



JACK MARS

ASSASSIN

ZERO

AN AGENT ZERO SPY THRILLER—BOOK 7

An Agent Zero Spy Thriller

Jack Mars

**Assassin Zero**

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

## **Mars J.**

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— (An Agent Zero Spy Thriller)

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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

When a mysterious ultrasonic weapon attack may be the preamble to something greater, Agent Zero sets off on a global manhunt to stop the ultimate devastation before it is too late. Agent Zero, trying to come up for air on the heels of the President’s impeachment and Sarah’s close brush with danger, wants to retire from the service and try to get his family back together. But fate has other choices for him. With the safety of the world at stake, Zero knows he must follow the call to duty. Yet his memories are shifting, and with it, new secrets are flooding back. Tormented, at his low point, Agent Zero may be able to save the world—but he may not be able to escape from himself. ASSASSIN ZERO (Book #7) is an unputdownable espionage thriller that will keep you turning pages late into the night. Book #8 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**

## **Assassin Zero (An Agent Zero Spy Thriller—Book #7)**

**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).

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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## PROLOGUE

*I can't locate Sara.*

That was what Todd Strickland had told him over the phone. Zero had barely been home from Belgium for a full day, after exposing the Russian president as the puppeteer behind an attempt to annex Ukraine with American interference, when he got the news. Strickland had been keeping tabs on Sara ever since she had become an emancipated minor and moved to Florida, but now she had seemingly vanished. Her cell service was cut off and location inactive. Even her roommates at the co-op where she rented a room claimed they hadn't seen her in two days.

*Text me her home address, Zero had ordered him. I'm going to the airport.*

Just shy of three hours later he stood outside the ramshackle house in Jacksonville, Florida, the place Sara had been calling home for a little more than a year. He marched up the cracked concrete steps and pounded on the front door with the flat of a fist, over and over again without pausing, until someone finally answered.

"Dude," groaned a lanky blond teenager with tattoos up and down his arms. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Sara Lawson," Zero demanded. "You know where she might be?"

The kid's eyebrows knit quizzically, but his mouth curled in a smirk. "Why? You another Fed looking for her?"

*Fed? A chill ran up Zero's spine. If anyone who claimed to be FBI had come around, it could mean she's been abducted.*

"I'm her father." He stepped forward, shoving the kid back with his shoulder as he pushed into the house.

"Yo, you can't just barge in here!" the kid tried to protest. "Man, I will call the cops—"

Zero spun on him. "It's Tommy, right?"

The blond kid's eyes widened apprehensively, though he didn't answer.

"I've heard about you," Zero told him, keeping his voice low. Strickland had given him a full briefing while he was en route. "I know all about you. You're not going to call the cops. You're not going to call your lawyer dad. You're going to sit there, on the couch, and shut your damn mouth. You hear me?"

The kid opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something—

"I said shut it," Zero snapped.

The lanky boy retreated to the couch like a kicked dog, taking a seat beside a young girl who couldn't have been eighteen if she was a day.

"Are you Camilla?"

The girl shook her head frantically. "I'm Jo."

"I'm Camilla." A young Latina girl came down the stairs, dark-haired and wearing entirely too much makeup. "I'm Sara's roomie." She looked Zero up and down. "You're really her dad?" she asked dubiously.

"Yeah."

"Then... what do you do?"

"What?"

"For work. Sara told us what you do."

"I don't have time for this," he muttered at the ceiling. "I'm an accountant," he told the girl.

Camilla shook her head. "Wrong answer."

Zero scoffed. *Leave it to Sara to tell her friends the truth about me.* "What do you want me to say? That I'm a spy with the CIA?"

Camilla blinked at him. "Well... yeah."

“For real?” said the blond kid on the sofa.

Zero held up both hands in frustration. “Please. Just tell me where you last saw Sara.”

Camilla looked at her roommates, and then the floor. “All right,” she said quietly. “A few days ago, she was looking to score, and I gave her...”

“Score?” Zero asked.

“Drugs, man. Keep up,” said the blond kid.

“She needed something to even her out,” Camilla continued. “I gave her the address of my guy. She went there. She came back. Next morning she left again. I thought she was going to work, but she never came home. Her phone’s off. I swear that’s all I know.”

Zero almost saw red at these irresponsible kids, barely adults, sending a teenager alone to a drug dealer’s house. But he swallowed his anger for her. He needed to find her.

*She needs you.*

“That’s not all you know,” he said to Camilla. “I want the name and address of your guy.”

\*

Twenty minutes later Zero stood outside a Jacksonville rowhouse with grimy siding and a broken washing machine on the front porch. According to Camilla, this was the dealer’s house, some guy named Ike.

Zero didn’t have a gun on him. He’d been in such a rush to get to the airport that he’d run out the door with nothing but his car keys and his phone. But now he wished he’d brought one.

*How do I play this? Burst in, kick ass, demand answers? Or knock and have a chat?*

He decided the latter would be a better way to start—and he’d see where things took him from there.

On the third brisk knock, a male voice called out from inside the house. “Hang the fuck on, I’m coming!” The guy that appeared at the door was taller than Zero, more muscular than Zero, and far more tattooed than Zero (who had none). He wore a white tank top with what looked like a coffee stain on it, and jeans that were too big for him, hanging low on his hips.

“Are you Ike?”

The dealer looked him up and down. “You a cop?”

“No. I’m looking for my daughter. Sara. She’s sixteen, blonde, about this tall...”

“Never seen your kid, man.” Ike shook his head. He had a frown on his face.

But Zero noticed the tiny, almost imperceptible twitch of his eye. A flicker on his lips as he willed them not to scowl. *Anger.* He showed a brief flash of anger at Sara’s name.

“Okay. Sorry to bother you,” Zero said.

“Yeah,” the guy said flatly. He started to close the door.

As soon as Ike was partially turned away, Zero raised a foot and delivered a solid kick just below the doorknob. It flew open, crashing into the dealer and sending him sprawling on his belly to the brown carpet.

Zero was on him in a second, a forearm against his windpipe. “You know her,” he growled. “I saw it in your eyes. Tell me where she went, or I’ll—”

He heard a snarl, and then a blur of black and brown as a thick-necked Rottweiler leapt at him. He barely had time to react other than to take the force of the dog and roll with it. Teeth gnashed and bit at the air, finding purchase on his arm and sinking fangs into flesh.

Zero clenched his teeth hard and rolled once more, so that the dog was under him, and pushed down, forcing his bit forearm into the dog’s mouth even as it tried to clamp down further.

The dealer scrambled to his feet and fled the room while Zero grasped behind him for whatever he could find. The dog wriggled and thrashed beneath him, trying to get free, but Zero pinched his

legs together so it couldn't get upright. His hand found a ratty blanket draped on the leather couch, and he pulled it loose.

With his free hand he delivered a single, snapping blow to the dog's snout—not enough to hurt it badly, but to stun it enough that its teeth released his arm. In the half-second before the jaws clamped down again, he wrapped the blanket around the dog's head and relaxed his legs so it could flip over and stand.

Then he whipped the end of the blanket under its body and tied the ends behind its head, wrapped the front half of the Rottweiler tightly in the blanket. The dog thrashed and bucked, trying to get free—and it would, eventually. So Zero scrambled to his feet and dashed after the dealer.

He skidded into a tiny kitchen just in time to see Ike pulling a small, ugly pistol loose from a drawer. He tried to bring it around, but Zero leapt forward and stopped it with a hand, and then snapped it from his grip in a twisting maneuver that definitely dislocated, if not broke, one of the guy's fingers.

Ike yelped sharply and cowered, holding his hand, as Zero aimed the gun at his forehead.

"Don't shoot me, man," he whimpered. "Don't shoot me. Please don't shoot me."

"Tell me what I want to know. Where is Sara? When did you last see her?"

"Okay! Okay. Look, she came to me, but she couldn't pay, so we worked out a deal where she could run my stuff around town—"

"Drugs," Zero corrected. "You had her running drugs. Just say that."

"Yeah. Drugs. It was just a few days, and she was doing okay, but then I gave her a big score of pills..."

"Of what?"

"Prescription pills. Painkillers. And she just ghosted me, man. Never showed up, never delivered. My people were pissed. I was out more than a thousand bucks. And she even took one of my cars, 'cause she didn't have one of her own..."

Zero scoffed loudly. "You gave her a thousand dollars' worth of drugs, and she ran off with it?"

"Yeah, man." He looked up at Zero, his hands up near his face defensively. "If you think about it, I'm really the victim here..."

"Shut up." He gently pushed the barrel against Ike's forehead. "Where was she going, and what kind of car did she take?"

\*

Zero took the black Escalade, which he'd "borrowed" from Ike along with his gun, and used the GPS on his phone to drive as quickly as he could to the drop-off point, all the while looking for a light blue 2001 four-door Chevy sedan.

He didn't see one before he reached the delivery point, which much to his chagrin was a local rec center. But he couldn't worry about that in the moment. Instead he thought to himself, *What would Sara do? Where would she go?*

He already knew the answer before he even finished asking himself the question. It floated to him on the salty scent of the air as easily as recalling a memory.

It was no secret in their family that Kate, Maya and Sara's late mother, had a favorite spot in the entire world. She had taken the girls there on three separate occasions, the first time when they were only eight and six respectively, and told them: "This is my favorite spot."

It was a beach in New Jersey, a phrase that would typically make Zero cringe. The beach was too rocky and the water was usually too cold except for two months in the summer, but that's not what Kate liked about it. She just liked the view. She'd gone there every year when she was a little girl, all through her teens, and had a fond and almost unfounded love for the place.

*The beach.* He knew that Sara would go to the beach.

He used his phone to find the closest ones and drove there like a maniac, cutting people off and blowing lights and overall generally surprised that no cops zipped out from hiding places to pull him over. The parking lots at the beach were only a few rows, long and narrow and full of cars and happy families. But he didn't see any vehicles that matched the one that Ike had described.

He searched three of the largest, closest beaches to Sara's home and work and found nothing. Dusk was falling fast. In the back of his mind he was aware that the US had a new president; the former Speaker of the House had been sworn in that afternoon. Maria was invited there, to the ceremony, and was most likely at some cocktail party by now, full of stuffy politicians and wealthy constituents, sipping champagne and talking idly about a bright future while Zero searched the coast of Jacksonville for his estranged daughter who, last time he'd seen her, had called the police on him and shouted that she never wanted to see him again.

"Come on, Sara," he muttered to the ether as he flicked the headlights on. "Give me something. Help me find you. There must be a..."

He trailed off as he realized his mistake. He'd been searching public beaches. Popular beaches. But Kate's beach had been small and sparsely visited. And Sara had a thousand dollars' worth of drugs. She wouldn't want to be where people were.

He pulled over to the side of the road and opened the browser on his phone. He frantically searched for less popular beaches, rocky beaches, places that people didn't often go. It was a hard search, and it didn't feel like he was making progress until he touched the "images" tab and then he saw it—

A beach that looked remarkably like Kate's beach. As if it had been molded from his own memory.

Zero headed there at about eighty miles an hour, not caring about police or traffic laws or even other drivers as he swerved around cars going far too slow, people casually heading home for the night and not concerned that their daughter might be dead in the surf somewhere.

He skidded into the tiny gravel parking lot and slammed his brakes when he saw it. A blue sedan, the only car in the lot, parked at the farthest end. Night had fallen, so he left the headlights on and put the Escalade in park right there in the middle of the lot, and he jumped out and ran over to the sedan.

He threw the back door open.

And there she was, looking like both heaven and hell: his baby girl, his youngest daughter, pale-skinned and beautiful, lying prostrate in the backseat of a car with her eyes glazed and half-opened, pills scattered around the floor below her.

Zero immediately checked for a pulse. It was there, though slow. Then he tilted her head back and made sure her airway was clear. He knew that most overdose deaths were the result of blocked airways that resulted in respiratory failure and eventually cardiac arrest.

But she was breathing, albeit shallowly.

"Sara?" he said hoarsely in her face. "Sara?"

She didn't answer. He hefted her out of the car and held her upright. She was unable to stand on her own two feet.

"I'm so sorry," he told her. And then he stuck two fingers down her throat.

She retched involuntarily, then again, and vomited into the parking lot. She coughed and sputtered while he held her and told her, "It's okay. It's going to be okay."

He put her in the Escalade, leaving the doors of the sedan still open with pills all over the seats, and drove two miles until he found a convenience store. He bought two liters of water with a twenty and didn't stick around for his change.

There in the parking lot of a Florida gas station, he sat with her in the back seat, her head in his lap as he stroked her hair, feeding her small amounts of water and watching for any signs that he should bring her to an emergency room. Her pupils were dilated, but her airways were open and her

pulse was slowly returning to normal. Her fingers were twitching slightly, but when he slipped his hand into them they closed around his. Zero held back tears, remembering when she was just a baby, when he'd hold her in his lap and her tiny fingers would clench his.

He lost track of time sitting there with her. The next time he glanced up at the clock he saw that more than two hours had gone by.

And then she blinked, and moaned slightly, and said: "Daddy?"

"Yeah." His voice came out a whisper. "It's me."

"Is this real?" she asked, her voice floating to him dreamily.

"It's real," he told her. "I'm here, and I'm going to take you home. I'm going to take you away from here. I'm going to take care of you... even if you hate me for it."

"Okay," she agreed softly.

And eventually he relaxed enough to realize that the danger had passed. Sara fell asleep and Zero slid into the front seat of the SUV. He couldn't put her on a plane in this state, but he could drive back, through the night if he had to. Maria would get rid of the vehicle for him, no questions asked. And the local authorities would be paying a visit to the dealer, Ike.

He glanced over his shoulder at her, curled in the backseat with her knees drawn up and her cheek on the soft leather, looking peaceful but vulnerable.

*She needs you.*

And he needed to be needed.

## **4 WEEKS LATER**

## CHAPTER ONE

“You ready for this?” Alan Reidigger asked, his voice low as he checked the magazine on the black Glock in his meaty fist. He and Zero had their backs to a plywood structure, keeping hidden and obscured by the darkness. It was almost too dark to see, but Zero knew that in moments the whole place would be lit up like the Fourth of July.

“Always ready,” Zero whispered back. He held a Ruger LC9 in his left hand, a small silver pistol with a nine-round mag, as he flexed the fingers of his right. He had to stay cognizant of the injury he’d sustained almost two years earlier, when a steel anchor had crushed his hand to the point of uselessness. Three surgeries and several months of physical therapy later, he had regained most of its operation, despite permanent nerve damage. He could fire a gun but his aim tended to track to the left, a minor annoyance that he’d been working to overcome.

“I’ll go left,” Reidigger laid out, “and clear the causeway. You go right. Keep your eyes up and watch your six. I bet there’s a surprise or two waiting for us.”

Zero grinned. “Oh, are you calling the shots now, part-timer?”

“Just try to keep up, old man.” Reidigger returned the grin, his lips curling behind the thick beard that obscured the lower half of his face. “Ready? Let’s go.”

With the simple, whispered command they both shoved off from the plywood façade behind them and split off. Zero brought the Ruger up, its barrel following his line of sight as he slipped around the dark corner and stole down a narrow alley.

At first it was just silence and darkness, barely a sound in the cavernous space. Zero had to remind his muscles to keep from tensing, to stay loose and not slow down his reaction speed.

*This is just like all the other times,* he told himself. *You’ve done this before.*

Then—lights exploded to his right, a severe and jarring series of flashes. A muzzle flare, accompanied by the deafening report of gunfire. Zero threw himself forward and tucked into a roll, coming up on one knee. The figure was barely more than a silhouette, but he could see enough to squeeze off two shots that connected with the silhouette at center mass.

*Still got it.* He climbed to his feet but stayed low, moving forward in a crouch. *Eyes up. Watch your six...* He whirled around just in time to see another dark figure sliding into view, cutting off the path behind him. Zero dropped himself backward, landing on his rear even as he popped off two more shots. He heard projectiles whistle right over his head, practically felt them ruffle his hair. Both his shots found home, one in the figure’s torso and the second to the forehead.

From the other side of the structure came three tight shots in quick succession. Then silence. “Alan,” he hissed into his earpiece. “Clear?”

“Hold that thought,” came the reply. A burst of automatic fire tore through the air, and then two punctuating shots from the Glock. “All clear. Meet me around the side.”

Zero kept his back to the wall and moved forward quickly, the rough plywood tugging at his tac vest. He spotted a blur of movement up ahead, from the roof of the flat-topped structure. A single well-placed headshot took out the threat.

He reached the corner and paused, taking a breath before clearing it. As he whipped around, the Ruger coming up, he found himself face-to-face with Reidigger.

“I got three,” Zero told him.

“Two on my side,” Alan grunted. “Which means...”

Zero didn’t have time to shout a warning as he saw the human-shaped figure glide into view behind Alan. He brought the pistol up, right over Alan’s shoulder, and fired twice.

But not fast enough. As Zero’s shots landed, Alan yelped and grasped at his leg.

“Ah, dammit!” Reidigger groaned. “Not again.”

Zero winced as bright fluorescent lights came to life suddenly, illuminating the entire indoor training course. Heels clacked against the concrete floor, and a moment later Maria Johansson rounded the corner, arms folded over her white blazer and her lipsticked mouth frowning.

“What gives?” Reidigger protested. “Why’d we stop?”

“Alan,” Maria scolded, “maybe you ought to take your own advice and watch *your* six.”

“What, this?” Alan gestured to his thigh, where a green paintball had splattered across his pant leg. “This is barely a graze.”

Maria scoffed. “That would have been a femoral bleed. You’d be dead in ninety seconds.” To Zero she added, “Nice job, Kent. You’re moving like your old self.”

Zero smirked at Alan, who furtively gave him the finger.

The warehouse they were in was a former wholesale packing plant, until the CIA purchased it and turned it into training grounds. The course itself was a product of the eccentric agency engineer Bixby, who had done his best to simulate a nighttime raid. The “compound” they had been storming was made of boxy plywood structures, while the muzzle flashes were strobe lights placed throughout the facility. The gunshots were reproduced digitally and broadcast on high-def speakers, which echoed in the huge space and sounded to Zero’s trained ear almost like real shots. The human-shaped figures were little more than dummies molded from ballistic gel and affixed to dolly tracks, while the paintball guns were automated, programmed to fire when motion sensors picked up movement at varying ranges.

The only thing genuine about the exercise were the live rounds they were using, which was why both Zero and Reidigger wore plated tac vests—and why the training facility was only open to Spec Ops agents, which Zero found himself once again being.

After the fiasco in Belgium, in which the two of them had confronted Russian President Aleksandr Kozlovsky and unearthed the secret pact he had with US President Harris, to say that Zero and Reidigger had landed themselves in hot water would have been a monumental understatement. They’d become international fugitives wanted in four countries for having broken more than a dozen laws. But they had been right about the plot, and it didn’t quite seem justified for the two of them to spend the rest of their lives in prison.

So Maria pulled every string she could, sticking her neck out in a big way for her former teammates and friends. It was nothing short of a miracle that she somehow managed to have the ordeal retconned as a top-secret operation under her supervision.

The trade-off, of course, was that they had to return to work for the CIA.

Though Zero wouldn’t admit it aloud, to him it felt like a homecoming. He had been working hard the past month, hitting the gym again, target-shooting at the range daily, boxing and sparring with opponents almost half his forty years. The weight he’d gained in his year and a half absence was gone. He was getting better at shooting with his injured right hand. Maria was right; he was very nearly back to his old self.

Alan Reidigger, on the other hand, had resisted at every turn. He had spent the last four years of his life with the agency thinking he was dead, living under the alias of a mechanic named Mitch. Coming back to the CIA was the last thing he wanted, but given a choice between that or a hole at H-6, he had reluctantly agreed to Maria’s terms—but as an asset rather than a full-fledged agent, hence Zero’s digs of him being a “part-timer.” Alan’s involvement would be on an as-needed basis, providing support whenever able and helping to train up younger agents.

But first that meant that the two of them had to get back into fighting shape.

Reidigger wiped at the green paint on his pants, only serving to smear it further across his thigh. “Let me clean this up and we’ll go again,” he told Maria.

She shook her head. “I’m not spending my whole day in this stuffy place watching you take shot after shot. We’ll pick it up again after the holiday.”

Alan grunted, but nodded anyway. He had been an excellent agent in his day, and even now had still proven himself to be sharp-witted and useful in a fight. He was quick despite the extra weight he carried around his midsection. But he'd always been something of a bullet magnet. Zero couldn't recall how many times Reidigger had been shot in his career, but it had to be approaching double digits—especially since he'd been tagged in the shoulder during their Belgian escapades.

A young male tech wheeled out a steel-topped cart for their equipment while a team of three others went about resetting the training course. Zero cleared the round from the Ruger's chamber, popped the magazine, and set all three down on the cart. Then he tore at the Velcro straps of the tac vest and tugged it over his head, suddenly feeling several pounds lighter.

"So, any chance you've reconsidered?" he asked Alan. "About Thanksgiving. The girls would love to see you."

"And I'd like to see them," he replied, "but I'm gonna take a rain check. They could use some quality time with you."

Alan didn't elaborate, and he didn't need to. Zero's relationship with Maya and Sara had been severely strained over the past year and a half. But now Sara had been staying with him for the past several weeks, ever since he found her on the beach in Florida. He and Maya had been talking over the phone more and more—she had almost jumped on the very first plane when she'd heard what happened to her younger sister, but Zero had calmed her down and convinced her to stay in school until the holiday. This week was going to be the first time in quite a long time that the three of them would all be under the same roof. And Alan was right; there was still substantial work to be done to repair the damage that had separated them for so long.

"Besides," Alan said with a grin, "we've all got our traditions. Me, I'm going to eat an entire rotisserie chicken and rebuild the engine of a seventy-two Camaro." He glanced over at Maria. "How about you? Spending time with dear old dad?"

Maria's father, David Barren, was the Director of National Intelligence, essentially the only man other than the president that CIA Director Shaw answered to.

But Maria shook her head. "My father is going to be in Switzerland, actually. He's part of a diplomatic attaché on behalf of the president."

Alan frowned. "So you're going to be alone on Thanksgiving?"

Maria shrugged. "It's not a big deal. In fact, I'm way behind on paperwork, thanks to spending so much time down here with you two idiots. I plan on putting on some sweatpants, making some tea, and hunkering down..."

"No," Zero interrupted firmly. "No way. Come have dinner with me and the girls." He said it without fully thinking it through, but he didn't regret the offer. If anything, he felt a stab of guilt, since the only reason she'd be alone on Thanksgiving was because of him.

Maria smiled gratefully, but her eyes were hesitant. "I'm not so sure that's a good idea."

She had a point; their relationship had ended barely more than a month prior. They had been living together for more than a year as... well, he wasn't sure what they had been. Dating? He couldn't remember ever referring to her as his girlfriend. It just sounded too strange. But it didn't matter in the long run, because Maria had admitted that she wanted a family.

If Zero was going to do it all over again, there wouldn't be anyone else in the world he'd rather do it with than Maria. But when he took a good introspective look, he realized he didn't want that. He had work to do on himself, work to repair the relationships with his daughters, work to exorcise the ghosts of his past. And then the interpreter, Karina, had come into his life, in a too-brief romance that was dizzying and dangerous and wonderful and tragic. His heart was still aching from her loss.

Even so, he and Maria had a storied history, not only romantically but professionally and platonically as well. They had agreed to stay friends; neither of them would have it any other way. Yet now he was an agent again, while Maria had been promoted to Deputy Director of Special Operations—which meant she was his boss.

It was, to say the least, complicated.

Zero shook his head. It didn't have to be complicated. He had to believe that two people could be friends, regardless of their past or current associations.

"It's a great idea," he told her. "I won't take no for an answer. Have dinner with us."

"Well..." Maria's gaze flitted from Zero to Reidigger and back again. "Okay then," she relented. "That sounds nice. I guess I should go get started on that paperwork."

"I'll text you," Zero promised as she left the warehouse, heels clacking loudly on the concrete.

Alan pulled off his own tac vest with a long grunt, and then replaced the sweat-stained trucker's cap over his matted hair before casually asking, "Is this a scheme?"

"A scheme?" Zero scoffed. "For what, to get Maria back? You know I'm not thinking about that."

"No. I mean a scheme for Maria to be a buffer between you and them." For a covert operative who had been living the last four years as someone else, Alan had a brutal candor about him that sometimes bordered on insulting.

"Of course not," Zero said firmly. "You know there's nothing I want more than for things to be the way they used to be. Maria is a friend. Not a buffer."

"Sure," Alan agreed, though he sounded dubious. "Maybe 'buffer' wasn't the right term there. Maybe more like a..." He glanced down at the bulletproof tac vest lying on the steel cart in front of them and gestured to it. "Well, I can't think of a more apt metaphor than that."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Zero insisted, trying to keep the heat out of his voice. He wasn't angry with Alan for being honest, but he was irritated at the suggestion. "Maria doesn't deserve to be alone on Thanksgiving, and things with the girls are far better than they've been in more than a year. Everything is going great."

Alan put up both hands in surrender. "Okay, I believe you. I'm just looking out for you, that's all."

"Yeah. I know." Zero looked at his watch. "Look, I gotta run. Maya's coming in today. Let's hit the gym on Friday?"

"Definitely. Tell the girls I said hi."

"Will do. Enjoy your chicken and engine." Zero waved as he headed for the door, but now his head was swimming with doubts. Was Alan right? Had he subconsciously invited Maria because he was afraid to be alone with the girls? What if them being together again reminded them of why they had left in the first place? Or worse, what if they thought the same thing Alan did, that Maria was there as some sort of protective barrier between him and them? What if they thought he wasn't trying hard enough?

*Everything is going great.*

It wasn't at all a comfort, but at least his ability to lie convincingly was sharp as ever.

## CHAPTER TWO

Maya trudged up the stairs to the second-floor condo that her dad was renting. It was in a newer development outside of downtown Bethesda, in a neighborhood that had been built up over the past few years with apartments and townhomes and shopping centers. Hardly the sort of place she had ever expected her father to live, but she understood that he had been in a hurry to find something available when things fell apart between him and Maria.

*Probably before he could change his mind*, she imagined.

For the briefest of moments she mourned the loss of their home in Alexandria, the house that she and Sara and her dad had shared before all of the insanity started. Back when they still believed he was an adjunct history professor, before discovering that he was a covert agent with the CIA. Before they had been kidnapped by a psychopathic assassin who sold them to human traffickers. Back when they believed their mother had died of a swift and sudden stroke while walking to her car after work one day, instead of being murdered at the hands of a man who had saved the girls' lives on more than one occasion.

Maya shook her head and swept the bangs from her forehead as if trying to push away the thoughts. It was time for a fresh start. Or at least to give it an earnest try.

She found the door to her father's unit before she realized that she didn't have a key and should have probably called first to make sure he was home. But after two brisk knocks, the deadbolt slid aside and the door opened, and Maya found herself staring for several dumbfounded seconds at a relative stranger.

She hadn't see Sara in longer than she cared to admit, and it was evident all over her younger sister's face. Sara was quickly growing into a young woman, her features becoming defined—or rather, the features of Katherine Lawson, their late mother.

*This is going to be harder than I thought.* While Maya more closely resembled their father, Sara had always taken on aspects of their mother, in personality and interests as well as looks. Her younger sister's complexion was paler than Maya remembered too, though whether that was a trick of her memory or a result of a detox, Maya didn't know. Her eyes seemed somehow duller, and there were evident dark crescents beneath each that Sara had attempted to obscure with makeup. She'd dyed her hair red at some point, at least two months earlier, and now the first several inches of the roots were showing her natural blonde. She'd had it cut recently as well, to chin level, in a way that framed her face nicely but made her look a couple years older. In fact, she and Maya might very well have passed for the same age.

"Hey," Sara said simply.

"Hi." Maya snapped out of the initial surprise of seeing her dramatically different sister and smiled. She dropped her green duffel and stepped forward for a hug that Sara seemed grateful to return, almost as if she'd been waiting to see how she might be received by her big sister. "I missed you. I wanted to come home right away when Dad told me what happened..."

"I'm glad you didn't," Sara said candidly. "I would've felt awful if you left school for me. Besides, I didn't want you to see me... like that."

Sara slid out of her sister's arms and grabbed up the duffel bag before Maya could protest. "Come in," she beckoned. "Welcome home, I guess."

*Welcome home.* Strange how little it felt like home. Maya followed her inside the condo. It was a nice enough place, modern with lots of natural light, though rather austere. If not for a few dishes in the sink and the television humming in the living room at low volume, Maya wouldn't have believed anyone actually lived there. There were no pictures on the walls, no décor that spoke to any sort of personality.

*Kind of like a blank slate.* Though she had to admit that a blank slate was appropriate for their situation.

“So this is it,” Sara announced, as if reading Maya’s mind. “At least for now. There are only two bedrooms, so we’ll have to share a room...”

“I’m fine with the couch,” Maya offered.

Sara smiled thinly. “I don’t mind sharing. It’d be like when we were little. It’d be... nice. Having you around.” She cleared her throat. Despite how often they had talked over the phone, it was painfully obviously how oddly awkward it was to be in the same room again.

“Where’s Dad?” Maya asked suddenly, and perhaps too loudly, in an effort to diffuse the tension.

“Should be home any minute. He had to stop off after work and get a few things for tomorrow.”

*After work.* She made it sound so casual, as if he was leaving an office for the day instead of CIA headquarters in Langley.

Sara perched herself upon a stool at the bar-like countertop that separated the kitchen and small dining room. “How’s school?”

Maya leaned against the countertop on her elbows. “School is...” She trailed off. Though she was only eighteen, she was in her second year at West Point in New York. She’d tested out of high school early and was accepted to the military academy on the merit of a letter from former President Eli Pierson, whose assassination attempt had been thwarted by Agent Zero. Now she was top of her class, perhaps even top of the whole academy. But a recent tiff with her sort-of ex-boyfriend Greg Calloway had evolved into hazing and some bullying. Maya refused to give in to it, but she had to admit it made life irritating lately. Greg had a lot of friends, all of them older boys at the academy whom Maya had shown up at least once or twice.

“School is great,” she said at last, forcing a smile. Sara had enough problems of her own. “But kind of boring. I want to know what’s going on with you.”

Sara almost snorted, and then held her hands out at her sides in a grand gesture at the condo. “You’re looking at it. I’m here all day, every day. I watch TV. I don’t go anywhere. I don’t have any money. Dad got me a phone on his plan so he can keep an eye on my calls and texts.” She shrugged one shoulder. “It’s like one of those white-collar prisons they send politicians and celebrities to.”

Maya smiled sadly at the joke, and then cautiously asked: “But you’re... clean?”

Sara nodded. “As I can be.”

Maya frowned at that. She knew a lot about a lot of things, but recreational drug use wasn’t one of them. “What does that mean?”

Sara stared at the granite counter, tracing a small circle on the smooth surface with an index finger. “It means it’s hard,” she admitted quietly. “I thought it would get easier after those first few days, after all the junk was out of my system. But it didn’t. It’s like... it’s like my brain remembers the feeling, still craves it. The boredom doesn’t help. Dad doesn’t want me to get a job just yet, because he doesn’t want me having any extra money lying around until I’m better.” She scoffed and added, “He’s been pushing me to study for my GED.”

*And you should,* Maya very nearly blurted out, but she held her tongue. Sara had dropped out of high school after she was granted emancipation, but the last thing she needed right then was a lecture, especially when she was opening up like she was.

But one thing was clear: Sara’s problem was worse than Maya had realized. She’d thought her younger sister had just been experimenting recreationally, and that the near-OD on pills had been an accident. Yet the opposite was true. Sara was a recovering addict. And there was nothing that Maya could do to help her. She didn’t know anything about addiction.

*But is that really true?*

She suddenly recalled a night, about two weeks earlier, when she’d woken her dorm mate by coming in from the gym at one in the morning. The irritated cadet had grumbled at her, half-asleep,

something about being a “workout junkie.” And then Maya had stayed up for another hour studying, only to be out on the track for a jog at six the next morning.

The more she thought about it, the more she realized she knew all about addiction. Wasn't she addicted to proving herself? Had she not been chasing a dragon of her own success?

And her father, even after all the tumult of the last two years, had still gone back to the job. Sara still craved the chemical high the way that Maya craved accomplishment and their dad craved the thrill of the chase—because maybe they were all just a family of addicts.

*But Sara is the only one that's acknowledged it. Maybe she's the smartest of all of us.*

“Hey.” Maya reached over and put her hand on Sara's. “You can beat this. You're stronger than you know. I have faith in you.”

Sara smiled with half her mouth. “I'm glad someone does.”

“I'll talk to Dad,” Maya offered. “See if he won't relax a little bit, give you some freedom—”

“No,” Sara interrupted. “Dad isn't the problem. He's been great to me; probably better than I deserve.” Her gaze swept the floor. “The problem is me. Because I know damn well that if I had a hundred bucks in my pocket and could go wherever I wanted, he'd have to come find me again. And next time he might not get there fast enough.”

Maya's heart broke at the obvious torment reflected in her sister's eyes, and then again at the knowledge that there was nothing she could do to help. All she had were empty words of encouragement, which were all but meaningless in the scope of solving her problems.

Suddenly she felt incredibly out of place in that foreign kitchen. They had been through so much together. Growing up. Mourning their mother. Discovering their father. Family vacations and fleeing from would-be murderers. The kinds of things that anyone would assume would bring two people closer together, create an unbreakable bond, had instead created the vacuous silence that ballooned in the space between them.

Was this how it was going to be now? Would the girl before her just continue becoming more and more unrecognizable until they were mere strangers who happened to be related?

Maya wanted to say something, anything, to prove herself wrong. Reminisce about some happy memory. Or call her Squeak, the childhood nickname that hadn't been used in god-only-knew how long.

Before she could say anything at all, the doorknob rattled behind them. Maya spun as the door swung open, her fists balling instinctively at her sides. Her nerves still jumped when it came to unexpected intrusions.

But it was no intruder. It was her father, carrying two grocery bags and taking seemingly cautious steps into the kitchen of his own home at the sight of her.

“Hi.”

“Hi, Dad.”

He set the grocery bags on the floor and took a step toward her, arms opening, but then paused. “Can I...?”

She nodded once, and he put his arms around her. It was a ginger hug at first, a hesitant hug—but then Maya noticed, strangely enough, that he still smelled the same. It was an overpoweringly nostalgic scent, a scent of her childhood, of a thousand other hugs. And maybe she was older, and maybe Sara looked different; maybe she still wasn't entirely sure who her father was and maybe they were standing in a new place that she was supposed to call home, but in that moment none of that felt like it mattered. The moment felt like home, and she leaned into it, squeezing him tightly.

\*

Maya tugged open the sliding glass door at the back of the condo, pulling on a hooded sweatshirt against the chilly night air. The condo had no yard, but did have a small deck outfitted with a stubby table and two chairs.

Her dad was in one of them, sipping from a glass of something amber-colored. Maya lowered herself into the other, noting how clear the night was.

“Sara asleep?” he asked.

Maya nodded. “Dozed off on the couch.”

“She’s been doing a lot of that lately,” he said, sounding troubled. “Sleeping, that is.”

She forced a light chuckle. “She’s always slept a lot. I wouldn’t read too much into it.” She gestured to the glass in his hand. “Beer?”

“Iced tea.” He grinned sheepishly. “I haven’t been drinking since going back to work.”

“And how’s that going?”

“Not bad,” he admitted. “I haven’t been on any field assignments lately, since I’m taking care of Sara and still getting back into shape.”

“I was going to mention that you lost some weight. You’re looking much better than...”

*Than the last time I saw you*, Maya was going to say, but she stopped herself, because she didn’t want to dredge up the memory of that visit, when she’d brought Greg to the house, got angry, stormed out, abandoned Greg there, and told her dad she never wanted to see him again.

“Thanks,” he said quickly, clearly thinking the same. “And school is going well?”

She had already told him so earlier, over dinner, but it seemed as if he didn’t quite believe her—and she reminded herself that part of his job was the ability to read people. There was little use lying to him, but that didn’t mean she had to share either.

“I don’t really want to talk about school,” she told him plainly. She didn’t want to talk about how things sometimes went missing from her locker. Or how boys shouted unkind things at her across the quad. Or the feeling she couldn’t shake that it was only the beginning of the torment, that the more she tried to ignore them the more the boys at West Point would escalate.

“Fair enough.” Her dad cleared his throat. “Um, there is something I should mention though. I should have asked you first. But Maria had nowhere to go tomorrow, and it didn’t seem right...”

“It’s okay, Dad.” Maya grinned at his awkward attempt to ask her permission. “Of course I don’t mind, and you don’t need to clear it with me.”

He shrugged. “I guess you’re right. It’s just—you’re so grown up now. Both of you. I missed out on some important parts.”

Maya nodded slightly, though she didn’t feel the need to vocalize her agreement. Instead she changed the subject. “It’s a good thing you’re doing for Sara. Helping her like this. She sounds like she really needs it.”

This time it was her dad who nodded slightly, staring out over the deck at nothing in particular. “I’d do anything I could for her,” he said wistfully. “But I’m afraid it still won’t be enough.”

“What do you mean?”

He took a sip of his iced tea before he explained. “Last week we went to dinner, just the two of us, to this place downtown. It was nice. We talked. She seemed okay. When the check came, I paid with a hundred-dollar bill. And something happened; it was like a shadow passed over her. I saw her look at the money, and then the door, and...”

Her dad fell silent, but Maya didn’t need him to explain any further. Now she understood Sara’s comment from earlier; she had actually been thinking about grabbing the money and making a run for it. She wouldn’t have gotten far with only a hundred bucks, but she was probably thinking in the very short term. Getting a fix wherever she could.

“I’m sure you noticed,” her dad continued, “the place is pretty plain in there. I haven’t really put much out, because...”

*Because you’re worried she might steal it. Pawn it. Run off again.* The CIA hadn’t sent him anywhere in the time that Sara had been living with him, but sooner or later they would—and then what? Would Sara just sit here and wait for him to come back? Or would she be a flight risk, if left to her own devices and demons?

“It’s so much worse than I thought,” Maya murmured. Then, resolutely and without a second thought she added, “I’m staying.”

“What?”

She nodded. “I’m staying. There’s only three more weeks of school before Christmas break. I can make up the work. I’ll stay here through the holidays, go back to New York after New Year’s.”

“No,” Zero told her firmly. “Absolutely not—”

“She needs help. She needs support.” Maya wasn’t sure what sort of help or support she could offer her sister, but she would have time to figure it out. “It’s okay. I can handle it.”

“It’s not your job.” Her dad leaned over and touched her hand. She nearly flinched, but then her fingers closed around his. “I appreciate the offer. I’m sure Sara would too. But you have goals. You have a dream. You’ve worked hard for it, and you need to see it through.”

Maya blinked, a little taken aback. Her father had never once shown support for her goal of joining the CIA, of becoming the youngest agent in history. In fact, he had often attempted to talk her out of it, but she remained steadfast.

He smiled, seeming to pick up on her surprise. “Don’t get me wrong. I still don’t like it at all. But you’re an adult now; it’s your life. Your decision to make.”

She smiled back. He had changed. And maybe there was a chance after all to get back to what they once were. But there was still the matter of what to do about Sara.

“I think,” she said carefully, “that Sara might need more help than we can give her. I think she might need some professional help.”

Her dad nodded as if he already knew it—as if he’d been thinking the same thing himself, but needed to hear it from someone else. She squeezed his hand gently, reassuringly, and they let the silence reign over them. Neither of them knew what would come next, but for now, all that mattered was they were home.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Whoever named New York “the city that never sleeps” has never been to Old Havana,* Alvaro mused as he wound his way toward the harbor and the Malecón. In the daylight, Old Havana was a beautiful part of the city, a rich blend of history and art, food and culture, yet the streets were jammed with traffic and the air was filled with the sounds of construction from the various restoration projects to bring the oldest part of Havana into the twenty-first century.

But at night... night was when the city showed its true colors. The lights, the scents, the music, the laughter: and the Malecón was the place to be. The narrow streets surrounding Calle 23, where Alvaro lived, was vibrant enough but most of the native Cuban bars closed down at midnight. Here on the broad esplanade at the edge of the harbor, the nightclubs stayed open and the music swelled ever louder and the drinks continued to flow in many of the bars and lounges.

The Malecón was a roadway that stretched for eight kilometers along Havana’s sea edge, lined with structures painted sea green and coral pink. Many of the locals tended to snub it because of the staggering tourist population, but that was one of the many reasons Alvaro was drawn to it; despite the increasingly (and irritatingly) popular Euro-style lounges, there were still a handful of places where a lively, addictive salsa beat combated the EDM from neighboring buildings.

There was a joke among locals that Cuba was the only place in the world where you had to pay musicians *not* to play, and that was certainly true in the daytime. It seemed as if every person who owned a guitar or a trumpet or a set of bongos set up shop on a street corner, music on every block accompanied by the rumble of construction equipment and the honking of car horns. But nighttime was a different story, especially on the Malecón; live music was dwindling, losing the fight to electronic music played through computers—or worse, whatever pop hits had recently been imported from the States.

Yet Alvaro did not concern himself with any of that, so long as he had La Piedra. One of the few genuine Cuban bars left on the seaside strip, its doors were still open—quite literally, both of them propped with doorstoppers so that the dynamic salsa music floated to his ears before he stepped inside. There was no line to get into La Piedra, unlike the long queues of so many of the European nightclubs. There was no swarming throng, six deep of patrons vying for the bartenders’ attention. The lighting was not dimmed or strobing, but rather bright to fully accentuate the vibrant, colorful décor. A six-piece band played on a stage that could hardly be called such, just a one-foot raised platform at the farthest end of the bar.

Alvaro fit in perfectly at La Piedra, wearing a bright silk shirt with a white and yellow pattern of mariposas, the national flower of Cuba. He was tall and dark-featured, young and clean-shaven, handsome enough by most standards. Here in the small salsa club on Malecón, he was not just a sous chef with grease under his fingernails and minor burns on his hands. He was a mysterious stranger, an exciting indulgence. A tantalizing story to bring back home, or a sultry secret to keep.

He sidled up to the bar and put on what he hoped was a seductive smile. Luisa was working tonight, as she did most nights. Their routine had become something of a dance in itself, a well-practiced exchange that no longer held any surprises.

“Alvaro,” she said flatly, barely able to suppress her own smirk. “If it isn’t our local tourist trap.”

“Luisa,” he purred. “You are absolutely stunning.” And she was. Tonight she wore a bright maxi skirt, slit high up one leg and accentuating the curves of her hips, with an off-the-shoulder white crop top just barely cresting over a perfect belly button pierced with a stud in the shape of a rose. Her dark hair cascaded like gentle waves over the gold hoops in her ears. Alvaro suspected that half the patrons of La Piedra came just to see her; he knew it was at least true for him.

“Careful now. You wouldn’t want to waste your best lines on me,” she teased.

“I reserve all my best lines *especially* for you.” Alvaro leaned on his elbows on the wooden bar top. “Let me take you out. Better yet, let me cook for you. Food is a love language, you know.”

She laughed lightly. “Ask me again next week.”

“I will,” he promised. “And in the meantime, a mojito, *por favor?*”

Luisa turned to make his drink, and Alvaro caught a glimpse of the butterfly tattooed on her left shoulder. So went the *pasos* of their dance, the steps of their own personal salsa; compliment, advance, reject, drink. And repeat.

Alvaro tore his gaze from her and glanced around the bar, swaying gently along to the rapid and animated music. The patrons were a pleasant mix of music-loving locals and tourists, mostly American, generally peppered by some Europeans and the occasional group of Asians, all of them seeking the authentic Cuban experience—and with a little luck, he would become a part of someone’s experience.

Down at the end of the bar he caught sight of fiery red hair, porcelain skin, a pretty smile. A young woman, likely from the States, mid-twenties at best. She was there with two friends, each seated on barstools on either side of her. One of them said something that made her laugh; she tilted her head back and smiled wider, showing perfect teeth.

Friends could be a problem. The redheaded woman wore no ring and appeared dressed to attract, but it would be the friends who ultimately decided for her.

“She’s pretty,” Luisa said as she set the mojito down in front of him. Alvaro shook his head; he hadn’t realized he’d been staring.

He shrugged one shoulder, trying to play it off. “Not nearly as beautiful as you.”

Luisa laughed again, this time at him, as she rolled her eyes. “You’re as foolish as you are sweet. Go on.”

Alvaro took his drink, his heart breaking just a little more each time Luisa spurned his advances, and went in hopes of seeking the solace of a pretty redheaded American tourist. His methods were well-practiced, though not entirely foolproof. But tonight Alvaro was feeling lucky.

He sauntered along the bar, passing the girl and her two friends without giving them a glance. He took a position at a high-topped table in her line of sight and leaned against it on his elbows, tapping a foot rhythmically to the music and waiting, biding his time. Then, after a full minute, he glanced casually over his shoulder.

The redheaded girl glanced back, and their eyes met. Alvaro looked away, smiling shyly. He waited again, counting to thirty in his head before he looked back at her. She looked away quickly. She was watching him. That was all he needed.

As the song came to an end and the bar erupted in applause for the band, Alvaro plucked up his mojito and approached the girl—not too quickly, shoulders back, head high and confident. He smiled at her, and she smiled back.

“*Hola. ¿Bailar conmigo?*”

The girl blinked at him. “I-I’m sorry,” she stammered gently. “I don’t speak Spanish...”

“Dance with me.” Alvaro’s English was flawless, but still he exaggerated his accent to seem more exotic.

The girl’s cheeks flushed crimson, almost matching her hair. “I, uh... don’t know how.”

“I will teach you. It is easy.”

The girl smiled nervously and—as he expected—looked to her friends. One of them gave her a small shrug. The other nodded enthusiastically, and Alvaro had to keep his smile from broadening into a grin.

“Um... okay.”

He held out a hand and she took it, her fingers warm in his as he led her to the dance floor, little more than the foremost third of the bar where the tables had been pushed outward to make room for the two dozen or so likeminded patrons who had come for the music.

“Salsa is not about getting the steps right,” he told her. “It is about *feeling* the music. Like this.” As the band began the next song, Alvaro stepped forward with the beat, rocking on his back foot, and moving back again. His elbows swayed loosely at his sides, one hand still in hers, his hips moving with his steps. He was by no means an expert, but had been gifted with natural rhythm that made even the simplest *pasos* appear impressive.

“Like this?” The girl imitated his steps stiffly.

He smiled. “*Sí*. But looser. Do like I do. One, two, three, pause. Five, six, seven, pause.”

The girl laughed nervously as she fell into step, loosening up as she became more confident in the movements. Alvaro bided his time, not moving in just yet, waiting for the song to end and another to begin before he gently put a hand on her hip, both of them still moving to the beat, and said, “You are quite beautiful. What is your name?”

The girl blushed deeply again. “Megan.”

“Megan,” he repeated. “I am Alvaro.”

The girl, Megan, seemed to loosen up further after that, succumbing to the charm of a dark, handsome stranger in an exotic land. He had her right where he wanted her. She dared to move closer, closing her eyes, feeling the music as he had instructed, her hips swaying with each small salsa *paso* closer and away—not as shapely or pleasant as Luisa’s hips, he noticed, but attractive all the same. Alvaro knew from experience not to move too quickly, to let the music and her imagination take its hold first, and then...

He frowned as a sensation trembled through him. It was unusual for the pulse-pounding electronic dance music from the club next door to be heard through the walls, but he could have sworn that he heard it.

*Not heard*, he realized—*felt*. He felt a strange thrum in his body, difficult to discern and even harder to describe, so much so that his immediate assumption was the heavy bass from the too-powerful speakers of the next-door club. His redheaded dance partner opened her eyes, her face creasing in a concerned frown. She felt it too.

Suddenly the entire club shifted—or it seemed like it did as a wave of dizziness crashed over Alvaro. He stumbled to the side, catching himself on his left foot before he fell over. The American girl was not so lucky; she fell to her hands and knees. One by one the musicians of the band stopped playing, and Alvaro could hear the groans and frightened gasps of La Piedra’s patrons, backdropped by the dim pounding of the bass from next door.

Whatever this was, it was affecting everyone.

A powerful headache prodded at his skull as nausea bubbled up within him. Alvaro looked sharply to his left in time to see Luisa fall behind the bar.

*Luisa!*

He managed two steps before the dizziness cascaded again, sending him stumbling into a table. Glass crashed to the floor as he overturned it. A woman screamed, but Alvaro couldn’t seem to locate it.

He fell to his hands and knees and crawled, determined to find Luisa. To get them out of there, even if he had to drag them both along the floor. But when next he looked up, all he could see were vague shapes. His vision blurred. The sounds of the panicked bar fell away, replaced by only a single high-pitched tone. The vibrant colors of La Piedra dimmed, the edges of his periphery turning brown and then black, and Alvaro let himself slump to the floor, nauseous and dizzy and unable to hear anything but the tone before he lost consciousness.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Jonathan Rutledge did not want to get out of bed.

It was, to be fair, a terrific bed. Fit for a king, as well as king-sized—although, he mused to himself in those early morning hours, perhaps it would be more fitting to call it president-sized.

He groaned as he rolled over and instinctively reached for the empty spot beside him. Strange, he thought, how he still stuck to his side of the bed even when Deidre was out of town. He was astounded by how quickly she had taken to her new position; currently she was on a circuit through the Midwest, lobbying for funding of art and music programs in public schools, while he pushed his face further into a down pillow as if it might drown out the sound that he knew was coming any moment.

And with that, the phone at his bedside rang again.

“No,” he told it. It was Thanksgiving Day. The only things on his schedule were to pardon a turkey, pose for some photos with his daughters, and then enjoy a nice, private meal with them. Why were they bothering him at the crack of dawn on a holiday?

A sharp knock at the door startled him. Rutledge sat up, rubbed his eyes, and asked loudly, “Yes?”

“Mr. President.” A female voice floated to him through the thick door of the White House master suite. “It’s Tabby. May I come in?”

Tabitha Halpern, his Chief of Staff. She couldn’t be bringing good news this early, and definitely not coffee.

“If you have to,” he muttered.

“Sir?” She hadn’t heard him.

“Come in, Tabby.”

The door swung open and Halpern entered, dressed smartly in a navy blue pantsuit with a crisp white blouse. She took two brisk steps inside and then paused just as suddenly, casting her gaze at the carpet, seemingly uncomfortable standing over the president while he was still lying in bed in silk pajamas.

“Sir,” she told him, “there’s been an... incident. Your presence is required in the Situation Room.”

Rutledge frowned. “What sort of incident?”

She seemed hesitant to say. “A suspected terror attack in Havana.”

“On Thanksgiving?”

“It occurred late last night, but... technically yes, sir.”

Rutledge shook his head. What sort of deviants planned an attack on a holiday? Unless... “Tabby, does Cuba celebrate Thanksgiving?”

“Sir?”

“Never mind. Is there time for coffee?”

She nodded. “I’ll have some brought up immediately.”

“Great. Tell them I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

Tabby turned on a heel and marched out of the bedroom, closing the door behind her and leaving Rutledge grumbling under his breath about the injustice of it all. At long last he swung his bare feet out of the bed and stood, stretching and groaning again and wondering, for what must have been the ten thousandth time, how he had ended up living in the White House.

The technical answer was a simple one. Five weeks earlier Rutledge had been the Speaker of the House—and a damned good one at that, if he could say so himself. He had gained a reputation over his political career as a man who could not be bought, who stuck to his moral code and did not sway from his beliefs.

But then came the news of former President Harris's involvement with the Russians and their plan to annex Ukraine. With the incontrovertible evidence of an interpreter's recording, impeachment proceedings went dizzyingly fast. Then, with minutes to midnight before Harris's definitive ousting, the president threw a hopeful Hail Mary for a reduced sentence by implicating his own VP. Vice President Brown folded like a lawn chair, pleading no contest to having knowledge of Harris's involvement with Kozlovsky and the Russians.

It happened in the span of a single day. Before Rutledge had even finished reading the transcript of Brown's testimony, Harris's impeachment was approved by the Senate, and the VP resigned with a trial pending. For the first time in US history, the third man in line, the Speaker of the House, would take the seat in the Oval Office—Democrat Jonathan Rutledge.

He didn't want it. He had assumed that leading the House of Representatives would be the pinnacle of his career; he'd held no aspirations to go any higher than that. And he could have stated those four little words that would have made all the difference—"I decline to serve"—but in doing so he would have been letting down his entire party. The President Pro Tempore of the Senate was a Republican from Texas, about as far right on the political spectrum as one could go in the democratic system.

And so Speaker Rutledge became President Rutledge. His next step would have been to nominate a vice president and have Congress vote them in, but it had been four weeks since his inauguration and he hadn't done so yet, despite mounting pressure and criticism. It was a very careful deliberation to make—and after what the last two administrations had done, there weren't exactly people lining up around the block for the job. He had someone in mind, the sharp California senator Joanna Barkley, but his time in office thus far had been so tumultuous that it seemed controversy and scrutiny awaited him around every corner.

On any given day, it was enough to want to give up. And he was keenly aware that he could; Rutledge could nominate Barkley as his VP, get the vote of approval from Congress, and then resign, making Barkley the first female president of the United States. He could justify it by the whirlwind of events surrounding his rise to the office. He would be lauded, at least he imagined, for putting a woman in the White House.

It was tempting. Especially when waking to news of terror attacks on Thanksgiving Day.

Rutledge buttoned up a shirt and knotted a blue tie, but decided to forgo a jacket and instead rolled up his sleeves. An aide wheeled in a cart with coffee, sugar, milk, and assorted pastries, but he simply poured himself a mug, black, and carried it with him as two stoic Secret Service agents silently fell in step beside him as he strode toward the Situation Room.

That was just one more thing he had to get used to, the constant accompaniment. Always being watched. Never truly being alone.

The two dark-suited agents followed him down a flight of stairs and along a hall where three more Secret Service agents were posted, each nodding in turn and acknowledging him with a murmur of "Mr. President." They paused outside a pair of oak double doors, one of the agents taking a post with his hands clasped in front of him while the other opened the door for Rutledge, granting him access into the John F. Kennedy Conference Room, a five-thousand-square-foot center of command and intelligence in the basement of the White House's West Wing, known more commonly as the Situation Room.

The four people already present stood as he rounded the table to take a seat at its head. To his left was Tabby Halpern, and beside her, Secretary of Defense Colin Kressley. The Secretary of State and Director of National Intelligence were notably absent, having been sent to Geneva to speak to the UN about the ongoing trade war with China and how it might impact European imports. In their stead was CIA Director Edward Shaw, a severe-looking man whom Rutledge had never actually seen smile. And beside him was a blonde woman in her late thirties, professional but admittedly stunning.

A glance at her slate-gray eyes lit a glimmer of recognition; Rutledge had met her before, at his inauguration perhaps, but he couldn't recall her name.

How they all had assembled so quickly, dressed impeccably and so seemingly alert, was beyond him. *Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed*, as his mother used to say. Rutledge suddenly felt downright slovenly in his rolled shirtsleeves and loosely knotted tie.

"Please, have a seat," Rutledge said as he lowered himself into a black leather chair. "We want to give this matter the attention it deserves, but there are places we'd all rather be today. Let's get right into it."

Tabby nodded to Shaw, who folded his hands atop the table. "Mr. President," the CIA director began, "at 0100 hours last night, an incident occurred in Havana, Cuba, specifically near the northern harbor shore in an area called the Malecón, a popular tourist spot. In a span of approximately three minutes, more than one hundred people experienced an array of symptoms, ranging from dizziness and nausea to permanent hearing loss, vision loss, and, in one unfortunate case, death."

Rutledge stared blankly. When Tabby had said a suspected terror attack, he'd assumed a bomb had gone off or someone had opened fire in a public place. What was all this about symptoms and hearing loss? "I'm sorry, Director, I'm not sure I follow."

"Sir," said the blonde woman beside him. "Deputy Director Maria Johansson, CIA, Special Operations Group."

*Johansson, right.* Rutledge suddenly recalled meeting her, as he had thought, the day of his inauguration.

"What Director Shaw is describing," she continued, "is indicative of an ultrasonic weapon. This sort of concentration on a limited area in such a finite period of time creates parameters narrow enough for us to assume this was a targeted attack."

That did little to explain anything to Rutledge. "I'm sorry," he said again, feeling like the dunce of the room. "Did you say ultrasonic weapon?"

Johansson nodded. "Yes, sir. Ultrasonic weapons are typically used as nonlethal deterrents; most of our Navy's ships are outfitted with them. Cruise ships use them as defense against pirates. But based on what we know happened in Cuba, what we're seeing is much larger in scale and more potent than what our military employs."

Tabby cleared her throat. "The police in Havana collected reports from at least three eyewitnesses who claim to have seen a group of masked men loading a 'strange object' onto a boat in the aftermath of the attack."

Rutledge rubbed his temples. *An ultrasonic weapon?* It sounded like something out of a science fiction movie. It never ceased to amaze and confound him the creative ways humans dreamed up to hurt and kill each other.

"I assume you don't believe this is an isolated incident," Rutledge said.

"We would love to assume so, sir," said Shaw. "But we simply can't. That weapon and the people behind it are out there somewhere."

"And the nature of this attack," Johansson picked up, "appears random. We can't discern a motive to target Havana or a tourist destination other than ease of access and escape, which in a case like this generally indicates a testing ground."

"A testing ground," Rutledge repeated. He had never served in the military, nor had he ever been employed in intelligence or covert operations, but he was fully aware what the deputy director was suggesting: this was the first attack, and there would be others. "And I suppose I should also assume that some of the victims were American."

Tabby nodded. "That's correct, sir. Two suffered permanent blindness. And the lone casualty was a young American woman..." She consulted her notes. "Named Megan Taylor. From Massachusetts."

Rutledge was not prepared to deal with this. It was bad enough that he hadn't yet nominated his vice president, a decision he had been floundering on because he didn't trust himself not to resign immediately. It was bad enough that he was under a microscope, from not only the media but practically the entire world, because of the indiscretions of his two predecessors. It was bad enough that China's new and seemingly irrational leader had sparked a trade war with the US by imposing ever-climbing tariffs on the massive amount of exports manufactured there, which was forecast to cause leaping inflation and, in the long term, potentially destabilize the American economy.

It was bad enough that it was Thanksgiving, for Christ's sake.

"Sir?" Tabby prodded gently.

Rutledge hadn't realized he'd been lost in his own head. He snapped out of it and rubbed his eyes. "All right, brass tacks: do we have reason to believe the United States might become a target?"

"Currently," said Director Shaw, "we should operate under the assumption that the US *will* be a target. We can't afford not to."

"Any intel on who's behind this?" Rutledge asked.

"Not yet," Johansson said.

"But this doesn't quite fit the MO of any of our Middle Eastern friends," offered General Kressley. "If I was a betting man, I'd put hard cash on the Russians."

"We can't make any sort of assumptions," said Johansson firmly.

"Given our recent history," Kressley argued, "I'd call it an educated guess."

"We are an intelligence agency," Johansson fired back across the table, even wearing a thin smirk as she did. "And as such, we'll gather intelligence and work on facts. Not guesses. Not assumptions."

Rutledge found himself very fond of the slight blonde woman who refused to back down from a scowling four-star general. He turned to her and asked, "What do you propose, Johansson?"

"Our top engineer is currently devising a method of tracking this sort of weapon. Based on Havana, I would say the perpetrators are most likely to stay close to the water and target a coastal area. With your approval, sir, I'd like to send a Special Ops team to find them."

Rutledge nodded slowly—a CIA operation sounded far more preferable than sounding the horn on the potential for an attack. *Keep it small, keep it quiet*, he thought. Then an idea came, sudden as an actual light bulb coming to life.

"Johansson," he asked, "one of your agents was the guy that cracked the Kozlovsky affair, yes? He found the interpreter and retrieved the recording?"

Johansson was oddly hesitant, but she nodded once. "Yes, sir."

"What was his name?"

"That would be... well, his call sign is Zero. Agent Zero, sir."

"Zero. Right." Rutledge rubbed his chin. "Him. I want him on this."

"Um, sir... he's not quite field-ready at this time. He's transitioning back to operations work."

The president didn't know what that meant, but it sounded like an excuse or a euphemism to him. "It's your job to make him ready, Deputy Director." There was no swaying him now; Rutledge knew that this was the right call. The agent had singlehandedly rescued former President Pierson from assassination, and uncovered the secret pact between Harris and the Russians. If anyone could find the perpetrators and this ultrasonic whatever-it-was, it was him.

"If I may," Johansson said, "the CIA has one of the very best trackers in the world at our disposal. A former Ranger, and a highly decorated agent in his own right—"

"Great," Rutledge interrupted, "send him too. As soon as possible."

"Yes sir," Johansson acquiesced quietly, staring down at the tabletop.

"Is there anything else?" he asked. No one spoke, so Rutledge rose from his seat, and the four others in the Situation Room stood as well. "Then keep me updated, and, uh... try to enjoy the

holiday, I suppose.” He nodded to them and strode out of the conference room, where the two Secret Service agents instantly fell in step with him.

*Always being watched. Never truly alone.*

Actually, he realized, he was wrong about that. In the moment it felt quite the opposite—no matter how many people were around him, advising him, protecting him, prodding him in one direction or another, he did feel truly alone.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Zero woke to sunlight filtering through the blinds, warm on his face. He sat up and stretched his arms, feeling well rested. But something wasn't right; this bedroom was bigger than it should have been, yet familiar. Instead of a single bureau opposite him there were two, one of them shorter and topped with a mirror.

This was not his condo in Bethesda. This was his bedroom from New York—*their* bedroom, in the house that *they* shared. Before... before everything.

And when he slowly turned his head he saw, impossibly, that *she* was there. Lying beside him, the comforter pulled halfway up her torso, sleeping peacefully in a white tank top as she so often did. Her blonde hair was arranged perfectly on the pillow; there was a light smile on her lips. She looked angelic. Carefree. Peaceful.

He smiled and settled back down on the pillow, watching her sleep. Noting the perfect contours of her cheeks, the slight dimple in her chin that Sara had inherited. His wife, the mother of his children, the greatest love of his life.

He knew this wasn't real, but he wished it could be, that this moment could go on forever. He reached for her and gently touched her shoulder, running his fingertips along her smooth skin, down to the elbow...

He frowned.

Her skin was cold. Her chest was not rising and falling with breath.

Not sleeping. Dead.

Killed by a lethal dose of tetrodotoxin, administered by a man Zero had called a friend, a man that Zero had let live. A decision he regretted every day.

"Wake up," he murmured. "Please. Wake up."

She did not stir. She wouldn't, ever again.

"Please wake up." His voice cracked.

It was his fault that she died.

"Wake up."

It was his fault she was *murdered*.

"WAKE UP!"

Zero sucked in a breath as he sat bolt upright in bed. It was a dream; he was in his bedroom in Bethesda, white walls and plain with only one bureau. He wasn't sure if he had actually shouted or not, but his throat was hoarse and a powerful headache was coming on.

He groaned and checked his phone for the time as he came around to reality. The sun was up; it was Thanksgiving. He had to get out of bed. He had to get the turkey in the oven. He couldn't dwell on a nightmare, because that would mean dwelling on the past, and dwelling about...

About...

"Oh my god," he murmured under his breath. His hands trembled and his stomach turned.

Her name. He couldn't remember her name.

For a long moment he sat like that, his gaze darting around the bedspread as if the answer was going to be written there on its surface. But it wasn't there, and it didn't seem to be in his head either. He could not remember her name.

Zero tore the blankets off of him and practically fell out of bed. He dropped to his hands and knees and reached underneath it, pulling out a fireproof security box the size of a briefcase.

"Key," he said aloud. "Where's the damn key?" He scrambled to his feet again and tore open his top dresser drawer, nearly pulling it out completely. He snatched up the small silver key that laid there, amongst balls of socks and curled belts, and flopped to the floor again as he unlocked the security box.

Inside was an assortment of important documents and items—among them his and the girls’ passports, his birth certificate and Social Security card, two pistols, a thousand dollars in cash, and his wedding ring. He pulled all of those out and made a small pile on the floor, because none of them were what he was looking for. He paused briefly on a picture, a photo of the four of them in San Francisco one summer, when Maya was five and Sara was three. The woman in the photo was completely familiar; he could hear her playful laugh in his head, feel her breath on his ear, the warm touch of her hand in his.

“What’s her goddamn name?!” His voice wavered as he tossed the photo aside and kept digging. It had to be in here. A lot of his things were still in Maria’s basement, but he was certain he would have put it in the security box...

“Thank god.” He recognized the manila envelope and tore the flap opening it. There was a single sheet inside, printed on thick stock and embossed with the stamp of a New York court. Their marriage license.

His throat ran dry as he stared at the name. “Katherine,” he said to himself. “Her name was Katherine.” But there was no relief in it; he felt only terror. The name did not register any memories in him or familiarity. It was like a foreign word on his tongue. “Katherine,” he said again. “Katherine Lawson.”

Still it didn’t sound right, even though it was printed right there in front of his eyes in black and white. Had she been Katherine? Had he called her Katherine? Or maybe it was...

“Kate.”

The air rushed out of him in an enormous sigh. Kate. He called her Kate. The memories rushed back, as sudden as a faucet turning on. Now there was relief, but still it was underscored by the very real fact that for those few harrowing minutes, he had absolutely forgotten his wife’s name—and that was not something he could write off as an arbitrary lapse.

Zero grabbed his cell phone and scrolled through his contacts. International charges be damned; he needed answers. Switzerland was six hours ahead. It would be early afternoon there, assuming their office was open.

“Pick up,” Zero pleaded. “Pick up, pick up...”

“Dr. Guyer’s office.” The female voice that answered the call was soft, tinged with a Swiss-German accent. He would have thought it sultry had he not been panicking.

“Alina?” he asked quickly. “I need to speak with Dr. Guyer, it’s very important—”

“I’m sorry,” she said, “may I ask who’s calling?”

*Right.* “It’s Reid. I mean, Kent. Kent Steele. Zero.”

“Ah, Agent Steele,” she said brightly. “How wonderful to hear from you.”

“Alina, it’s urgent.”

“Of course.” Her demeanor changed on a dime. “I’ll get him for you, hold a moment.”

Dr. Guyer was a brilliant Swiss neurologist, likely among the best in the world—and also the man who had installed the rice-grain-sized memory suppressor in Zero’s head four years earlier, which had wiped his memory clean of any affiliation with the CIA. But Guyer had been acting upon Zero’s own request, and later he was also the doctor who performed the procedure that restored his memory, albeit belatedly.

The two of them had been in contact on and off over the last year; the doctor had been delighted to learn that Zero’s memories had returned and eager to run further tests, but that required a trip to Switzerland, which Zero hadn’t had the time or energy to do—though he fully admitted he owed it to him. Nevertheless, if anyone could tell him what was happening in his head, it was Guyer.

“Agent Steele,” said a deep voice through the phone, accented and somber enough to suggest they were going to skip the pleasantries. “Alina said you sounded distressed. What seems to be the trouble?”

“Dr. Guyer,” Zero said. “I need help. I’m not sure what’s happening, but...” He paused as another horrid thought struck him. What if this wasn’t a private call? What if someone was listening in? The CIA had tapped his personal lines before. And if they heard all this...

*You’re being paranoid. Don’t become that person again.*

Even so, once the thought was in his head, he couldn’t shake it. It was best to err on the side of caution, after all. He’d just made his way back into the CIA, and it felt good. Like his life had purpose again. If they heard about this, things could change very quickly for him—and he didn’t want to fall back into the listless, fifteen-month depressive episode he’d found himself in before.

“Agent Steele? Are you still there?”

“Yes. Sorry.” Zero did his best to keep his voice even and casual as he said, “I’m, uh... having some trouble remembering things.”

“Hmm,” said Guyer thoughtfully. “Short-term or long-term?”

“I would say more of the long-term.”

“And you believe this to be of... concern?” Guyer was choosing his words carefully. Zero wondered if the doctor was thinking the same thing, that their call might be monitored. Someone like Guyer could face a world of trouble for what he’d done—certainly lose his medical license, if not actually face jail time.

“I would say that I think I should schedule that trip to see you sooner than later,” Zero told him.

“I see.” Guyer fell silent, and in that pregnant pause Zero became certain that the doctor was being as careful as he was. “Well, it so happens that you’re in luck. You won’t have to come to me; I’m attending a conference next week at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. I can see you then. I’m sure that one of my colleagues will allow me use of an examination room.”

“Perfect.” Finally some semblance of relief came. He trusted that the doctor would know what to do—or at least be able to explain what was going on in his head. “Text me the details, and I’ll see you then.”

“I shall. *Adieu*, Agent Steele.” Guyer hung up, and Zero sat heavily on the edge of the bed. His hands were still shaking, and his bedroom floor was a mess of strewn nostalgia.

*Maybe it was just a fluke*, he told himself. *Maybe the dream rattled me and it was just a brief bout of waking forgetfulness. Maybe I panicked for nothing.*

Of course he didn’t truly believe any lie he might tell himself.

But despite whatever was happening in his head, life had to go on. He forced himself to stand, to pull on a pair of jeans and a shirt. He replaced the items back into the security box, locked it, and pushed it under the bed.

In the bathroom he brushed his teeth and splashed some cold water on his face before heading down the hall to the kitchen—just in time to see Maya closing the oven door and setting the digital timer.

Zero frowned. “What’s this?”

She shrugged and pushed the sweeping bangs from her forehead. “Just putting the bird in the oven.”

He blinked. “You’re cooking the turkey? Is that something they teach you at West Point?”

Maya smirked. “No.” She held up her phone. “But Google does.”

“Well... okay then. Guess I’ll just get myself some coffee.” He was again pleasantly surprised to find that she’d already made a pot. Maya had always been as independent as she was intelligent, but this almost seemed to him as if she was trying to pull some weight around. He couldn’t help but wonder if she was feeling as helpless about Sara’s situation as he was; maybe this was her way of showing support.

So he decided to stay out of her way and let her do what she would. He took a stool at the counter and stirred his coffee, trying to push the morning’s unpleasantness out of his mind. A few

minutes later Sara trudged her way into the kitchen, still in pajamas, eyes partially open, her red-blonde hair tousled.

“Morning,” Maya said cheerfully.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” Zero chimed in.

“Mmph,” Sara grunted as she dragged herself to the coffee machine.

“Still not a morning person, huh, Squeak?” Maya ribbed gently.

Sara grunted something else, but he saw the hint of a smile on her lips at the sound of her childhood nickname. He felt a warmth inside him that wasn’t just the coffee; this was a feeling he had lacked for some time, the feeling of truly being at home.

And then, naturally, his cell phone rang.

The screen showed him that it was Maria calling and he winced. He had forgotten to text her the time and address to come today. Then he panicked all over again; it wasn’t like him to forget something like that. Was this another symptom of his ailing limbic system? What if he hadn’t actually forgotten, but it had been pushed out, just like Kate’s name had?

*Calm down*, he commanded himself. *It’s just a little absentmindedness, nothing more.*

He took a breath and answered the phone. “I am so sorry,” he said immediately. “I was supposed to text you, and it completely slipped my mind—”

“That’s not why I’m calling, Kent.” Maria sounded somber. “And *I’m* the one who should be sorry. I need you to come in.”

He frowned. Maya noticed and mirrored his expression as he rose from the stool and sought the relative privacy of the adjacent living room. “Come in? You mean to Langley?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, I know the timing couldn’t be worse, but we have a situation and I need you in this briefing.”

“I..” His first instinct was to refuse outright. Not only was it a holiday, and not only was he still dealing with Sara’s recovery, but Maya was visiting for the first time in a long time. Throw in an ample helping of terrifying memory loss and Maria was right; the timing couldn’t be worse.

He almost blurted out, “*Do I have to?*” but held his tongue for fear of coming off as petulant.

“I don’t want to do this any more than you do,” Maria said before he could think of any way to refuse. “And I really don’t want to pull rank.” Zero read that part loud and clear; Maria was reminding him that she was his boss now. “But I have no choice. This isn’t coming from me. President Rutledge asked for you personally.”

“He asked for me?” Zero repeated dully.

“Well, he asked for ‘the guy that cracked the Kozlovsky case,’ but close enough...”

“He could have meant Alan,” Zero suggested hopefully.

Maria chuckled halfheartedly, though it came out as barely more than a breathy sigh. “I’m sorry, Kent,” she said for the third time. “I’ll try to keep the briefing short, but...”

*But this means I’m being sent into the field.* The subtext was plain as day. And worse, there was no excuse or defense he could give to turn it down. He was under the CIA’s thumb for what he’d done, now more than ever—and he couldn’t very well say no to the president, who was for all intents and purposes his boss’s boss’s boss.

“Okay,” he relented. “Give me thirty minutes.” He ended the call and groaned softly.

“It’s all right.” He spun quickly to find Maya standing behind him. The condo wasn’t big enough for him to actually take the call privately, and he was certain she could ascertain the nature of the conversation even hearing only his side of it. “Go, do what you have to do.”

“What I have to do,” he said plainly, “is be here with you and Sara. It’s Thanksgiving, for crying out loud...”

“Apparently not everyone got the memo.” She was doing the same thing he tended to do; attempt to diffuse the situation with gentle humor. “It’s okay. Sara and I will take care of dinner. Get back when you can.”

He nodded, grateful for her understanding and wanting to say more, but ultimately he just murmured “thank you” and headed to his bedroom for a change of clothes. There was nothing more to say—because Maya knew just as well as he did that his day would be much more likely to end on a plane than it would sharing Thanksgiving with his daughters.

## CHAPTER SIX

If anyone were to consider the phrase “Middle America,” the images they conjured would likely be shockingly close to that of Springfield, Kansas. It was a town surrounded by gently sloping farmland, a place where the cows outnumbered the citizens, so small that one could hold a single breath while driving clear through it. Some would find it idyllic. Some would call it charming.

Samara found it disgusting.

There were forty-one towns and cities in the United States named Springfield, which made this town not only unremarkable, but particularly uninspired. Its population hovered around eight hundred; its main street consisted of a post office, a bar and grill, a mom-and-pop grocer, a pharmacy, and a feed store.

For all of those reasons and more, it was perfect.

Samara pulled back her bright red hair and bunched it into a ponytail, exposing the small tattoo on the back of her neck, the single simple character for “fire”—which transliterated in Pinyin to Huǒ, the surname she had adopted after defecting.

She leaned against the commercial box truck and examined her fingernails, biding her time. She could hear the music from there, teenagers and young adults playing poorly while marching to the beat of a rattling snare drum. They’d be at her location soon.

Behind her, in the cargo area of the truck, were four men and the weapon. The attack on Havana had gone surprisingly well, easy even. With any luck, the Cuban and American governments would believe it to have been a testing ground, but their weapon had been tested plenty already. The purpose of the Havana attack was much more than that; it was to introduce chaos. To sow confusion. To present the illusion of a fair warning while making the powers-that-be scratch their heads and wonder.

Nearby, Mischa sat on the curb behind the colorful box truck and idly tugged at brown weeds that had made their way through the cracks in the pavement. The girl was twelve, typically sullen, dutifully quiet, and delightfully lethal. She wore jeans and white sneakers and, almost comically, a blue hooded sweatshirt with the word BROOKLYN screen-printed in white letters across the front.

“Mischa.” The girl looked up, her green eyes dull and passive. Samara held out a fist and the girl opened her hand. “It is nearly time,” Samara told her in Russian as she dropped two objects into the small palm—electronic earplugs, specifically designed to counter a particular frequency.

The weapon itself was unremarkable, ugly even. To see it, most would have no idea what they were looking at, and would hardly believe that such a device was even a weapon—which only worked in their favor. The frequency was emitted by a wide black disc, a meter in diameter and several centimeters thick, which produced the ultra-low sound waves in a unidirectional cone. The most potent of its effects occurred within a range of approximately one hundred meters, but the deleterious effects of the weapon could be felt from up to three hundred meters away. The heavy disc was mounted to a swiveling apparatus that not only held it upright like a satellite dish, but allowed it to turn in any direction. The apparatus was in turn welded to a steel dolly with four thick tires, which also held the lithium-ion battery pack that powered the weapon. The battery alone weighted thirty kilograms, or roughly sixty-five pounds; all together, including the dolly cart, the ultrasonic weapon weighed in at just under three hundred pounds, which was why such weapons were typically mounted on ships or atop Jeeps.

But mounting their weapon on a vehicle would make it far less mobile and far more conspicuous, which was why the four men in the truck were necessary. Each was a highly trained mercenary, but to her they were little more than glorified movers. Had the weapon been lighter, more maneuverable, Samara and Mischa could have handled this operation themselves, she was sure. But they had to work with what they had, and the weapon was as compact as it could be for how powerful it was.

Samara had been mildly concerned about logistics, but so far they had not run into any hitches. Immediately following the Havana attack they had loaded the weapon by ramp onto a boat, which carried them north to Key West. At the small airfield they quickly transferred to a mid-sized cargo plane that took them to Kansas City. It had all been arranged weeks earlier, bought and paid for. Now all they had to do was carry out the careful plan.

Samara meandered casually to the corner of the block as the marching band's music swelled. They were in sight now, heading her way. The box truck was parked at the curb outside the grocer's, two car lengths from the corner where orange cones blocked the road for the parade route.

Samara had done her research. The Springfield Community College put on a Thanksgiving Day parade every year, led by their marching band and following a circuitous two-mile route that started from a local park, wound through the town, and doubled back to the origin. At the forefront of the parade was a young male drum major, wearing a ridiculously tall hat and heartily pumping a baton in one fist. Following them was the tiny college's winless football team, and then their cheerleading squad. After that would be a convertible containing Springfield's mayor and his wife, and after them the local fire department. Bringing up the rear were faculty members and the athletic association.

It was all just so sickeningly American.

"Mischa," Samara said again. The girl nodded curtly and stuck the electronic earplugs into her ears. She rose from the curb and took a position near the cab of the truck, leaning against the driver's side door to avoid the range of the frequency.

Samara unclipped a radio at her belt. "Two minutes," she said into it in Russian. "Power it up." She had taught the team Russian herself, insisted that it was the only language they spoke in public.

An old man in a fleece sweater frowned as he passed by her; hearing someone speak Russian in Springfield, Kansas, was about as strange as hearing a Shar-Pei speak Cantonese. Samara scowled at him and he hurried along on his way, pausing when he reached the corner to watch the parade.

It seemed like the entire town had come out for the event, lawn chairs lined up for several blocks, children eagerly waiting to catch the candy that would be thrown by the handful from buckets.

Samara glanced over her shoulder at the girl. Sometimes she wondered if there was any remnant of childhood left within her; if she observed the other children with longing for what might have been, or if they were alien to her. But Mischa's gaze remained cold and distant. If there was any doubt behind those eyes, she had become an expert at hiding it.

The marching band rounded the corner, horns blaring and drums thrumming, their backs to Samara and the box truck as they marched onward down the block. Young men in jerseys followed on foot—the college's football team, tossing candy into the crowds, kids darting forward and crouching in clusters to snatch it up like carrion birds on a carcass.

A tiny object sailed toward Samara and landed near her feet. She picked it up gingerly between two fingers. It was a Tootsie Roll. She couldn't help but smirk. What an incredibly bizarre tradition this was, the youths of the wealthiest country in the world scrambling over one another to fetch the cheapest of treats tossed idly onto the pavement.

Samara joined Mischa near the cab of the truck, the end facing away from the parade and its patrons. She held out the candy. A flicker of curiosity passed over Mischa's young, passive face as she took it.

"*Spasiba*," the girl murmured. Thank you. But rather than unwrapping and eating it, she stuck it in the pocket of her jeans. Samara had trained her well; she would get a reward when she deserved one.

Samara lifted the radio to her lips again. "Initiate in thirty seconds." She did not wait for a reply; instead she put in her earplugs, a soft but high-pitched tone whining in her ears. The four men in the cargo space of the truck would take it from there. They did not have to expose the weapon; they did not even have to lift the rolling gate at the rear of the truck. The ultrasonic frequency was capable of traveling through steel, through glass, even through brick with little hindrance to its efficacy.

Samara clasped her hands in front of her and stood beside Mischa, silently counting down. She could no longer hear the marching band, or the applause of the parade-goers; she heard only the electronic whining tone of the earplugs. It was strange, seeing so many sights but hearing nothing, like a television on mute. For a moment she thought of that ridiculous adage: *If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?* Their weapon did not make a sound. The frequency was too low to register on a human's auditory spectrum. But there would still be falling.

Samara did not hear the music or the general din of the crowd, and she did not hear the screams when they began either. But mere moments after her countdown reached zero, she saw the bodies falling to the asphalt. She saw the citizens of Springfield, Kansas, panicking, running, trampling one another like so many children clambering for candy. Some of them writhed; several vomited. Instruments clattered to the street and buckets of treats spilled. Not twenty-five yards from her, a football player fell to his hands and knees and spat a mouthful of blood.

There was such beauty in chaos. Samara's entire existence had been based on regime, on protocol, on practice—and yet few knew as well as she did how unreliable all of that could be when mayhem reared its unpredictable head. In those situations, only instincts mattered. It was then that one truly became aware of the self, of what one was capable of. In the chaos that unfolded silently before her eyes, families trampled over their own loved ones. Husbands and wives abandoned their partners in the interest of self-preservation. Confusion reigned; bodies toppled. The crowd would end up doing more damage to each other than the weapon would do to them.

But they could not linger. She nodded to Mischa, who rounded the cab and climbed into the passenger seat as Samara got behind the wheel and put the key in the ignition. But she didn't turn the engine over just yet. They would give it one more minute—long enough for the fallout of the attack to be considered truly devastating, and leave those who would be pursuing them utterly perplexed by the significance of Springfield, Kansas.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Zero entered the George Bush Center for Intelligence, the headquarters of the CIA, in the unincorporated community of Langley, Virginia. He strode across the expansive marble floor, footsteps echoing as he trod over the large circular emblem, a shield and eagle in gray and white, surrounded by the words “Central Intelligence Agency, United States of America,” and headed straight for the elevators.

There was hardly anyone there, a skeleton crew of security guards and a few administrative assistants toiling on paperwork. He was still pretty sour about being called in, being called away from his girls on a holiday, and hoped that the briefing, as its name suggested, would be brief.

But he wasn't about to bet on it.

“Hold the door,” called a familiar voice as Zero pressed the button for the sublevel on which the meeting was being held. He stuck out a hand to keep the doors from closing, and a moment later Agent Todd Strickland trotted in beside him. “Thanks, Zero.”

“They called you in too, huh?”

“Yup.” Strickland shook his head. “Just as I got to the VA hospital, too.”

“You spend Thanksgiving with veterans?”

Strickland nodded once, casually, which Zero took as an indication that it wasn't something he wanted to discuss. Todd Strickland was just shy of thirty, thick-necked and well-muscled, still favoring the military fade style of haircut that he'd worn during his time with the Army. His bright eyes, boyish features, and clean-shaven cheeks gave him a youthful and approachable aspect, but Zero knew that behind the façade was a force to be reckoned with, one of the best the Rangers had ever seen. Todd had spent almost four years of his young life tracking insurgents through Middle Eastern deserts, sleeping in sand, climbing through caves, and raiding compounds. He was a fighter, through and through, and yet he'd managed to maintain a compassion that was just as strong as his sense of duty.

“Any idea what this is about?” Zero asked as the elevator doors slid open.

“If I had to guess? Probably the attack on Havana last night.”

“There was an attack on Havana last night?”

Strickland chuckled lightly. “You really don't watch the news, do you?” He led the way down an empty corridor. It seemed that just about all of Langley was enjoying the holiday at home with their families—except for them, of course.

“I've been a bit busy,” Zero admitted.

“Speaking of, how are the girls?” Strickland was no stranger to Maya or Sara; when the girls' lives were threatened by a psychopathic assassin, the young agent had made a vow that he would keep an eye out for them, regardless of whether Zero was around or not. So far he had stuck to his word.

“They're...” He was about to simply say “they're good,” but he stopped himself. “They're growing up. Hell, maybe grown up already.” Zero sighed. “I gotta be honest. If we get sent out somewhere today, I'm not sure what I'm going to do about Sara. I don't think she's well enough to be left on her own.”

Strickland paused as they reached the closed conference room door, beyond which the briefing would be held. But he lingered, and reached into his back pocket. “I was kind of thinking the same thing.” He handed Zero a business card.

He frowned. “What's this?” The card was simple, ivory, embossed with a website and phone number and the name “Seaside House Recovery Center.”

“It's a place in Virginia Beach,” Strickland explained, “where people like her can go to... recuperate. I spent a few weeks there myself, once upon a time. They're good people. They can help.”

Zero nodded slowly, a little taken aback by how everyone seemed to see it but him. Maya had already told him that Sara needed professional help, and evidently it was plain to Todd as well. He knew precisely why he'd been blind to it; he wanted to be able to help her. He wanted to be the one who pulled her through it. But he had already known, deep down, that she needed more than he could offer her.

"I hope this wasn't overstepping any boundaries," Todd continued. "But, uh... I gave them a call to make sure they had space. There's a spot for her, anytime she wants."

"Thank you," Zero murmured. He didn't know what else to say; it certainly wasn't overstepping any boundaries to do something that Zero probably wouldn't have brought himself to do. He stuck the card in his pocket and gestured toward the door. "After you."

He had attended scores of briefings in his time as a CIA agent, and no two were alike. Sometimes they were populated and chaotic, with representatives from cooperating agencies and video conferences with subject-matter experts. Other times they were small, quiet, and confidential. And even though he was certain that this one was going to be the latter, he was still quite surprised to enter the conference room and find only one person seated at the table, a single tablet in front of her.

Strickland seemed equally puzzled, because he asked, "Are we early or something?"

"No," said Maria as she stood. "Right on time. Have a seat."

Zero and Todd exchanged a glance and took seats on either side of Maria, who was at the far head of the long table.

"Well," the younger agent muttered, "isn't this cozy?"

"I'm sorry for taking you away from the holiday," she began. "You know I wouldn't if I had a choice." She said it as if it was meant more for Zero; Maria knew precisely who and what was waiting for him at home. After all, she'd been invited as well. "I'll get right into it," she continued. "Last night, an incident occurred on the northern waterfront of Havana, and we have strong reason to believe that it was a calculated terror attack."

She told them everything they knew; that more than one hundred people experienced a wide range of symptoms, and that the proximity of those impacted the worst suggested the use of an ultrasonic weapon positioned near the water's edge. As she explained, her fingertips slid across the tablet's touch-screen, navigating through photos of emergency services in Cuba aiding the victims. Some of them needed support just to stand; others had thin trails of blood running from their ears. A few were carried off on stretchers.

"There was only one casualty," Maria concluded, "a young American woman on vacation. And the weapon was not found, hence our involvement."

Zero had heard of this kind of ultrasonic weapon before, at least something like it, but aside from the tiny sonic grenades that Bixby had cooked up, he didn't have any experience with them. But he had to acknowledge that despite the lack of any visual on a weapon or perpetrators, it did sound very much like a terrorist attack—which only made it more confusing.

"Kent?" Maria prodded. "Penny for your thoughts?"

He shook his head. "Honestly, I'm a little perplexed. Why go through the trouble of building or buying this kind of weapon when a single assault rifle and a few magazines would have done a lot more damage?"

"Maybe it wasn't about the damage," Strickland suggested. "Maybe it was a message. For all we know, the perps could have been Cuban. They targeted a touristy area; maybe they're nationalists, and this was some sort of violent protest."

"It's possible," Maria admitted. "But we need to work on facts—and the only facts we have right now are that American citizens were part of this, one of them is now dead, and this weapon is still out there... which is where you two come in."

Zero and Strickland glanced at each other, and then Maria. For a minute there, he had started to think that this might have just been an intelligence briefing, keeping them abreast of what had happened in Cuba, but with those few words he now understood what it really meant.

There was no doubt about it; he was being sent back into the field.

“Hang on,” said Strickland. “You’re saying that *someone, somewhere* in the world, has a fairly portable and powerful sonic weapon, and you want us to what? Just go find it?”

“I understand it’s not much to go on...” Maria started.

“It’s not anything to go on.”

Zero was a little surprised by Strickland’s attitude; at heart he was still a soldier, and never spoke that way to a superior, not even Maria. But he understood, because while Strickland expressed indignation, Zero felt a wave of anger. *This* was why he was pulled away from Thanksgiving, from reuniting his family? He felt for the victims of the Havana attack, but his skills were typically put to use stopping nuclear wars and avoiding mass casualties, not to go off on a wild goose chase for a weapon that had claimed a single life.

“We do have something,” Maria told Strickland. “A handful of eyewitnesses at the harbor claim to have seen a group of men, four or five of them, wearing some sort of protective mask or helmet, and loading a ‘strange-looking object’ onto a boat immediately following the attack. The details are sketchy at best, but a few people also reported seeing a woman with bright red hair, possibly Caucasian, among them.”

“All right, that’s something,” Strickland agreed, appearing to shove down any further protests he might have voiced. “So we go to Havana, find out about the boat, who owns it, where it was going, where it is now, and follow the trail.”

Maria nodded. “That’s the long and short of it. Bixby is working up some tech that should help. And I don’t mean to be pushy, but President Rutledge did use the words ‘as soon as possible’ on this order, so—”

“Can we talk?” Zero blurted suddenly, before Maria could give the official go-ahead for them to act. “Privately?”

“No,” she said simply.

“No?” Zero blinked.

She sighed. “I’m sorry, Kent. But I know what you want to say, and I know that if you do I’ll likely give in and try to get you off the hook. But this came from the *president*. Not from me, not from Director Shaw—”

“And where’s Director Shaw now?” Zero found himself asking heatedly. “At home, I’m guessing? Getting ready to enjoy Thanksgiving with his family?”

“Yes, Zero, that’s exactly where he is,” she replied firmly. She never called him Zero; coming from her, it felt like being scolded. “Because it’s not his job to be here. It’s yours. Just like it’s not my job to put my own neck on the block for you again and again. My job is to tell you where you need to go and what needs doing.” She tapped the tablet twice with a finger. “This is where you’re going. This is what you’re doing.”

Zero stared down at the tabletop, smooth and polished to a reflective sheen. He had foolishly thought that he and Maria could still be friends after all they’d been through. But at the end of the day, this was how it would shake out. She was his boss, and this was what it felt like to have rank pulled on him.

He did not at all like the feeling, not any more than he liked the idea of the president commanding that he be put on this. As far as he was concerned, this was a complete waste of his skills. But he didn’t bother saying that.

“Just look at the state of things.” Maria’s tone softened, but she didn’t look directly at either of them. “We’ve got a trade war on our hands with China. Our ties to Russia are all but severed. Ukraine is less than pleased with us. Belgium and Germany are both still pissed about what they believe was

an unsanctioned op last month. No one trusts our leadership—least of all our own people. We don't even have a vice president yet." She shook her head. "We *cannot* allow for the possibility of an attack on US soil, even if it's just a possibility. Not if we can help it."

Zero wanted to argue. He wanted to point out that the efficacy of two men, highly trained or not, was still paltry compared to a cooperative effort of law enforcement agencies. He could understand why they didn't want to make a big public issue out of this, but even so—if they truly wanted to find these people, if they really thought that an attack on the US was likely, they could put out an APB, starting with coastal areas of Florida, Louisiana, Texas, the best estimates of potential targets considering the Havana attack. Have the Cuban government investigate the missing boat. Work together, as they should, to protect their respective citizens and anyone else who might be hurt along the way.

And Zero was about to suggest it aloud too, but before he got the chance, Maria's cell phone rang.

"One sec," she told them before answering with her typical greeting: "Johansson."

Then her face fell slack, and her gaze met Zero's. He had seen that expression before, many times—far too many for comfort. It was a look of shock and horror.

"Send me everything," Maria said into the phone, her voice a hoarse whisper. She ended the call, and he already knew what she was going to tell them before she even said it.

"There's been an attack on US soil."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Already?* Zero was stunned by the speed with which a subsequent attack had come—he had clearly underestimated the severity of the situation.

But he was even more shocked when Maria told them *where* it happened.

“The attack was on a small town in the Midwest.” Maria studied the tablet screen, scrolling through the intel just as fast as it was coming in. “A place called Springfield, in Kansas—population of eight hundred forty-one.”

“Kansas?” Zero repeated. If they had gotten all the way to Kansas since the Havana attack, that meant... “They must have traveled by plane.”

“Which means this was planned,” Strickland added. The young agent stood suddenly, as if there was something he could do in that moment. “But why? What could possibly be significant about a one-horse town in Kansas?”

“No idea,” Maria murmured. Then her hand flew to her mouth. “Oh my god.” She looked up at Zero, her eyes wide. “There was a parade going on. College kids, families... children.”

Zero took a deep breath, working to mentally put distance between the part of him that was a father and former professor, and the part of him that was an agent. “Fallout?”

“Unclear,” Maria reported, staring back down at the tablet. “This *just* happened. The first nine-one-one call was twenty-three minutes ago. But...” Her throat flexed in a gulp. “Initial reports from first-responders are claiming sixteen dead at the scene. Though it’s likely more.”

Strickland paced the short length of the conference room like a tiger waiting to be sprung from a cage. “We can’t assume the casualties were entirely the result of the weapon. Some could have been from panic.”

“But maybe that’s the point,” Zero murmured.

“Hang on, we’ve got a video incoming.” Maria tilted the tablet, and both men crowded at her shoulders to see it. She pressed play, and the screen filled with the shaky perspective of someone filming with a cell phone. The scene was of a small town’s main stretch, the camera angle directed up the block, catching in its lens the sidewalks jammed with people and chairs on both sides of the avenue.

From around the corner up ahead came a group of young people in green and white uniforms—a marching band, stepping in time with their instruments aloft, the approaching music drowning out the din of applause and cheers.

“They’re almost here, Ben!” said a cheerful female voice, presumably the woman behind the camera phone. “Are you ready? Wave to Maddie!”

The camera panned down briefly, showing a little boy who couldn’t have been more than five or six, an enormous smile on his face as he waved at the oncoming band. Then it panned back up, showing a group of young men in green jerseys coming around the corner behind the band—a football team, it appeared, tossing handfuls of candy from buckets.

A knot of dread formed in Zero’s stomach, knowing that disaster was about to strike.

The transition wasn’t sudden. It was slow and bizarre, unfolding over the next several seconds. Zero leaned closer, apprehensive yet rapt as he watched.

First, the camera panned down slightly, and he just barely heard the woman behind it as she muttered, “Does anyone else feel that? What *is* that...?”

Almost at the same time, several members of the band stepped out of cadence. One by one, instruments stopped playing as gasps and confused shouts mingled with the cheers.

A trumpet hit the street. Then a body. Band members stumbled. Behind them, the young men in jerseys keeled. The camera shook terribly as the woman whipped left and right, looking for a source, or perhaps trying to make sense of what was happening.

“Ben?” she shrieked. “Ben!”

Screams rose from the crowd as it surged in every direction. For all of two seconds, Zero witnessed absolute chaos; people running over one another, holding their heads, clutching stomachs, falling over. Then the phone was dropped to the street and the screen went black.

“Jesus,” Strickland murmured.

Zero rubbed his chin as he stepped back from the table. He had only been half-right; it was true that a single assault rifle would have done more damage, but this—an invisible force, a hidden weapon, no assailants in sight—this was downright harrowing. It had simply swept through the street like a slow breeze, affecting hundreds of people in seconds. If something like this got out...

“Is this video public?” he asked.

“I hope not,” Maria said, clearly thinking the same thing he was. “It came from Springfield PD, which is...” She consulted the tablet again. “Only five officers strong. We’ll do what we can on our end, but I doubt they’ll be able to keep that under wraps.”

“If that gets out, people are going to panic,” said Strickland.

“Exactly,” Zero agreed as he worked out a theory aloud. “In Havana, they struck at a packed tourist district. In Kansas, a busy parade route. Populated areas that appear random. Maybe they’re trying to prove that their weapon is just a catalyst, and that people will do just as much damage to each other as they can do to them.”

“So it could be a message after all,” said Strickland as he paced the conference room.

It was the only thing that made sense in the moment; an attack on such a small town was an attempt to make their targets appear random in order to sow panic and confusion. “But if that’s the case, what would happen if they got this thing into New York City? Or Washington, DC?”

Strickland stopped pacing. “They’re practically taunting us. Telling us that the next target could be anywhere. At any time.”

“So far local authorities aren’t sure what happened,” Maria announced. “It doesn’t seem like anyone but us is linking it to the sonic attack on Havana—yet.”

“But as soon as they do,” Zero added, “no one is going to feel safe.” He was already imagining it; something as innocent as walking down a busy street and being caught in an ultrasonic blast. Not knowing what was happening or where it was coming from or what to do or how to stop it.

It was a terrifying thought, even for him.

Maria’s tablet chirped suddenly. Zero glanced over her shoulder to see an incoming call on the CIA’s encrypted server, but instead of displaying a source it simply read, “SECURE.”

Maria took a breath and answered. It was a video call; a smartly dressed brunette woman suddenly appeared, looking solemn as a statue.

“Deputy Director,” said the woman by way of greeting.

“Ms. Halpern.”

Zero didn’t recognize the woman’s face, but he knew the name; Tabitha Halpern was the White House Chief of Staff under President Rutledge. And he knew the background behind her quite well. She was sitting in the Situation Room, a place he had been numerous times before.

“I have the president here with me,” Halpern said. “He’d like a word.” She reached forward and swiveled the screen until it settled on Jonathan Rutledge, seated at the head of the conference table. He wore a white shirt with the sleeves pushed to his elbows, a blue tie knotted loosely around his neck, and a world-weary expression on his face.

“Mr. President.” Maria nodded. “I’m sorry you had to take that seat twice in one day.”

“So you’ve heard?” Rutledge said, skipping the formalities.

“Yes sir. Just now.”

“Is that him behind you? I want to speak to him.”

Zero hadn't realized that he was partially in the camera's view—and if he knew that he would be videoconferencing with the president, he would have put on something nicer than a T-shirt and a light jacket. Maria passed him the tablet, and he held it in front of him.

"So you're the one they call Zero," Rutledge said simply.

"Yes sir, Mr. President," he replied with a curt nod. "It's unfortunate that we have to meet under these circumstances."

"Unfortunate. Yes." Rutledge rubbed his chin. There was something about him that seemed... well, to Zero it seemed less than presidential. He looked lost. He looked like a man in over his head. "Have you seen the video of the attack, Agent?"

"I have, sir. Just now. 'Terrible' doesn't quite do it justice, but it's the first word that comes to mind."

"Terrible. Yes." The president nodded, his gaze unfocused and far away. "Do you have children, Agent Zero?"

It seemed an odd question—especially one to ask of a covert operative whose identity was supposed to be confidential, but Zero told him, "Yes. Two daughters."

"Same here. Fourteen and sixteen." Rutledge put his elbows on the table and at last looked Zero in the eye, or his best approximation through a camera. "I need you to find these people. Find this weapon. Put a stop to this. Please. This cannot happen again."

Under even normal circumstances, which these were far from, Zero would not be able to deny an order from the President of the United States. Still, he didn't need Rutledge to implore him to take on the operation. From the time Maria had announced an attack on US soil, he'd already known that this was not something he would be able to turn away from. It was coded into his DNA; if there was something he could do about it, he would do it.

"I will." He glanced over at Strickland and corrected himself. "We will, sir."

"Good. And tell Johansson that you are to have *every* resource made available to you."

Zero frowned at that; it seemed like an odd emphasis to put on the statement, one that was likely meant more for Maria than for him.

"Godspeed," said Rutledge, and he ended the video call abruptly.

Zero passed the tablet back to Maria, who immediately checked for incoming updates on the scene in Kansas.

Strickland sighed heavily. "There's just one problem. Havana's a dead end now, and if they can travel as quickly as they did, there likely won't be anything to find in Kansas either. We have less to go on than we did before."

"That's not entirely true." Maria looked up from the tablet. "An eyewitness in Springfield, an elderly man, reported that he passed a woman on the street just moments before the attack—a white woman with bright red hair. Just like in Cuba. And this man claims he heard her speaking Russian into a radio."

"Russians?" Zero parroted. He shouldn't have been surprised, not after everything that had happened in the last year and a half. But the previous plots had involved secret cabals, huge sums of money, powerful people. This didn't feel at all like the same MO, nor could he ascertain a motive for this kind of attack beyond some sort of revenge scheme.

"Even so," Strickland pointed out, "'Russian redhead' doesn't exactly narrow things down."

"You're right." Maria pulled out her cell phone. "But there's something that can." She pressed a button and then said into the phone, "I'm coming down. I need OMNI."

"What's OMNI?" Strickland asked before Zero got the chance.

"It's... complicated," Maria said cryptically. "But I'll show you." She rose from her chair, bringing the tablet with her as she headed for the door.

Zero knew that “coming down” likely meant going to Bixby’s lab, the subterranean research and development arm of the Central Intelligence Agency. They were already on a sublevel, and the odd engineer was the only one below them—at least as far as Zero was aware.

He also knew by now that he was not going home, not having dinner with his girls. Once they were out in the empty corridor he said, “Hang on. Can I make a call?”

Maria hesitated, but nodded. “All right. But make it quick. We’ll meet you at the elevators.” The two of them headed down the hall as Zero pulled out his cell phone—as well as the small white card that Strickland had given him.

With his finger on the call button, he changed his mind and instead opened the video calling app, holding the phone in front of him at an angle so his face was in view of the camera.

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