening she saw, not even an alley but rather just a walkway between two storefronts. Then she made a left, running as fast as she could, glancing over her shoulder every now and then for the agent but not seeing him.

As she came out on the next street, she spotted a yellow cab.

The driver nearly spat his coffee, a Styrofoam cup to his lips, when she all but hurtled into his backseat and shouted, "Drive! Please drive!"

"Jesus Christ, lady!" he scolded. "Scared the hell outta me..."

"Someone is chasing me, please drive," she pleaded.

He frowned. "Who's chasing you?" The irritating driver actually glanced around. "I don't see anybody—"

"*Please just fucking drive!*" she screeched at him.

"Okay, okay!" The cabbie shifted and the taxi veered into traffic, eliciting a new fusillade of honks that would no doubt tip the agent off to her relative location.

Sure enough, as she twisted in the seat to look out the rear windshield she saw the agent rounding the corner at a full sprint. He slowed to a trot, his eyes meeting hers. One of his hands briefly snaked

into his jacket, but he seemed to think twice about pulling a gun in broad daylight and instead put a hand to his ear to radio someone.

“Turn left here.” Karina directed the cabbie to make the turn, drive a few more blocks, take a right, and then she jumped out again as he shouted after her for payment. She ran down the block and did that three more times, jumping into cabs and out of them until she was halfway across DC in such a serpentine manner she was certain there was no way that Joe the Secret Service agent would find her.

She caught her breath and smoothed her hair as she slowed to a brisk walk, keeping her head down and trying not to look frazzled. The most likely scenario was that the agent had gotten the cab’s license plate number and the unfortunate (though somewhat slow-witted) cabbie would be stopped, frisked, and background-checked to make sure he wasn’t part of some preconceived getaway plot.

Karina ducked into a bookstore, hoping no one would notice she was shoeless. The store was quiet and the shelves were tall. She quickly navigated her way to the back, headed into a restroom, splashed water on her face, and struggled to keep herself from breaking down into heaving sobs.

Her face was still sheet-white from the shock of it all. How quickly everything had gone wrong.

“*Bozhe moy,*” she sighed heavily. My god. As the adrenaline wore off, the full gravity of her situation struck her. She had heard things that were never supposed to leave the White House basement. She had no identification. No phone. No money. Hell, she didn’t have shoes. She couldn’t go back to her hotel. Even showing her face in any public space where there might be a camera was risky.

They were not going to stop pursuing her for what she knew.

But she had the pearls in her ears. Karina absently touched her left earlobe, caressing the smooth stone there. She had the words that were spoken in the meeting—and in more than just her memory. She had proof of the dangerous knowledge that the American president, an alleged Democratic liberal who had earned the country’s admiration, was being puppeteered by the Russians.

There in the ladies’ room of a downtown bookstore, Karina looked at herself in the mirror as she murmured desperately, “I’m going to need some help.”

## CHAPTER ONE

Zero sat on the edge of the queen-sized bed and wrung his hands nervously in his lap. He'd been through this before, had seen it in his mind a thousand times. Yet here he was again.

His two teenage daughters sat on the bed adjacent to his, a narrow aisle between them. They were in a room at the Plaza, an upscale hotel just outside of DC. They had decided to hole up there instead of going home in the wake of the assassination attempt on President Pierson's life.

"There's something I need to tell you."

Maya was on the brink of seventeen. She had her father's brown hair and facial features, and her mother's sharp wit and biting sarcasm. She regarded him passively, with a shadow of trepidation over such a dramatically foreshadowing statement.

"It's not easy to say. But you deserve to know."

Sara was fourteen, still round-faced with youth, teetering at a conflicted age between clinging to childhood and burgeoning womanhood. She had inherited Kate's blonde hair and expressive face. She looked more like her mother with every passing day, though at the moment she looked nervous.

"It's about your mother."

They had both been through so much, kidnapping and witnessing murders and staring down the barrel of a gun. They had stayed strong through it all. They deserved to know.

And then he told them.

He'd played it in his mind so many times before, but still the words were difficult to summon to his throat. They came slowly, like logs drifting on a river. He'd thought that once he started it would get easier, but that wasn't at all the case.

There in the Plaza hotel, with Alan out getting pizza and a sitcom muted on the TV mere feet from them, Zero told his daughters that their mother, Kate Lawson, had not died of an ischemic stroke as had been reported.

She had been poisoned.

The CIA had called a hit on her.

Because of him. Agent Zero. His actions.

And the person who carried out the sentence...

"He didn't know," Zero told his daughters. He stared at the bedspread, the carpet, anything other than their faces. "He didn't know who she was. He had been lied to. He didn't know until later. Until after." He was rambling. Making excuses for the man who had killed his wife, the mother of his children. The man Zero had sent away instead of killing him outright.

"Who?" Maya's voice came out hoarse, a harsh whisper, more of a sound than a word.

Agent John Watson. A man who had saved his daughters' lives more than once. A man they had come to know, to trust, to like.

The silence in the next few moments was crushing, like an invisible hand squeezing his heart. The hotel room's air conditioning unit rattled to life suddenly, loud as a jet engine in the otherwise vacuum.

"How long have you known?" Maya's tone was direct, almost demanding.

*Be honest.* That was the stance he wanted with his girls. Honesty. No matter how bad it hurt. This admission was the last barricade between them. He knew it was time to tear it down.

He already knew it would be what broke them.

"I've known for a little while that it wasn't an accident," he told her. "I needed to know who. And now I do."

He dared to look up then, to look at their faces. Sara cried silently, tears streaming down both cheeks, not making a sound. Maya stared at her own hands, expressionless.

He reached for her. It was the only thing that made sense in the moment. To connect, to hold a hand.

He remembered exactly how it had actually happened. As his fingers closed around hers, she pulled away violently. She scrambled backward, leapt off the bed. Sara jumped, startled, as Maya told him she hated him. Called him every name in the book. And he sat there, and he took it, because it was what he deserved.

But not this time. As his fingers closed around hers, Maya's hand disintegrated beneath his in a wisp of fog.

“No...”

He clambered for her, a shoulder or an arm, but she vanished under his touch like a column of ash in a breeze. He turned quickly and reached for Sara, but she only shook her head ruefully as she too evaporated before his eyes.

And then he was alone.

\*

“Sara!”

Zero woke with a start and immediately groaned. A headache roared through his forehead. It was a dream—a nightmare. One he'd had a thousand times before.

But it had happened that way, or nearly so.

Zero had saved the day. Thwarted a presidential assassination attempt. Stopped a war before it began. Uncovered a conspiracy. And then he and his girls had gone to the Plaza; none of them wanted to go home to their two-story house in Alexandria, Virginia. Too much had happened there. Too much death.

It was there that he'd told them. They deserved to know the truth.

And then they left him.

That was... how long ago now? Nearly eighteen months, by his best recollection. A year and a half ago. Still the dream plagued him most nights. Sometimes the girls evaporated before his eyes. Sometimes they screamed at him, hurling curses far worse than had actually happened. Other times they silently left, and when he ran out into the hallway after them they had already vanished.

Though the ending varied, the real-life ramifications were the same. He woke from the nightmare with a headache and the grim, despairing reminder that they really were gone.

Zero stretched and rose from the sofa. He couldn't remember falling asleep in the first place, but it wasn't surprising. He didn't sleep well at night, and not just because of the nightmare about his daughters. A year and a half ago he had recovered his memories, his complete memories as Agent Zero, and with them came harrowing nightmares. Recollections would shoulder their way into his subconscious while he slept, or tried to. Heinous scenes of torture. Bombs dropped on buildings. The impact of hollow-point bullets on a human skull.

Worse still was that he didn't know if they were real or not. Dr. Guyer, the brilliant Swiss neurologist who had helped him recover the memories, warned that some things might not be real, but a product of his limbic system manifesting fantasies, suspicions, and nightmares as reality.

His own reality felt barely just so.

Zero trudged into the kitchen for a glass of water, barefoot and groggy, when the doorbell rang. He jumped a little at the sudden break in silence, every muscle tightening instinctively. He was still pretty jumpy, even after all this time. Then he glanced at the digital clock on the stove. It was almost four thirty. There was only one person it would be.

He answered the door and forced a smile for his old friend. “Right on time.”

Alan Reidigger grinned as he held up a six-pack, a thumb and forefinger looped in the plastic rings. “For your weekly therapy session.”

Zero snorted and stepped aside. “Come on, we’ll go out back.”

He led the way through the small house and out a sliding glass door to a patio. The mid-October air was not yet cold, but crisp enough to remind him that he was barefoot. They took a seat in a couple of deck chairs as Alan liberated two cans and passed one to Zero.

He frowned at the label. “What’s this?”

“Dunno. The guy at the liquor store took one look at my beard and flannel shirt and said I’d like it.” Alan chuckled, popped the tab, and took a long sip. He winced. “That’s... different. Or maybe I’m just getting old.” He turned somberly to Zero. “So. How are you?”

*How are you.* It suddenly seemed like such a strange question. If anyone other than Alan had asked it, he would have recognized it as a formality and answered with a simple and hasty “Fine, how about you?” But he knew that Alan genuinely wanted to know.

Yet he didn’t know how to answer. So much had changed in eighteen months; not just in Zero’s personal life, but on a macro scale. The US had averted a war with Iran and its neighbors, but tensions remained high. The American government had seemingly recovered from the infiltration of conspirators and Russian influence, but only by cleaning house. President Eli Pierson had remained in office for another seven months after the attempt on his life, but was ousted in the next election by the Democratic candidate. It was an easy victory after Pierson’s cabinet was revealed to have been a veritable nest of snakes.

But Zero hardly cared. He wasn’t involved in any of that anymore. He didn’t even have an opinion about the new president. He barely knew what was going on in the world; he avoided the news whenever possible. He was just a citizen now. Whatever was unfolding in the shadows did so without his influence.

“I’m fine.”

He was stagnating.

“Really. I’m good.”

Alan took another sip, obviously dubious but not mentioning it. “And Maria?”

A thin smile crossed Zero’s lips. “She’s doing well.” And it was true. She was taking to her new position swimmingly. In the wake of the conspiracy coming to light, the CIA had been completely restructured; David Barren, high-ranking member of the National Security Council and Maria’s father, was named interim director of the agency and oversaw vetting of each and every person under its banner until a new director was named, a former NSA director named Edward Shaw.

Maria Johansson had been appointed as deputy director of Special Activities Division—a job that had been formerly held by the now-deceased Shawn Cartwright, Zero’s old boss. She in turn named Todd Strickland as Special Agent in Charge, a position formerly held by one Agent Kent Steele.

And she was good at it. There would be no corruption under her watch, no renegade agents like Jason Carver, and no shadowy conspirators like Ashleigh Riker. It was obvious, though, that she still missed the fieldwork; it wasn’t often, but occasionally she would accompany her team on an op.

Zero, on the other hand, had not gone back. Not to the CIA, not even to teaching. He hadn’t gone back to anything.

“How’s the shop?” he asked Alan, for want of changing the subject from something other than himself and his morose introspection.

“Keeping busy,” Reidigger replied casually. He ran the Third Street Garage, which despite Alan’s background in espionage and covert operations was, in fact, a garage. “Not much to say there. How’s the basement coming?”

Zero rolled his eyes. “It’s a work in progress.” After the falling out with his girls, he just couldn’t stay in the Alexandria house alone. He put it on the market and sold it to the first offer that came along. He and Maria had made their relationship official by then, and she too was seeking a change of scenery, so they bought a small house in the suburbs of the unincorporated town of Langley, not

far from CIA headquarters. A “Craftsman bungalow”—that’s what the real estate agent had called it. It was a simple place, which was good for them both. One of the many things he and Maria had in common was that they yearned for simplicity. They could have afforded something bigger, more modern, but the little one-story house suited them just fine. It was cozy, pleasant, with a big picture window in the front and a master suite loft and an unfinished basement, all smooth concrete walls and floor.

About four months earlier, at the beginning of summer, Zero had the idea that he’d finish the basement, make it into usable living space. Since then he’d gotten as far as framing out the walls with two-by-fours and stapling up some strips of fluffy pink insulation.

Lately, just the thought of going back down there exhausted him.

“Anytime you want me to come by and help out, say the word,” Alan offered.

“Yeah.” Alan made the same offer every week. “Rome wasn’t built in a day, you know.”

“It might have been if they hired contractors who knew what they were doing.” Alan winked.

Zero scoffed, but smirked. The can in his hand felt light, too light. He shook it and was surprised to find it empty. He didn’t remember even taking a sip, let alone registering the taste. He set the can down on the patio beside him and reached for another.

“Careful,” Reidigger warned with a grin. He gestured toward Zero’s midsection and the speed-bump of a paunch that was developing there.

“Yeah, yeah.” So he’d gained a few pounds in his semi-retirement. Ten, maybe fifteen. He wasn’t sure and certainly wasn’t about to step on a scale to find out. “Look who’s talking.”

Reidigger laughed. He was a far cry from the round-faced agent Zero had known four years earlier, with his boyish looks and stubbornly thick torso. In order to obscure his appearance after his faked death, and to assume his alias of a mechanic named Mitch, Alan had put on at least forty pounds, grown out a bushy beard flecked with gray, and perpetually wore a trucker’s cap pulled low on his forehead, the brim of it permanently stained with both sweat and dark oily thumbprints.

The cap had become such an omnipresent accessory that Zero wondered if he wore it to bed.

“What, this?” Reidigger chuckled again and slapped his stomach. “This is all muscle. Y’know, I go down to the gym twice a week. They’ve got a boxing ring. The young kids, they love to talk trash to the older guys. Right before I whip their asses.” He took a sip and added, “You should come sometime. I usually go on—”

“Tuesdays and Thursdays,” Zero finished for him. Alan made that offer every week too.

He appreciated the effort. He appreciated that Alan came by so often to sit around on the patio with his old friend and shoot the breeze. He appreciated the check-ins and the attempts to get him out of the house that were growing more halfhearted with every visit.

The truth was that without the CIA or teaching or his daughters around, he didn’t feel like himself, and it had led to a sort of sickness settling into his brain, a general malaise that he couldn’t seem to overcome.

The sliding glass door opened suddenly then, and both men turned to see Maria step out into the October afternoon. She was dressed smartly in a crisp white blazer with black slacks and a thin gold necklace, her blonde hair cascading around her shoulders and dark mascara accentuating her gray eyes.

It was strange, but for the briefest of moments it was jealousy that swept through Zero at the sight of her. Where he had stagnated, she had flourished. But he pushed that down too, pushed it down into the murky swamp of his stifled emotions and told himself he was glad to see her.

“Afternoon, boys,” she said with a smile. She seemed in good spirits; her mood upon arriving home from work tended to be as varying as the odd hours she kept. “Alan, it’s good to see you.” She bent at the waist to give him a hug.

“Astonished” wasn’t quite the term that came to Zero’s mind when Maria discovered that Alan was not only still alive, but holed up in a garage not thirty minutes from Langley. But she took the

news in stride—a bruising punch to his shoulder and a harsh rebuke of “you should have told us!” was seemingly all the catharsis she needed.

“Hi, Kent.” She kissed him before grabbing a beer from Alan’s sixer and joining them. “Good day?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “Good day.” He didn’t elaborate, because the only elaboration he could have offered was that he’d spent the day watching old movies, napping, and vaguely thinking about returning to the waiting and still unfinished basement. “You?”

She shrugged. “Better than most.” She tended not to talk too much about work with him—not only because of security clearance, of which Zero currently had none, but also out of the unspoken fear (at least Zero presumed) that it might trigger him, jar some old memory, or otherwise inspire him to get back in the game. She seemed to like him where he was. Though his suspicion about that was another matter entirely.

“Kent,” she said, “don’t forget that we have dinner plans.”

He smiled. “Right, of course.” He hadn’t forgotten about the guest they’d be hosting that evening. But he was actively trying not to think about that.

*Kent.*

She was the only one who still called him that.

Agent Kent Steele had been his alias in the CIA, but now that was nothing but a memory. Zero had been his call sign, started as a joke by Alan Reidigger—who still called him Zero. And ever since he’d gotten his memories back, that was the name that he usually thought of himself by. But he wasn’t either of those anymore, Kent or Zero, not really. He wasn’t Professor Lawson anymore. Hell, he barely felt like himself, his real self, Reid Lawson, father of two and history professor and covert CIA operative and whatever other thing he identified himself as. Even though eighteen months had passed, he still bitterly recalled the shadowy conspirators dragging his name through the mud, releasing his image to the media, calling him a terrorist and attempting to pin the would-be assassination attempt on him. He was, of course, completely exonerated of those charges, and he had no idea if anyone else even remembered it. But he did. And now the name felt foreign to him. He avoided being known as Reid Lawson whenever possible, to the extent that the house, the bills, even the cars were all in Maria’s name. No mail came for him with his name on it. No one ever called asking for Reid.

Or Kent.

Or Zero.

Or Dad.

*So just who the hell am I?*

He didn’t know. But he knew that he had to discover it for himself, because the life he was leading was no life worth living.

## CHAPTER TWO

Zero was glad he didn't have to talk about them. But Alan knew better than to ask about the girls.

Reidigger stuck around for about forty-five minutes before rising from the deck chair, stretching, and in his usual fashion, announcing he'd better "hit the ol' dusty trail." Zero gave him a brief hug and waved as he pulled the pickup truck out of the driveway and silently thanked him for not asking about his daughters, because the truth was that if Alan had asked how they were, Zero couldn't answer.

He found Maria in the kitchen, wearing an apron over her work clothes as she chopped an onion. "Good visit?"

"Yeah."

Silence. Just the rhythmic tock of the knife against the cutting board.

"You ready for tonight?" she asked after a long moment.

He nodded. "Yeah. Definitely." He wasn't. "What are you making?"

"*Bigos*." She dumped the cutting board's contents into a large pot on the stove that already contained simmering kielbasa, cabbage, and other vegetables. "It's a Polish stew."

Zero frowned. "*Bigos*. Since when do you make *bigos*?"

"I learned from my grandmother." She smirked. "There's still a lot you don't know about me, Mr. Steele."

"I guess so." He hesitated, wondering how best to broach the subject on his mind, and then decided direct was best. "Um... hey. So tonight, do you think you could maybe try not to call me Kent?"

Maria paused with the knife hovering over a dried mushroom. She frowned, but nodded. "Okay. What do you want me to call you? Reid?"

"I..." He was about to agree, but then realized that he didn't really want that either. "I don't know." Maybe, he thought, she should just avoid calling him anything.

"Huh." It was obvious from her expression that she was concerned, wanted to push further into whatever was going on in his head, but it wasn't the time to unpack all that. "How about I just call you 'pookie'?"

"Very funny." He grinned in spite of himself.

"Or 'cupcake'?"

"I'm going to get changed." He headed out of the kitchen even as Maria called after him, laughing to herself.

"Wait, I got it. I'll call you 'honeybunch.'"

"I'm ignoring you," he called back. He appreciated what she was trying to do, attempting to diffuse the situation with humor. But as he reached the top of the short staircase that led to the loft, the anxiety bubbled up within him again. He'd been glad for Alan's visit because it meant he didn't have to think about it. He'd been glad Alan didn't ask about the girls because it meant he didn't have to face facts or memories. But there was no avoiding it now.

Maya was coming to dinner.

Zero inspected his jeans, made sure they were free of holes or errant coffee stains, and traded his lounging T-shirt for a striped button-down.

*You're a liar.*

He ran a comb through his hair. It was getting too long. Slowly turning gray, especially at the temples.

*Mom died because of you.*

He turned sideways and inspected himself in the mirror, pulling his shoulders back and trying to shrink the slight paunch that had gathered around his belly button.

*I hate you.*

The last meaningful exchange he'd had with his eldest daughter was vitriolic. In the hotel room at The Plaza when he'd told them the truth about their mother, Maya had stood from the bed. She'd started quietly, but her voice rose quickly by the octave. Her face growing redder as she cursed at him. Called him every name he deserved. Telling him exactly what she thought of him and his life and his lies.

After that, nothing had been the same. Their relationship had changed instantly, dramatically, but that wasn't the most painful part. At least she was still there physically, at the time. No, the slow burn was so much worse. After the admission in the hotel, after they had returned home to their Alexandria house, Maya went back to school. She was ending her junior year of high school; she'd missed two months of work but she hit the books with an intensity Zero had never seen in her before.

Then that summer came, and still she exiled herself to her room, studying. It didn't take long for him to figure out what was going on. Maya was fiercely intelligent—too smart, he'd often say, for her own good. But in this case, she was too smart for *his* good.

Maya studied and worked hard and, thanks to a little-known bylaw in her school district's charter, she was able to test out of her senior year of high school by taking and passing every AP exam. She graduated from high school before the end of that first summer—though there was no ceremony, no cap and gown, no walking with classmates. No proud, smiling photos next to her father and sister. There was just a form letter and a diploma in the mail one day, and Zero's abject astonishment as he realized what she was trying to do.

And then, only then, was she gone.

He sighed. That was more than a year ago now. He'd last seen her just this past summer, around July or August, not long after his fortieth birthday. She rarely came down from New York these days. On that occasion she'd come back to get some of her belongings out of storage, and had hesitantly agreed to have lunch with him. It had been an awkward, tense, and mostly silent affair. Him asking questions, prodding her to tell him about her life, and her giving him succinct answers and avoiding eye contact.

And now she was coming to dinner.

"Hey." He hadn't heard Maria come into the loft bedroom, but he felt her arms around his midsection, her head resting against his back as she hugged him from behind. "It's okay to be nervous."

"I'm not nervous." He was very nervous. "It'll be good to see her."

"Of course it will." Maria had organized it. She had been the one to reach out to Maya, to invite her over the next time she was in town. The invitation had been extended two months earlier. Maya was in Virginia this weekend to visit some friends from school, and reluctantly agreed to come. Just for dinner. She wouldn't be staying. She made that very well known.

"Hey," Maria said softly behind him. "I know the timing isn't great, but..."

Zero winced. He knew what she was going to say and wished she wouldn't.

"I'm ovulating."

He didn't respond for a long moment, long enough to realize that the silence was becoming uncomfortable as it yawned between them.

When they first moved in together, they had agreed that neither of them was terribly interested in marriage. Kids were not even on his radar. But Maria was only two years younger than him; she was rapidly approaching forty. There was no longer a snooze button on her biological alarm clock. At first she would just casually mention it in conversation, but then she ceased her birth control regiment. She started keeping keen track of her cycle.

Still, they'd never actually sat down and discussed it. It was as if Maria simply assumed that since he'd done it twice before, he would want to be a father again. Though he never said it aloud, he

secretly suspected that was why she hadn't pushed for him to return to the agency, or even to teaching. She liked him where he was because it meant there would be someone to care for a baby.

*How can it be, he wondered bitterly, that my life as an unemployed civilian could be more complicated than as a covert agent?*

He'd waited too long to reply, and when he finally did it sounded forced and lame. "I think," he said at last, "that we should put a pin in that for now."

He felt her arms fall away from around his waist and hastily added, "Just until we get past this visit. Then we'll talk, and we'll decide—"

"To wait longer." She practically spat the words out, and when he turned to face her she was staring at the carpet in undisguised disappointment.

"That's not what I'm saying."

*Yes, it is.*

"I just think it warrants a serious discussion," he said.

*So I can man up enough to admit I don't want it.*

"We should at least deal with what's in front of us first."

*Like the fact that the two children I already raised hate me.*

"Yeah," Maria agreed quietly. "You're right. We'll wait longer." She turned and headed out of the bedroom.

"Maria, wait..."

"I have to finish dinner." He heard her footfalls on the stairs and cursed himself under his breath for mishandling that so badly. It was pretty much par for the course in his life lately.

Then the doorbell rang. The sound of it sent an electric tingle through his nervous system.

He heard the front door open. Maria's cheerful voice: "Hi! It's so good to see you. Come in, come in."

She was here. Suddenly Zero's feet felt like lead weights. He didn't want to go downstairs. Didn't want to face this.

"And you must be Greg..." Maria said.

*Greg? Who the hell is Greg?* Suddenly he found the willpower to move. One stair at a time, she slowly came into sight. It had only been a few months since he'd last seen her, but still she took his breath away.

Maya was eighteen now, no longer a child, and it was showing more rapidly than he cared to admit. When they'd met for lunch the past summer, her hair was still long and curled into the military-requisite donut bun, but she had since had it cut shorter, a pixie cut, short on the sides and back and sweeping across her forehead, accentuating her lean face, which was growing mature and angular. She looked stronger, the muscles in her arms developing, small but dense.

She was looking more like him every day, while he was looking and feeling less like himself every day.

Maya glanced up at him as he came down the stairs. "Hi." It was a passive greeting, not bright but not flat. Neutral. Like someone greeting a stranger.

"Hi, Maya." He moved in to hug her and the slightest hint of apprehension shadowed her face. He settled for a half-embrace, one arm around her shoulders while her hand patted his back once. "You look... you look well."

"I am." She cleared her throat and addressed the elephant in the room. "This is Greg."

The boy, if he could be called that, stepped forward and stuck out an enthusiastic hand. "Mr. Lawson, a pleasure to meet you, sir." He was tall, six-two, with short blond hair and perfect teeth and tanned arms that were testing the limits of his polo shirt's sleeves.

He looked like the high school quarterback.

"Uh, nice to meet you too, Greg." Zero shook the kid's hand. Greg had a firm grip, firmer than was necessary.

Zero disliked him immediately. “You’re a, uh, friend of Maya’s from school?”

“Boyfriend,” Maya said unflinchingly.

*This guy?* Zero disliked him even more now. His smile, his teeth. He found himself incensed with jealousy. This grinning idiot was close to his daughter. Closer than Zero was allowed to be.

“What are we all standing around here for? Come in, please.” Maria closed the door and led them toward the living room. “Have a seat. Dinner isn’t quite done yet. Can I get you something to drink?”

They responded, but Zero didn’t hear it. He was too busy examining this relative stranger in his house—and he didn’t mean Greg. Maya was flourishing into a young woman, with her new hair and pressed clothes and boyfriend and school and career trajectory... and he wasn’t a part of it. Not any of it.

Despite everything that had happened, Maya hadn’t deterred from the goal she had set for herself almost two years earlier. She wanted to be a CIA agent—more than that, she wanted to become the youngest agent in the CIA’s history. But it had nothing to do with following in her father’s footsteps. She had been through some harrowing experiences of her own, chief among them being kidnapped by a psychopathic assassin and handed over to a human trafficking ring, and she wanted to be among the protectors who would keep such things from happening to other young women.

After testing out of her senior year of high school, and unbeknownst to Zero, Maya applied to the military academy West Point. Even though her grades were excellent, she had no ROTC experience and no plans for military service, and therefore wouldn’t have made the most attractive candidate. But she had a plan for that too.

In an act of cunning and guile that foreshadowed an illustrious career in covert operations, Maya went over her father’s head to fellow agent (and friend) Todd Strickland. Through him, and under the pretense of being Agent Zero’s daughter, she managed to secure a letter of recommendation from then-president Eli Pierson, who thought he was doing Zero a personal favor. She was accepted into West Point, and moved to New York before the end of that first summer after discovering the truth about her mother.

Zero found out all of this while she was packing her bags. By then it was too late to stop her, though not for lack of trying. But no amount of pleading would dissuade her.

She was in her second year now, and even though the ties between father and daughter were nearly severed, Maria kept tabs on Maya as best she could and updated Zero. He knew that she was top of her class, excelling in everything she did, and earning admiration from the faculty. He knew that she was heading toward great things.

He just wished that it wasn’t the same career path that had gotten her mother killed and ruined the relationship with her father.

“So.” Greg cleared his throat, sitting beside Maya on the sofa while Zero sat across from them in a recliner. “Maya tells me you’re an accountant?”

Zero smiled thinly. Of course Maya would choose such a bland occupation as his cover. “That’s right,” he said. “Corporate finance.”

“That’s... interesting.” Greg forced a smile in return.

*What a sycophant. What does she see in this guy?* “And what about you, Greg?” he asked. “What do you plan to do? Become an officer?”

“No, no, I don’t think that’s for me.” The kid waved a hand as if swatting away the notion. “I plan to go into the NCAVC. Specifically, the BAU...” He trailed off and chuckled lightly to himself. “Sorry, Mr. Lawson, I forgot I was talking to a civilian. I want to be an FBI agent, with their Behavioral Analysis Unit. Violent Crime Division. You know, the guys who hunt serial killers and domestic terrorists and such.”

“Sounds exciting,” Zero said flatly. Of course he knew what the NCAVC was, and the BAU—just about anyone who turned on prime time television knew that—but he didn’t say so. In fact,

he had little doubt that if this smarmy kid across from him knew who *he* was, Agent Zero, he would wipe that unctuous grin off his face and devolve into a slobbering fan in point-five seconds flat.

But he couldn't say any of that. Instead he added, "Sounds ambitious, too."

"Greg can do it," Maya chimed in. "He's top of second class."

"That means 'junior,'" Greg offered to Zero. "But we don't call them that at The Point. And Maya here is the best in third class." He reached over and gently squeezed Maya's knee.

Zero had to physically restrain himself from his lip curling in a snarl. Suddenly he understood why Maya brought this boy with her; he was more than just a buffer between them. With him there, they couldn't talk openly. There would be no talk of the CIA, no talk of the past. Hell, he wasn't even sure he could ask the one thing he wanted to ask the most, which was about Sara.

Maya leaving for school crushed him. But Sara... even after all this time, it felt like that nail in the coffin had pierced straight through to his heart.

Greg was still talking, saying something about the FBI and cleaning house in light of the scandal that had rocked the former administration, and how his family had connections, or something of the like. Zero wasn't listening. He looked over at her, his daughter, the young woman he had raised, given everything he could. He had changed her diapers. Taught her to walk and talk and write and play softball and use a fork. He'd grounded her, hugged her when she cried, brightened her day when she was feeling down, put Band-Aids on scraped knees. He'd saved her life and gotten her mother killed.

When he looked over at her, tried to catch her eye, she looked away.

And in that moment, he knew. There would be no reconciliation, at least not tonight. This was a formality. This was Maya's way of saying *you deserve to know that I'm alive and well, but not much more than that*.

She stared at the carpet while Greg droned on about something or other, her gaze pensive. Her smile faltered, and as it vanished, so did Zero's hope of getting his daughter back.

## CHAPTER THREE

Maya dipped a crust of sourdough into the Polish stew and chewed it slowly. It was delicious, better than the food that the academy served, but she didn't have much of an appetite. Her dad was seated across from her at the small dining table, with Maria on her left and Greg to the right.

He was staring at her again.

She wished she hadn't come. She didn't owe him anything. And she knew that she couldn't bring herself to look up, to look into his eyes and see the unmasked pain of their rift. So instead she stared at a mottled chunk of kielbasa in her bowl.

Being here, in this new house and seeing him living with Maria, dark circles forming under his eyes and weight pinched around his midsection, her own father felt like a stranger to her. He no longer had the youthful, playful light in his eyes like he did when they were growing up. She hadn't heard his laugh in more than a year. She missed their sarcastic, quipping exchanges and at times heated debates.

"Isn't that right, Maya?"

"Hmm?" She looked up at the sound of her name to find Greg gazing at her expectantly. "Oh. Yeah. That's right." *Good god, is he still talking?*

Greg was not actually her boyfriend. At least she didn't think of it like that. They were being casual about it, unofficial. She knew he liked her—they'd made out a few times, though she wouldn't let him get any farther than that—yet she couldn't help but think it was more of a status thing for him than anything else. He came from a good family, a mother in politics and a father high up in the NSA. She was top of her class and (depending on who asked) likely better than him at most things, particularly academics. Some of the other cadets in second and third class made jokes about the two of them being "the prom king and queen of West Point."

He was cute. He was athletic. He was generally nice enough. But he was also a blowhard, self-centered, and completely oblivious to his faults.

"If you ask me," Greg was saying, "Pierson should have done hard time. My mother says—my mother was the mayor of Baltimore for two years, did I mention that? Anyway, she says that his negligence was enough to impeach him, or at least indict him when he left office..."

*Stop staring at me.* She wanted to blurt it out, to shout it even, but she held her tongue. She could *feel* how desperate her father was to talk to her. That was part of the reason she brought Greg, so that they couldn't open any cans of worms during this visit. She knew he wanted to ask about Sara. She knew he wanted to apologize, to try to make amends, to put all the ugliness behind them.

The truth was, she didn't hate him. Not anymore. To hate someone required energy, and she was putting everything she had into school. To her, he was a non-issue. This visit was not reconciliatory; it was bureaucracy. Decorum. Etiquette. The values that the academy instilled in its cadets were not entirely applicable to Maya's unique situation, but her takeaway was that she should at least have a check-in with the man who raised her, this shell of his former self. If for no other reason than to prove to herself that she could still stand to be in the same room as him.

But now she wished she hadn't.

"So," Maria said suddenly. Greg had stopped talking long enough to spoon some stew into his mouth, and Maria was taking full advantage of the temporary reprieve. "Maya. Have you spoken to your sister lately?"

The question took her off guard. She had expected it from her dad, but not from Maria. Still, it was as good a time as any to practice the skills she'd been developing on her own time. She fought the instinct to display any betraying expressions and instead smiled lightly.

"I have," Maya replied. "Just yesterday, in fact. She's well." Only half of that was a lie.

"You have a sister?" Greg asked.

Maya nodded. “Two years younger. She’s in Florida on a work-study program. Very busy.” Another lie, but she told it with ease. She was getting better at that all the time, and often told small, off-the-cuff fibs just for practice—and, admittedly, for a bit of a thrill.

“And, uh. . .” Her dad cleared his throat. “She’s getting by okay? She has everything she needs?”

“Mm-hmm,” Maya answered curtly without looking at him. “Doing great.”

Greg simpered as he turned to her father. “You ask that like you don’t talk to her, Mr. Lawson.”

“It’s like Maya said,” her dad answered quietly. “Sara is very busy.”

Maya knew that her own sudden departure was a blow to him. But if that was the case, then Sara leaving was a death stroke.

In that first summer, just a few months after their father saved President Pierson’s life, after he told them the truth about their mother and the tension in their home was sky-high, Maya confided her plans in her sister. She told Sara that she had tested out of her senior year of high school and was running down admission to West Point.

As long as she lived, she would never forget the panicked expression on her little sister’s face. *Please. Please don’t*, Sara had begged her. *Don’t leave me alone with him. I can’t do it.*

As much as it broke her heart, Maya had made her plans and intended to see them through. So Sara made some of her own. She went online and found a lawyer who would take her case pro bono. Then she filed for emancipation. She knew it was a long shot; there was no proof or evidence of neglect, abuse, or anything like that.

But in a turn that shocked both sisters, their father did not fight it. Less than two weeks after Maya left for military school in New York, her dad attended the court date and, in front of a judge, told his then-fifteen-year-old daughter that if she wanted freedom from him enough to do this, to take him to court for it, she could have her freedom.

That same night came another event that Maya would not soon forget. Her father called her. She ignored it. She still hated him back then. He left her a voicemail that she didn’t listen to for two days. When she finally did, she wished she hadn’t. His voice wavering, breaking even, he told her that Sara was gone. He admitted that he deserved all of it and then some. He apologized three times, and told her he loved her.

It would be another six months before they spoke again.

But Maya did keep up with her sister. Upon emancipation, Sara packed up what she could carry and got on a bus. She ended up in Florida and took the first job she found, as a cashier in a thrift store. She still worked there. She lived in a co-op, a rented house with five other people. She shared a bedroom with a girl a couple years older than her, and a bathroom with everyone else.

Maya made sure to call her sister at least once a week, and more when her schedule allowed. Sara always promised that she was doing fine, but Maya wasn’t sure she could believe it. She’d left high school with the assurance that she’d go back, but she never did. These days Maya didn’t bother trying to convince her to return; instead, she pushed for Sara to test for her GED. Just another thing Sara claimed she’d do. Someday.

Maya lived at the academy year-round, and was given a stipend every semester for uniforms, books, food, and the like. She usually didn’t have much left over, but she sent her sister some money when she could. Sara was always appreciative.

Neither of them needed anything from him anymore. They didn’t *want* anything from him anymore.

They really had talked the day prior; that part wasn’t a lie. Sara was sixteen now, and one of the girls in her co-op was teaching her to drive. It pained Maya that she was missing out on such important parts of Sara’s life, but she had her own goals and was determined to meet them.

Simply put, the truth about their mother’s death and their father’s lies had driven a wedge between not only them and their father, but the two girls as well. They were on separate paths, and

though they could keep in touch and help each other when able, neither was about to go too far out of their way to disrupt their own lives.

“Would anyone like some more?” Maria offered. “There’s plenty.”

Maya’s attention snapped back to the dinner table. She’d been lost in her own thoughts, and when she looked around she saw that everyone else was finished eating. Still she set the spoon down. She just wanted this visit to be over, to thank them and get the hell out of there. “No thank you. It was very good.”

“Agreed,” said Greg enthusiastically. “Absolutely delicious.” And then the blond idiot went and opened his big mouth yet again. “Thank you, Mrs. Lawson.”

A flash of anger combusted inside her like a swelling backdraft. The words forced their way out of Maya’s mouth before she even thought about them. “She is *not* Mrs. Lawson.”

Maria did a double-take. Her father continued to stare, but now his eyes were wide in surprise and his mouth slightly open.

Greg cleared his throat nervously. “Sorry,” he muttered. “I just assumed...”

More anger welled inside her. “I told you that on the ride down here. You wouldn’t *have* to assume anything if you stopped talking about yourself for five damn minutes!”

“Hey,” Greg bristled. “You can’t talk to me like that—”

“Why not?” she challenged. “Is your mommy going to do something about it? Yeah, Greg, I know, she was the mayor of Baltimore for two years. You only mention it every other sentence. No one gives a shit!”

His throat flexed and his face flushed red, but he said nothing in return.

“Maya.” Maria spoke softly, yet firmly. “I know you’re upset, but it was just an accident. There’s no reason to be rude. We’re all adults here—”

“Oh.” Maya scoffed. “I think there’s *every* reason to be rude. Would you like me to enumerate them for you?” She was smart enough to know what was happening, but angry enough not to care. The truth was evident; she was still very angry with her father, despite telling herself she wasn’t. But she had channeled all of that hostility and ire into school and her goals. Here and now, without any of that and sitting across from the man who had done this to her, it all came bubbling back to the surface. Her face felt hot and her heartbeat had doubled its pace.

She was suddenly keener than ever that she could not conjure a single happy memory from her childhood without the stabbing realization that her father’s life, and by extension much of her own, was one big lie wrapped in a thousand smaller lies. The brightest light in her young life, her mother, had been cruelly and coldly extinguished because of it, at the hands of a man Maya had been foolish enough to put her own trust in.

And her father not only knew about it. He let that man, John Watson, walk away.

“Maya,” her father started. “Please just—”

“You don’t get to speak!” she snapped. “She’s dead because of you!” She surprised even herself with the intensity of it, and was then surprised again that her dad did not have a burst of anger in response. Instead he clammed up, staring down at the table like a kicked pup.

“Look, I don’t know what’s going on here,” Greg said gently, “but I think I’m going to bow out...”

He started to rise, but Maya stuck a threatening finger in his face. “Sit down! You’re not going anywhere.”

Greg immediately lowered himself back into his chair as if she were a drill sergeant ordering a private. Maria regarded her aloofly, one eyebrow arched slightly, as if waiting to see how this was going to play out. Her father’s shoulders slumped and his chin nearly touched his collarbone.

“Goddammit,” Maya muttered as she ran her hands over her short hair. She thought she was past all this, past the emotional surges that crashed on her like an errant wave, past the attempts to reconcile the smiling, humorous professor that she called Dad with a deadly covert agent who had

been responsible for the trauma she would carry with her for the rest of her life. Past the late-night sobbing bouts when she changed her clothes and saw the thin white scars of the message she had carved into her own leg, back when she thought she was going to die and used her last ounce of strength to give him a clue to her sister's whereabouts.

*Don't you dare cry.*

"This was a mistake." She rose and started for the door. "I don't ever want to see you again."

She was too angry to cry, she realized. At least she was past that.

Maya slid behind the wheel of the rental car and turned the key in the ignition before Greg came jogging out after her.

"Maya!" he called. "Hey, wait!" He tried to pull the handle of the passenger side, but she'd already locked the doors. "Come on. Let me in."

She started backing down the drive.

"This isn't funny!" He slammed a palm on the window. "How am I supposed to get back?"

"Your mom sounds useful," she shouted at him through the closed window. "Try giving her a call."

And then she drove away, down the street, with a tiny version of Greg standing in the rearview mirror with his hands on his head in disbelief. She knew she'd catch hell for that back at the academy, but in the moment she didn't care. Because as the foreign house of her father grew smaller behind her, it felt like a weight was lifting from her shoulders. She'd gone there that day out of some sense of family, a sense of responsibility. A burden, really.

But now, she realized, if she never saw them or that house again, it would be okay. She was fine on her own. There was no closure, and there never would be. Her mother was dead, and her father was dead to her.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Karina Pavlo sat at the furthest corner of the bar, obscured by beer taps but with a clear view of the front entrance. She'd chosen a place that no one in their right mind would ever think to look for her, a seedy dive bar in the southeast quadrant of DC, not far from Bellevue. It was not the best of neighborhoods, and the day was quickly becoming dusk, but she was not concerned about petty thieves or would-be muggers. She had bigger problems than that.

Besides, she had just done some petty theft herself.

After eluding the Secret Service agent and hiding out in the bookstore for a short while, Karina risked heading back out onto the street for less than a block before ducking into a department store. Aside from the fact that she was shoeless, she was still well dressed and, holding her head high and walking confidently to avoid scrutiny, looked the part of any upper-middle-class businesswoman.

She headed straight to the women's department and grabbed some casual clothing off the rack, items that wouldn't draw a lot of attention. She left her skirt and blouse and blazer in the dressing room, pulled on a pair of sneakers, and walked back out a different entrance of the store without anyone looking twice at her. Two blocks later she stopped in at another store and, after pretending to browse for a few minutes, walked out with a pair of stolen sunglasses and a silk scarf that she tied over her dark hair.

Back on the street, she targeted a chubby man in a striped polo with a camera hanging around his neck. He couldn't have been more of a tourist if he was wearing a sandwich board that said so. She bumped into him roughly as they passed, gasping and immediately apologizing. His face turned red and he opened his mouth to shout at her, until he saw that she was a slight, pretty brunette. He muttered an apology and scurried along on his way, unaware that his wallet was missing. Karina had always been quick with her hands. She did not condone stealing, but this was a time of necessity.

The wallet had a little less than a hundred dollars in cash in it. She took the money and dropped the rest of it, ID and credit cards and photos of kids, into a large blue postal box on the next corner.

Finally she took a cab east, across town, where she headed into the dive bar, its windows darkened and the place smelling like cheap beer, and took a seat at the bar and ordered a soda.

The television suspended over the beer taps was on and tuned into a news station, the current story an update on sports scores from the night prior. She sipped her soda, calming her nerves and wondering what she would do next. She couldn't go back to the hotel; that would be a fool's errand. Besides, there was nothing for them to find there but clothes and toiletries. She had one phone number memorized, but she was hesitant about finding a pay phone. They were getting rarer, even in the cities. The Secret Service had her cell phone, and they might be watching the pay phones.

She was considering asking the bartender to use their phone, but her contact was an international number and that might draw undue attention.

The next time Karina glanced up at the television, the story had changed. A male anchor she didn't recognize was talking at her, and though the volume was too low to hear she could clearly see the words on the black ticker across the bottom of the screen: HARRIS AND KOZLOVSKY HOLD PRIVATE MEETING.

"*Korva,*" she sighed. Shit. Then in English: "Can you turn this up, please?"

The bartender, a Latino man with a handlebar mustache, scowled at her for a moment before turning his back to show just how blatantly he was ignoring her.

"*Zalupa,*" she muttered, an unkind curse in Ukrainian. Then she leaned over the bar, located the remote, and turned the volume up herself.

"...anonymous source inside the White House has confirmed that a private meeting was held earlier today between President Harris and Russian President Aleksandr Kozlovsky," the anchor declared. "The two days since Kozlovsky arrived in the United States have been highly publicized and

well documented, yet the notion of a closed-door meeting held in a conference room of the White House basement has many people nervously reminiscing on the events from nearly a year and a half ago.

“In response to the leak, the press secretary issued this statement, and I quote: ‘Both presidents have been under a veritable microscope these past two days, due largely to the indiscretions of their predecessors. President Harris and his guest simply wanted a brief reprieve from the limelight. The meeting in question was less than ten minutes in length, and the subject of this meeting was for each leader to become better acquainted with the other without the pressure of media presence or scrutiny. I can assure each and every person here and tuning in that there was no clandestine agenda. This was simply a closed-door conversation, and nothing more,’ end quote. When questioned further about the specifics of this meeting, the press secretary joked, ‘I wasn’t privy to details, but I believe the meeting was largely about their mutual love of scotch and dachshunds.’

“Though the true nature of the meeting remains shrouded in secrecy, we have confirmed through our anonymous source that there was only one other person present in the room with the two leaders—an interpreter. Though her identity has not been released, we have confirmed that she is female, and a native to Russia. Now the world wants to know: were the two leaders discussing drinks and dogs? Or does this unidentified female interpreter hold the answer to a question that many Americans have on their—”

The television suddenly flickered out, the screen turning black. Karina looked down sharply to see that the Latino bartender had grabbed the remote and turned it off.

She was about to call him an asshole in plain English but stopped herself. There was no point picking fights; she was supposed to be incognito. Instead she mulled over the report. The White House had not released her identity, at least not yet. They wanted to find her and silence her before she could tell anyone what she had heard. What the two presidents were planning. What Kozlovsky had asked of the American leader.

But Karina had an ace in the hole—two of them, in fact. She again absentmindedly caressed the pearl studs in her ears. Two years earlier, she had been translating for a German diplomat who had accused her of misinterpreting his words. She hadn’t, but it had almost landed her in some real trouble. So with some help from her sister and her contacts in FIS, Karina had the earrings made. Each of them contained a tiny unidirectional microphone that recorded a speaker on either side of her; together, the two earrings combined would capture any conversation that Karina interpreted. It was, of course, highly illegal, but also very handy, and since she had begun using them she hadn’t found any reason to need the recordings and subsequently deleted them.

Until now. Every word that had been spoken between her, Harris, and Kozlovsky was contained in those two studs. Getting them into the right hands was all that mattered now.

She slid silently off the stool and stole toward the rear of the bar, making a beeline for the bathroom, but then kept on going down a dingy corridor and pushed out through a metal security door and into a rear alley.

Out on the street, Karina tried to look as cool and casual as possible, but inside she was terrified. It was bad enough that the Secret Service was looking for her—and no doubt had the police involved, possibly even the FBI—but when Kozlovsky found out, he would send his own people to find her, if he hadn’t already.

And worse, any John Doe citizen who heard the news might look twice at her and wonder. Americans were not the most open-minded when it came to foreigners. Luckily she could do a decently passable American accent. At least she hoped it was passable; she’d never had to use it in any serious situation before. So far she had gotten by just fine pretending to be Russian.

*I need a phone.* She couldn’t risk a pay phone. She couldn’t steal a cell phone; the victim would report it and the Secret Service could easily run down the device’s location and last-called number, which would put Veronika at risk as well.

*Think, Karina.* She pushed the sunglasses up the bridge of her nose and looked around—*a-ha*. The answer was right there in front of her, half a block away and across the street. She glanced both ways and trotted over to the cellular store.

The shop was tiny, smelled of disinfectant, and harshly lit by too many fluorescent tube lights. The young black man behind the counter couldn't have been more than twenty, poking idly at a phone in front of him with his chin in his hand. There was no one else in the store.

Karina stood there for a long moment before he looked up at her, his gaze flat.

"Yeah?"

"Do you jailbreak phones here?" she asked.

He looked her up and down. "We're not allowed to sell that service."

Karina smiled. "That's not what I was asking." She hoped her American accent wasn't betraying her. It sounded rough to her ears, tinged with a Ukrainian lilt. "I'm not a cop, and I don't have a phone. I want to use one. I need to make a call on an off-network device via Wi-Fi. Preferably through a third-party app. Something that can't be traced."

The kid blinked at her. "What do you mean, you gotta make a call?"

She sighed curtly, trying not to grow irritated. "I don't know how to make it any clearer than that." She leaned over the counter and lowered her voice conspiratorially, even though there was no one else in the store. "I'm in some trouble, okay? I need five minutes with the type of phone I just described. I can pay. Can you help me or not?"

He eyed her suspiciously. "What kind of trouble you in? Like with the police?"

"Worse," she said. "Look, if it was the kind of thing I could tell you, do you think I'd be here at all?"

The kid nodded slowly. "All right. I got what you need. And you can use it. Five minutes... fifty bucks."

Karina scoffed aloud. "Fifty dollars for a five-minute call?"

The clerk shrugged. "Or you can try someplace else."

"Fine." She pulled the wad of cash she'd stolen from the tourist, counted out fifty, and slid it across to him. "There. The phone?"

The kid rummaged around under the counter and came out with an iPhone. It was a few years old, one corner of the screen cracked, but it powered on just fine. "This one here is off-network, and has a Chinese calling app on it," he told her. "It reroutes through a randomized out-of-service number." He slid it over to her. "Five minutes."

"Great. Thank you. You have a back office here?" To his frown she added, "Obviously this is a private call."

The kid hesitated, but then jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Go ahead."

"Thanks." She headed into a tiny back office with wood-paneled walls and a melamine table as a desk, covered in invoices and assorted other paperwork. She opened the calling app on the phone, dialed the number she knew by heart, and waited as it rerouted. It took several seconds, and for a moment she thought it wouldn't work, that the call wouldn't go through, but at last it rang.

Someone answered. But they did not speak.

"It's me," she said in Ukrainian.

"Karina?" The woman on the other end of the line sounded confused. "What are you doing calling this number?"

"I need help, V."

"What's wrong?" Veronika asked urgently.

Karina did not know where to begin. "There was a meeting," she said. "Between Kozlovsky and Harris..."

"I saw the news." Veronika sucked in a breath as she realized. "You? You were the interpreter in that meeting?"

“Yes.” Karina quickly recounted what had happened, from her time with the two presidents to fleeing from the Secret Service agent. She tried to keep her voice steady as she concluded, “If they find me, they will kill me, V.”

“My god,” Veronika said breathily. “Karina, you need to tell someone what you know!”

“I’m telling you. Don’t you see? I cannot take this to the media. They will stifle it. They will deny it. You are the only one I can trust with this information. I need to get the earrings to you.”

“You have them?” Veronika asked. “You recorded the meeting?”

“Yes. Every word.”

Her sister thought for a long moment. “FIS has a liaison in Richmond. Can you get there?”

Veronika, Karina’s older sister by two years, was a top agent of the Foreign Intelligence Service, Ukraine’s version of the CIA. It was no secret to Karina that FIS had several sleepers in the United States. The thought of being under their protection was an attractive one, but she realized she could not risk it.

“No,” she said at last. “They will expect me to flee. I’m certain they’ll be watching the airports and highways carefully.”

“Then I will tell him to come to you—”

“You are not understanding, Veronika. If they find me, they will kill me. And anyone who is with me. I will not be responsible for that.” Her voice caught in her throat. Standing there in the dim back office of a shady cellular store, the events of the past few hours finally caught up with her. But she would not let her emotions get the best of her. “I’m scared, V. I need help. I need a way out.”

“I will not let anything happen to you,” her sister promised. “I have an idea. I will have our liaison make an anonymous tip to DC Metro that the meeting was recorded—”

“What? Are you insane?” Karina snapped.

“And I will have him tell the media as well.”

“Christ, V, you have lost your mind!”

“No. Listen to me, Karina. If they believe you possess a recording, then you have a bargaining chip. Without it you are as good as dead. This way, they will want you alive. And if the tip comes from Richmond, they will believe you have fled the city. In the meantime, I will work on an extraction and get you the hell out of here.”

“The heat is too much for you to send one of your own to retrieve me,” Karina said. “I won’t have anyone compromised or killed because of me.”

“But you can’t do this alone, *sestra*.” Veronika was silent for a moment before adding, “I think I might know someone who can help.”

“FIS?” Karina asked.

“No. An American.”

“Veronika—”

“He is former CIA.”

That clinched it. Her sister had truly lost her mind, and Karina told her so.

“Do you trust me?” Veronika asked.

“A minute ago I would have said yes...”

“Trust me now, Karina. And trust this man. I will tell you where to go and when to be there.”

Karina sighed. What choice did she have? V was right. She could not elude the Secret Service, the Russians, and anyone else they sent by herself. She needed help. And she did trust her sister, even if this plan sounded ludicrous.

“All right. How will I know this man?”

“If he is still good at his job, you won’t,” Veronika said. “But he will know you.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

Sara inspected herself in the bathroom mirror as she adjusted her ponytail. She hated her hair. It was too long; she hadn't had it cut in months. Her ends were split badly. About six weeks earlier she'd let Camilla dye it red with a box from the drugstore, and though she'd liked it at the time her bright blonde roots were showing through the first inch from her scalp. It wasn't a good look.

She hated the dark blue polo she had to wear to work. It was a size too big for her slight frame, with the words "Swift Thrift" screen-printed on the left breast. The letters were faded, the edges chipped from repeat washings.

She hated going to the thrift shop, with its constant odor of mothballs and stale sweat, pretending to be nice to rude people. She hated that nine bucks an hour was the best she could do at sixteen without a high school diploma.

But she had made a decision. She was independent. Mostly.

The bathroom door swung open suddenly, forced from the other side. Tommy slid to a halt when he saw her standing in front of the mirror.

"What the hell, Tommy!" Sara shouted. "I'm in here!"

"Why didn't you lock the door?" he shot back.

"It was closed, wasn't it?"

"Well, hurry up! I have to take a piss!"

"Just get out!" She shoved the door closed and left the older boy cursing on the other side of it. Life in the co-op was anything but glamorous, but she'd gotten used to it in the year that she'd been living there. Or had it been more now? Thirteen months or so, she reasoned.

She brushed some mascara on her eyelashes and inspected herself once more. *Good enough*, she thought. She didn't like to wear a lot of makeup, despite Camilla's best efforts. And besides, she was still growing into her looks.

She exited the bathroom, which opened onto the kitchen, just in time to see Tommy leaning away from the sink and zipping up his fly.

"Oh my god." She winced. "Tell me you did *not* just pee in the sink."

"You were taking too long."

"God, you're disgusting." She crossed to the old beige refrigerator and took out a bottle of water—no way she was drinking tap water now, that was for sure—and as she closed it again, the whiteboard caught her eye.

She winced again.

On the refrigerator door was a magnetic dry-erase board with six names in black marker, each of the tenants of the co-op. Written beneath each name was a number. The six of them were responsible for a share of the rent and equal part of the bills each month. If they couldn't pay their share, they had a three-month grace period to wipe out their debt, or else they would have to leave. And the number under Sara's name was the largest.

The co-op was far from the worst place to live in Jacksonville. The old house needed some repairs, but it wasn't a disaster. There were four bedrooms, three of them occupied by two people each and the fourth used as storage and workspace.

Their landlord, Mr. Nedelmeyer, was a German guy in his early forties who had a bunch of properties like this one in the Jacksonville metro area. He was pretty laid back, all things considered; in fact, he insisted that they simply call him "Needle," which to Sara sounded like something you'd call a drug dealer. But Needle was an easy man to deal with. He didn't care if they had friends over, or threw the occasional party. He didn't even care about the drugs. He had only three major rules: If you get arrested, you're out. If you can't pay after three months, you're out. If you assault another tenant, you're out.

At the moment, staring at the whiteboard on the fridge, Sara was worried about the second rule. But then she heard a voice right in her ear that made her worry about the third rule.

“What’s the matter, little girl? Worried about that big scary number under your name?” Tommy laughed like he’d told a great joke. He was nineteen, lanky and bony, with tattoos up both arms. He and his girlfriend Jo shared one of the co-op’s bedrooms. Neither of them worked; Tommy’s parents wired him money every month, more than enough to cover their co-op expenses. The rest they spent on coke.

Tommy thought he was some kind of badass. But he was just a suburban kid on vacation.

Sara turned slowly. The older boy was nearly a whole foot taller, and standing only a few inches away he towered over her. “I think,” she said slowly, “you should take a couple of steps back and get out of my face.”

“Or what?” He grinned maliciously. “You gonna hit me?”

“Of course not. That would be against the rules.” She smiled innocently. “But you know, the other night I took a little video. You and Jo, doing a line off the coffee table.”

A flash of fear crossed Tommy’s face, but he stood his ground. “So? Needle doesn’t care about that.”

“No, you’re right. He doesn’t.” Sara lowered her voice to a whisper. “But Thomas Howell, Esquire, down at Binder & Associates? He might care about that.” She cocked her head to one side. “That’s your dad, isn’t it?”

“How do you...?” Tommy shook his head. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Maybe not. That’s up to you.” She walked past him, bumping her shoulder roughly against his as she did. “Stop pissing in the sink. That’s gross.” And she headed upstairs.

Sara had left Virginia more than a year earlier as a frightened and naïve fifteen-year-old girl. It was hardly more than a year later, but she’d changed. On the bus between Alexandria and Jacksonville, she’d made two rules for herself. The first was that she was not going to ask anyone for anything, least of all her dad. And she stuck by it. Maya helped her out a bit from time to time, and Sara was grateful—but she never asked for it.

The second rule was that she was not going to take shit from anyone, period. She’d been through too much. She had seen things that she could never talk about. Things that still kept her awake at night. Things that a guy like Tommy could never imagine. She was beyond pettiness, past teenage angst. Past her own past.

Upstairs she pushed open the door to the bedroom that she and Camilla shared. It was set up like a dorm room, two twin beds sitting against opposite walls with a lane between them and a shared nightstand. They had a small vanity and a closet that they split. The roommate in question was still in bed, lying awake on her back and scrolling through social media on her phone.

“Hey,” she said with a yawn as Sara entered. Camilla was eighteen, and thankfully pleasant. She was the first friend Sara had made in Florida; it was her online ad for a roommate at the co-op that had brought Sara there in the first place. They’d gotten along well. In fact, Camilla was teaching her to drive. She’d taught her how to put on mascara and how to pick out clothes that flattered her narrow frame. Sara had picked up a lot of new terms and mannerisms from her. Kind of like a big sister.

*Like the kind of big sister that doesn’t abandon you with a man you can’t stand.*

“Hey yourself. Get out of bed, it’s almost ten.” Sara grabbed her purse from the nightstand and made sure she had everything she’d need.

“I had a late night.” Camilla worked as a waitress and bartender at a local seafood place. “But hey, look at this stack.” She flashed a thick wad of cash, tips from the night before.

“Great,” Sara muttered. “I got to get to work.”

“Cool. I’m off tonight. You want me to do your hair again? It’s looking a little haggard.”

“Yeah, I know, it looks like shit,” Sara snapped irritably.

“Whoa, hostile.” Camilla frowned. “What’s got your panties twisted?”

“I’m sorry. Just Tommy, being an ass.”

“Forget that guy. He’s a poser.”

“I know.” Sara sighed and rubbed her face. “Okay. I’m off to the mines.”

“Wait up. You seem pretty high strung. You want a bar?”

Sara shook her head. “No, I’m okay.” She took two steps to the door. “Screw it, yeah.”

Camilla grinned and sat up in bed. She reached over for her own purse and took out two items—an orange prescription bottle with no label and a small plastic cylinder with a red cap. She shook out a single oblong blue Xanax from the bottle, dropped it into the pill grinder, and screwed the red cap tightly, crushing the bar into powder. “Hand.”

Sara held her right hand out, palm down, and Camilla shook out the powder onto the fleshy bridge between her thumb and forefinger. Sara brought her hand to her face, plugged one nostril, and sniffed.

“Attagirl.” Camilla smacked her lightly on the butt. “Now get outta here before you’re late. See you tonight.”

Sara flashed a peace sign as she closed the door behind her. She could taste the bitter powder at the back of her throat. It wouldn’t take long for it to kick in, but she knew that one bar would barely get her through half the day, if that.

It was still hot out, even for October, like the Indian summers they sometimes experienced in Virginia. But she was getting used to the weather. She liked it, the almost year-round sunshine, being close to the beach. Life wasn’t always great, but it was a far sight better than it had been two summers ago.

Sara was barely out the door when her phone rang in her purse. She already knew who it would be, one of the only people who ever called her.

“Hey,” she answered as she walked.

“Hi.” Maya’s voice sounded quiet, strained. Sara could tell right away that she was upset about something. “Got a minute?”

“Uh, a few. I’m on my way to work.” Sara looked around. She didn’t live in a bad neighborhood, but it got a little rougher as she neared the thrift shop. She’d never had a problem herself, but she also stayed alert to her surroundings and kept her head up while she walked. A girl distracted by her phone was a potential target. “What’s up?”

“I, uh...” Maya hesitated. Being sullen and reluctant was unusual for her. “I saw Dad last night.”

Sara stopped in her tracks, but said nothing. Her stomach tightened instinctively as if she was preparing for a punch to the gut.

“It... didn’t go well.” Maya sighed. “I ended up shouting some things, storming out—”

“Why are you telling me this?” Sara demanded.

“What?”

“You know that I don’t want to see him. I don’t want to hear about him. I don’t even want to think about him. So why are you telling me this?”

“I just thought you might want to know.”

“No,” Sara said forcefully. “You had a bad experience, and you wanted to talk to someone that you think might understand. But I’m not interested. I’m done with him. Okay?”

“Yeah.” Maya sighed. “I think I am too.”

Sara hesitated a moment. She’d never heard her sister sound so defeated. But she stood by her position. “Good. Move on with your life. How’s school?”

“School’s great,” Maya said. “I’m top of my class.”

“Of course you are. You’re brilliant.” Sara smiled at that as she resumed her walk. But at the same time, she noticed movement on the sidewalk near her feet. A shadow, stretched long with the mid-morning sun, was keeping pace with her own. Someone walking not far behind her.

*You're being paranoid.* It wouldn't be the first time she mistook a pedestrian as a pursuer. It was part of the unfortunate fallout of her experiences. Even so, she slowed as she reached the next intersection to cross the street.

"But seriously," Maya said through the phone. "You're doing okay?"

"Oh, yeah." Sara paused and waited for the light. So did the shadow. "I'm doing great." She could have turned and looked at them, made them aware that she was aware, but she kept her eyes forward and waited for the signal to cross to see if they would follow.

"Good. I'm glad. I'll try to send you a little something in a couple weeks."

"You don't have to do that," Sara told her. The light changed. She strode briskly across the crosswalk.

"I know I don't have to. I *want* to. Anyway, I'll let you get to work."

"I'm off tomorrow." Sara reached the opposite corner and continued on her way. The shadow kept pace. "Call you then?"

"Definitely. Love you."

"Love you too." Sara ended the call and stuck her phone back in her purse. Then, without warning, she made an abrupt left turn and jogged a few paces, just to get out of his line of sight. She turned, folded her arms across her chest, and put on her very best stern expression as her pursuer rounded the corner after her.

He practically skidded to a stop when he saw her there waiting for him.

"For a supposedly covert operative, you're shit at this," she told him. "I smelled your cologne."

Agent Todd Strickland smirked. "Nice to see you too, Sara."

She did not return the smile. "Still keeping tabs on me, I see."

"What? No. I was in the area, working an op." He shrugged. "I saw you on the street, figured I'd come say hi."

"Uh-huh," she said flatly. "In that case, hi. Now I have to go to work. Bye." She turned and walked away briskly.

"I'll walk with you." He trotted to catch up to her.

She scoffed. Strickland was young for a CIA agent, not yet thirty years old—and, she realized, irritatingly handsome—but he also reminded her too much of her father. The two were friends, going back nearly two years when Sara and her sister had been kidnapped by the Slovakian traffickers. Strickland had helped rescue them, and at that time he'd made a promise that no matter what happened, he would do whatever he could to keep the two girls safe.

Apparently that meant using CIA resources to keep abreast of Sara's whereabouts.

"So things are good?" he asked her.

"Yup. Peachy. Now go away."

But still he walked beside her. "That guy in your building still giving you grief?"

"Oh my god," she groaned. "What, did you bug the place?"

"I just want to make sure you're okay—"

She spun on him. "You're not my dad. We're not even friends. Once upon a time, maybe you were a... I don't know. Glorified babysitter. But now you're coming off like a fucking stalker." She had known that he was tracking her for some time; this was not the first occasion in which he'd suddenly appeared in Florida. "I don't want you here. I don't want to be reminded of that life. So how about you tell me what you want from me, and we can go our separate ways?"

Strickland barely reacted to the outburst. "I want you to be safe," he said plainly. "And, if I'm being honest, I want you to quit the drugs."

Sara's eyes narrowed and her mouth fell open a little. "Just who do you think you are?"

"Someone who cares. It would break your father's heart if he knew."

*If he knew?* "Oh, you mean you're not hand-delivering him weekly reports?"

Strickland shook his head. "Haven't seen him in months."

“So you’re just following me out of some misguided sense of duty?”

The young agent smiled sadly and shook his head. “Whether you like it or not, there are still a lot of people out there that remember Agent Zero. I hope the day never comes that you have to thank me for keeping an eye on you. But until then, I’m going to keep doing it.”

“Yeah. I bet you will.” She looked straight up, squinting at the bright sky. “What is it, a satellite? Is that how you watch me?” Sara stuck one arm over her head and flashed a middle finger to the clouds. “There’s a photo for you. Send it to my dad as a Christmas card.” Then she turned and started away.

“Sara,” he called after her. “The drugs?”

*Christ, why won’t he go away?* She turned to face him. “So I smoked a little weed. Who cares? It’s practically legal here.”

“Uh-huh. And the Xanax?”

*The Xanax.* Her first question was, how did he know about that? The second that crossed her mind was, why hadn’t it kicked in yet? But she knew the answer to the latter already. Her body was getting too accustomed to a single bar. It wasn’t enough anymore.

“And the coke?”

She laughed at him then, a bitter and caustic laugh. “Don’t do that. Don’t try to make me feel like some kind of criminal deviant because I tried something once or twice at a party.”

“Once or twice, huh? You have these parties every night?”

Sara felt her face grow hot. It wasn’t just because he had offended her; it was because he was right. It had started out as once or twice at a party, but then quickly became a bump after work. A little something to take the edge off. But she wasn’t about to acknowledge that now.

“It must be so easy for you,” she said. “Standing there, clean cut, Boy Scout, Army Ranger. CIA agent. Must be so easy to judge someone like me. You say you know what I’ve been through. But you don’t understand it. You can’t.”

Strickland nodded slowly. He stared directly at her, with those eyes that she might have found charming if he was anyone other than who he was. “Yeah. I guess you’re right. I wouldn’t know what it was like to be emancipated at seventeen—”

“I was fifteen,” Sara corrected.

“And I was seventeen. But you didn’t know that about me, did you?”

She didn’t. But she didn’t give him the satisfaction of reacting.

“I joined the Army right away. A lot of states will let you do that. I had my first confirmed kill two days before my eighteenth birthday. Funny thing about the military. They don’t call it ‘murder’ when you kill someone.”

Sara bit her lip. She knew what it was like to kill someone. It had been a mercenary with the black ops team called The Division. He would have killed them, her and her sister, so Sara shot him in the neck. And though the nightmares still plagued her, she’d never once thought of it as murder.

“At one point I was on four different prescriptions,” Strickland told her. “For PTSD. Anxiety. Depression. I abused them all. It was so much easier to be numb, to pretend that everything I did happened to someone else.”

He smiled sadly. “And man, I was a good addict. No one knew. Or maybe no one cared as long as I was a good soldier. Eventually one of my Ranger pals found out. He started following me, keeping close tabs on me. It was so damned irritating. He even took me to see a therapist. It was really hard. It’s so much harder to quit and deal with all your shit than to just take something. I still see a therapist, twice a week when I’m able.”

Sara stared at a small stone on the sidewalk to avoid looking at his eyes. After everything her dad had put her through, Strickland could have been lying. This could have just been a story. But he told it with a lot of conviction. *Just like he was trained.*

“I know that you’ve experienced some awful things,” he continued. “I know how hard it is to commiserate with normal people and listen to them whine about money or jobs or relationships when you’ve seen real, genuine horrors in the world. But don’t stand there and lean on your crutch and tell me that I don’t understand it. Because you’re lying to yourself right now. You’re heading down a path that’s going to lead to addiction. Homelessness. Death. Is that what you want?”

“What I want…” Her voice cracked.

*You will not cry. You don’t do that anymore.*

She cleared her throat and said as clearly as she could, “What I want is for you to leave me alone. I want to make my own choices and live with the consequences. I want to be free of any and all reminders that any of those things ever happened. That includes you.”

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