



FILE

ZERO

AN AGENT ZERO SPY THRILLER—BOOK 5

JACK MARS

An Agent Zero Spy Thriller

Jack Mars

File Zero

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2019

Mars J.

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

ISBN 978-1-09-431033-6

“You will not sleep until you are finished with AGENT ZERO. A superb job creating a set of characters who are fully developed and very much enjoyable. The description of the action scenes transport us into a reality that is almost like sitting in a movie theater with surround sound and 3D (it would make an incredible Hollywood movie). I can hardly wait for the sequel.” --Roberto Mattos, Books and Movie Reviews In FILE ZERO (Book #5), Agent Zero’s memory finally comes flooding back—and with it, shocking revelations about the CIA’s secret plot to spark a war and to take his life. Disavowed and on the run, can he stop them in time? When an incident in the Strait of Hormuz threatens to mushroom into an all-out war, Agent Zero’s memory comes rushing back, and with it, a chance to uncover the plot that caused his memory loss to begin with. Discredited, with few friends left, Zero is on his own as he tries to stop the CIA while also saving his targeted family. Yet as he digs deeper, another, more nefarious, plot comes to surface, one which will require him to trust no one, and to risk it all to save the country he loves. FILE ZERO (Book #5) is an un-putdownable espionage thriller that will keep you turning pages late into the night. Book #6 in the AGENT ZERO series is now also available. “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!

ISBN 978-1-09-431033-6

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Jack Mars

File Zero (An Agent Zero Spy Thriller—Book #5)

Jack Mars

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

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

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TRAPPING ZERO (Book #4) – Summary

A new threat rises to power that threatens to shake the foundation of America to its core. It's up to CIA Agent Kent Steele to pull at the threads and unravel the brilliant but deadly master plan before it is executed—all while staying out of the line of fire of those who want him dead.

Agent Zero: Though he was unable to stop the Brotherhood from destroying the Midtown Tunnel in New York, Agent Zero successfully ended the terrorist organization and helped save thousands of lives. During a clandestine award ceremony at the White House, his lost memories suddenly returned to him all at once—including his knowledge about the war conspiracy.

Maya and Sara Lawson: Now that they know what their father is and does, Zero's daughters understand that they are viable targets for those trying to get to him. However, they refuse to become victims again, displaying intelligence and tenacity far beyond their age.

Agent Maria Johansson: Maria continues to work with the Ukrainians despite Zero's insistence that she break ties. Though stopping the war is crucial to her, she is equally determined to find out if her father, a high-ranking member of the National Security Council, is involved in the government conspiracy—and if not, what might become of him if he doesn't relent.

Agent Todd Strickland: The young CIA agent and former Army Ranger was stunned to learn of the government plot from his friend Agent Zero, but now that he knows, he is as resolute as anyone to help put an end to it and keep innocent people from needlessly dying.

Dr. Guyer: The brilliant Swiss neurologist that initially installed the memory suppressor in Agent Zero's head attempted to bring the memories back with a machine of his own invention. He believed the process had failed, and is unaware that Zero's memories have belatedly returned.

Agent Talia Mendel: The Israeli Mossad agent helped put a stop to the Brotherhood's plot in both Haifa and New York. Though unaware of the conspiracy, Mendel makes no attempt to hide her appreciation for, and attraction to, Agent Zero, willing to help in any capacity she's able.

Fitzpatrick: The leader of the "private security force" known as the Division, Fitzpatrick was sent after Agent Zero by Deputy Director Ashleigh Riker in an effort to stall him in New York. Fitzpatrick was struck by a car driven by Talia Mendel, his fate largely unknown.

CHAPTER ONE

I am Agent Zero.

He had already known it, at least for the past few months, ever since the memory suppressor had been violently ripped from his skull by the trio of Iranian terrorists working for Amun. But this... this was different from just knowing. It was an awareness, a sense of being and belonging that had come on as swiftly as a heart attack, and equally pernicious.

“Agent Zero?” said President Eli Pierson. “Do you need to sit?”

Reid Lawson stood in the Oval Office, the President of the United States standing before him with a smile on his lips but puzzlement in his eyes. In his hands, the president held a polished wooden box of dark cherry. The lid was open; nestled in a small pillow of velvet was the Distinguished Intelligence Cross, the highest award the CIA could give.

Only a minute earlier, Reid could not recall ever having visited the White House before. But now he recalled it all. He had been here several times, clandestine meetings just like this one, so the president could commend him on a job well done.

Less than a minute earlier, the president had said, “I’m so sorry. Director Mullen, is this the Intelligence Cross, or the Star? I can’t seem to keep them straight.”

And that was when it happened. That single word had triggered it all:

Straight.

That word stuck in Reid’s mind and lodged there, sending an electric tingle up his spine.

Strait.

And then the floodgates opened suddenly and without warning. It felt as if an intruder had shouldered open the door to his brain, forced his way in, and made it his new home. Quick as a bolt of lightning, he remembered.

He remembered *everything*.

Hunting terrorists in the Gaza Strip. Apprehending bomb makers in Kandahar. Midnight raids on compounds. Briefings, debriefings, weapons training, combat training, flight lessons, languages, interrogation tactics, rapid intervention... In half a second, the dam in Reid Lawson’s limbic system broke and Agent Zero surged through. It was too much, far too much to process that quickly. His knees threatened to buckle and his hands trembled. He slumped; Maria’s arms caught him before he hit the carpet.

“Kent,” she said quietly but urgently. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” he murmured.

I need to get out of here.

“I’m okay.”

I’m not okay.

“It’s, uh...” He cleared his throat and forced himself to stand again, albeit shakily. “It’s just the pain medication, for my hand. Made me a bit woozy. I’m okay.” His right hand was wrapped in layers of metal braces, gauze, and tape, after the terrorist Awad bin Saddam had crushed it with the anchor of a motorboat. Nine of the twenty-seven bones in his hand were broken.

And even though there had been a throbbing pain only a minute ago, he now felt nothing.

President Pierson smiled. “I understand. No one here will be offended if you sit.” The president was a charismatic man, young for the office at only forty-six and nearing the end of his first term. He was an excellent orator, praised by the middle class, and he had been a friend to Zero. Now he knew it to be true: his memories told him.

“Really. I’m okay.”

“Good.” The president nodded and lifted the dark cherry box in his hands. “Agent Zero, it is my great honor and genuine pleasure to give you this Distinguished Intelligence Cross.”

Reid nodded, forcing himself to stand straight, to keep himself steady as Pierson presented the gold, three-inch-round medal nestled inside the box. He handed it to Reid gently and Reid took it.

“Thank you. Um, Mr. President.”

“No,” said Pierson. “Thank *you*, Agent Zero.”

Agent Zero.

The room broke out into light applause and Zero looked up quickly, bewildered; he had nearly forgotten there were other people in the Oval Office. Standing to the left of Pierson’s desk was Vice President Cole, and beside him were the Secretaries of Defense, Homeland Security, and State. Opposite them were Christopher Poe, head of the FBI, Governor Thompson of New York, and Director of National Intelligence John Hillis.

Beside the DNI was Zero’s own boss, CIA Director Mullen, his hands making a show of clapping but hardly emitting any noise. His bald head, ringed with gray hair, gleamed under the lights. Deputy Director Ashleigh Riker was beside him in her usual uniform of a charcoal gray pencil skirt and matching blazer.

He knew about them. These people who were applauding him, he had gathered intelligence on nearly every single one of them that suggested they were involved in the plot. The knowledge came to him as if it had always been there. The Secretary of Defense, retired general Quentin Rigby; Vice President Cole; even DNI Hillis, the only man other than President Pierson that Mullen answered to. Not one among them was innocent. They were not to be trusted. They were all involved.

Two years ago, Zero had discovered the plot, or at least part of it, and he had been building a case. While interrogating a terrorist at the black site H-6 in Morocco, Zero had stumbled upon a conspiracy for the United States to manufacture a war in the Middle East.

The strait—that was the trigger. The intention was for the US to gain control of the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow waterway between the Gulf of Oman and Iran, a global thoroughfare for oil shipping and one of the most strategic maritime chokepoints the world over. It was no secret that the United States had a substantial presence in the Persian Gulf, an entire fleet, and it was all for one reason: to protect their interests. And their interests boiled down to a single resource.

Oil.

That’s what this was about. That’s what it had always been about. Oil meant money, and money meant that the people in power got to stay in power.

The Brotherhood’s attack on New York City was the catalyst. A large-scale terrorist attack was just the provocation the government needed not only to justify a war, but to rally the American people to the side of abject patriotism. They had seen it work before with the attack on September 11, and had been keeping the notion in their back pocket until they needed it again.

Awad bin Saddam, the young leader of the Brotherhood who believed he had orchestrated the attack, had been a pawn. He had unwittingly been led to the conclusions he thought he had drawn himself. The Libyan arms dealer that had supplied the terrorists with submersible drones was undoubtedly a liaison between the US and the Brotherhood. But there was no way to prove that now; the Libyan was dead. Bin Saddam was dead. Anyone who might be able to substantiate Zero’s belief was dead.

Now the catalyst had happened. Even though Zero and his small team had thwarted the large-scale loss of life that bin Saddam had hoped for, hundreds had been killed and the Midtown Tunnel was lost. The American people were outraged. Xenophobia and hostility toward Middle Easterners was already running rampant.

Two years ago, he thought he had time to build a case, to gather evidence—but then came Amun, Rais, and the memory suppressor. Now, he was out of time. The men surrounding him, applauding him, these heads of state and government captains, were about to start a war.

But this time around, Zero wasn’t alone.

To his left, standing in a line beside him in front of the president's desk, were the people that he counted among friends. Those he could trust; or rather, those he believed he could trust.

John Watson. Todd Strickland. Maria Johansson.

Watson's real name is Oliver Brown. Born and raised in Detroit. Lost his six-year-old son to leukemia three years ago.

Maria's real name is Clara. She told you that after your first night together, during your tryst. After Kate died.

No. After Kate was murdered.

My god. Kate. The memory struck him like a hammer to the head. She had been poisoned with a powerful toxin that caused respiratory and cardiac failure as she walked to her car after work one day. Zero had always believed it was the work of Amun and their top assassin, but Rais's dying words had been but three letters.

C-I-A.

I need to get out of here.

"Agents," said President Pierson, "I thank you once again on behalf of the American people for your service." He flashed a winning smile at the four of them before addressing the entire room. "Now, we have an excellent luncheon prepared in the State Dining Room, if you'll all indulge me. Right this way—"

"Sir," Zero spoke up. Pierson turned to him, the smile still on his lips. "I appreciate the offer, but if it's all the same to you, I, uh, really think I should get some rest." He held up his right hand, wrapped thick as a catcher's mitt. "My head is swimming from the medication."

Pierson nodded deeply. "Of course, Zero. You deserve some rest, some time with your family. Although it feels a bit odd to hold a reception without a guest of honor, I doubt this will be the last time we see each other." The president grinned. "This must be, what, the fourth time we've met like this?"

Zero forced a smile of his own. "Fifth, if I'm not mistaken." He shook the president's hand once more, awkwardly, with his uninjured left. As he left the Oval Office, escorted by two Secret Service agents, he couldn't help but notice in his periphery the expressions on Rigby's and Mullen's faces.

They're suspicious. Do they know I know?

You're being paranoid. You need to get out of here and focus.

It wasn't paranoia. As he followed the two black-suited agents down the corridor, an alarm rang out in his head. He realized what he had just done. *How could you be so careless!* he scolded himself.

He had just admitted, in front of the entire Oval Office of conspirators, that he remembered precisely how many times he'd been commended personally by Pierson.

Maybe they didn't notice. But of course they did. By stopping the Brotherhood, Zero had made it clear that he was the top obstacle that stood in their way. They were aware that Zero knew things, at least partially. And if they suspected even for a moment that his memory had returned, he would be watched even more carefully than he'd been before.

All that meant to him was that he had to move faster than they did. The men he left behind in the Oval Office were already enacting their plan, and Zero was the only person who knew enough to stop them.

*

Outside it was a beautiful spring day. The weather was finally turning; the sun felt warm on his skin and the dogwood trees on the White House lawn had just begun to sprout small white flowers. But Zero hardly noticed. His head was spinning. He needed to get away from the influx of stimuli so he could process all this sudden information.

“Kent, wait up,” Maria called out. She and Strickland hurried after him as he strode toward the gates. He wasn’t heading to the parking lot, or back to the car. He wasn’t sure where he was going at the moment. He wasn’t sure of anything. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah,” he muttered, not slowing. “Just need some air.”

Guyer. I have to contact Dr. Guyer and tell him that the procedure worked belatedly.

No. Can't do that. They might have your phones tapped. Your email too.

Have I always been this paranoid?

“Hey.” Maria grabbed him by the shoulder and he spun to face her. “Talk to me. Tell me what’s going on.”

Zero stared into her gray eyes, noted the way her blonde hair fell around her shoulders in waves, and the memory of them together whirled through his head again. The feel of her skin. The shape of her hips. The taste of her mouth on his.

But there was something else there too. He recognized it as a stabbing pang of guilt. *Kate hadn't been killed yet. Did we... did I...?*

He shook the thought from his head. “Like I said. It’s the meds. They’re just really messing with my head. I can’t think straight.”

“Let me drive you home,” Strickland offered. Agent Todd Strickland was only twenty-seven, but had an impeccable track record as an Army Ranger and had quickly made the transition to the CIA. He still wore a military-style fade cut over a stocky neck and muscled torso, though he was simultaneously gentle and approachable when the situation called for it. Most importantly, he had been a friend in more than one time of need.

And while Zero recognized that, at the moment he needed to be alone. It felt impossible to think straight with anyone talking to him. “No. I’ll be fine. Thanks.”

He tried to turn again, but Maria reached for his shoulder once more. “Kent—”

“I said I’m fine!” he snapped.

Maria did not recoil at his outburst, but narrowed her eyes slightly as her gaze bored into his, searching for some understanding.

The memory of their tryst came again, involuntarily, and he felt heat rise in his face. *We were on an op. Holed up in some Greek hotel. Waiting for instructions. She seduced me. I was weak. Kate was still alive. She never knew...*

“I have to go.” He took a few steps backward to make sure that neither of his fellow agents would attempt to pursue him again. “Don’t follow me.” Then he turned and strode away, leaving them standing there on the White House lawn.

He had very nearly reached the gates before he felt the presence behind him, heard the shifting of footsteps. He spun quickly. “I told you not to—”

A short woman with shoulder-length brunette hair stopped in her tracks. She wore a navy blue blazer and matching slacks with heels, and she raised an eyebrow as she regarded Zero curiously. “Agent Zero? My name is Emilia Sanders,” she told him. “Aide to President Pierson.” She held out a white business card with her name and number on it. “He wants to know if you’ve reconsidered his offer.”

Zero hesitated. Pierson had previously offered him a spot on the National Security Council, which had made him suspicious of the president’s involvement, but it seemed as if the offer was genuine.

Not that he wanted it. But still he took her card.

“If you find you need anything at all, Agent Zero, please don’t hesitate to give a call,” Sanders told him. “I’m quite resourceful.”

“I could use a ride home,” he admitted.

“Certainly. I’ll get someone for you immediately.” She pulled out a cell phone and made a call while Zero stuffed the business card in his pocket. Pierson’s offer was the furthest thing from his mind. He had no idea how much time, if any, he had in which to act.

What do I do? He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head, as if trying to dislodge an answer.

726. The number spun quickly through his mind. It was a safe deposit box at a bank in downtown Arlington where he had been keeping records of his investigations—photos, documents, and transcriptions of phone calls from those leading this secret cabal. He had paid for five years upfront on the deposit box so that it wouldn’t go dormant.

“Right this way, Agent.” The presidential aide, Emilia Sanders, gestured for him to follow as she led him briskly toward a garage and a waiting car. As they walked, Zero thought again of the suspicious looks from General Rigby, from Director Mullen. It was paranoia, nothing more—at least he tried to tell himself that. But if there was even a chance that they knew he was on to them, they would come after him with everything they had. And not just him.

Zero made himself a mental checklist:

Get girls safe.

Retrieve contents of safe deposit box.

Stop war before it starts.

All Zero had to do was figure out how to stop a group of the most powerful men in the world, with some of the deepest pockets, who had been planning this event for more than two years, had the backing of almost every government agency the United States had to offer, and had everything to lose.

Just another day in the life of Agent Zero, he thought sourly.

CHAPTER TWO

Aboard the USS *Constitution*, Persian Gulf April 16, 1830 hours

The furthest thing from Lieutenant Thomas Cohen's mind was war.

As he sat at a radar array aboard the USS *Constitution*, watching the small blips as they meandered lazily across the screen, he was thinking about Melanie, his girlfriend back home in Pensacola. It was just under three weeks to go before he would rotate home. He already had the ring; he'd purchased it a week earlier on a day pass to Qatar. Thomas doubted there was anyone on the ship he hadn't proudly shown it to yet.

The sky over the Persian Gulf was clear and sunny, not a single cloud, but Thomas wouldn't get to enjoy it, tucked away in a corner of the bridge as he was, the thick armored port windows obscured by the radar console. He couldn't help but feel mildly jealous of the ensign out on the deck that he communicated with by radio, the younger man holding a line-of-sight visual on the ships that, to Thomas, were just blips on the screen.

Sixty billion dollars, he thought with grim amusement. That's how much the United States spent annually to keep a presence in the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, and the Gulf of Oman. The US Navy's Fifth Fleet called Bahrain its headquarters, and was comprised of several task forces with specific patrol routes along the coasts of North Africa and the Middle East. The *Constitution*, a destroyer-class ship, was part of Combined Task Force 152, which patrolled the Persian Gulf from the northern end all the way to the Strait of Hormuz, between Oman and Iran.

Thomas's friends back home thought it was so cool that he worked on a US Navy destroyer. He let them believe that. But the reality was simply a strange, if not somewhat boring and repetitive, existence. He sat upon a modern marvel of engineering, outfitted with the highest of tech and armed with enough weaponry to devastate half a city, yet their entire purpose basically boiled down to what Thomas was doing at the very moment—watching blips on a radar screen. All that firepower and money and men amounted to a glorified what-if situation.

That wasn't to say there was never any excitement. Thomas and the other guys who had been around for a year or longer got their kicks from watching how nervous the FNGs would get, the newcomers, the first time they heard that the Iranians were going to fire on them. It didn't happen every day, but it was frequent enough. Iran and Iraq were dangerous territories, and they had to at least keep up appearances, Thomas supposed. Every now and then the *Constitution* would get a threat from the Navy of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Iran's maritime force in the Persian Gulf. The ships would sail a little close for comfort, and sometimes—on the particularly exciting days—they'd fire off a few rockets. Usually they fired in the complete opposite direction of any US ships. Posturing, Thomas thought. But the FNGs would just about piss themselves over it, and they'd be the butt of the joke for a few weeks after.

The trio of blips on the screen moved ever closer to their location, approaching from the northeast. "Gilbert," said Thomas into the radio, "how are we looking up there?"

"Oh, it's a beautiful afternoon. About seventy-four and sunny," Ensign Gilbert said through the radio, doing his best to keep the laughter out of his voice. "Humidity's low. Wind is maybe five miles an hour. If I close my eyes, it feels like Florida in early spring. How y'all doing in there?"

"Jackass," muttered Lieutenant Davis, the communications officer, seated near Thomas at the radar array. He smirked and said into the radio, "Sorry, *Ensign* Gilbert? Can you repeat that for your lieutenant?"

Thomas chuckled as Gilbert let out a soft groan. “All right, all right,” said the young man from the top deck. “I’ve got visual on three IRGC ships to the northeast, traveling at about fourteen knots or so and looking to be a little more than a half mile out.” Then he quickly added, “Sir.”

Thomas nodded, impressed. “You’re good. They’re at point-five-six. Anyone want to take some action on this?”

“I’ve got a fiver that says they veer off by point-four,” said Davis.

“I’ll see that and raise,” said Petty Officer Miller behind them, swiveling around in his chair. “Ten bucks says they reach point-three. You in, Cohen?”

Thomas shook his head. “Hell no. Last time you guys took me for twenty-five bucks.”

“And he’s got a wedding to save up for,” Davis chided with a nudge.

“Y’all are thinking small,” Gilbert said in the radio. “These guys are cowboys, I can feel it. A certain Mr. Jackson says not only do they come within point-two-five, but we get an Iranian dick pic.”

“Don’t be crass,” Davis scolded Gilbert for his lewd metaphor of the IRGC firing off a rocket.

“That’d be a nice change of pace,” Miller muttered. “Most exciting thing that’s happened around here in two weeks was enchilada day.”

It was not at all lost on Lieutenant Cohen that an outside observer might have thought it insane for them to be making small wagers on whether or not a ship fired a missile. But after so many so-called confrontations yielding nothing, it was hardly anything to fret over. Besides, the US rules of engagement were clear; they would not fire unless directly fired upon first, and the Iranians knew that. The *Constitution* was exactly as its class implied: a destroyer. If a rocket fell close enough for them to feel the heat of it, they could obliterate the IRGC ship in seconds.

“Point-four and closing,” Thomas announced. “Sorry, Davis. You’re out.”

He shrugged. “Can’t win ’em all.”

Thomas frowned at the array. It looked as if the two ships flanking either side of the third were veering, but the central ship continued on a straight path. “Gilbert, check visual.”

“Aye aye.” There was a moment of silence before the ensign reported back. “Looks like two of the ships are breaking off, south-southeast and south-southwest. But I think that third boat wants to be friends. What did I tell you, Cohen? Cowboys.”

Miller sighed. “Where is Captain Warren? We should alert—”

“Captain on the bridge!” a sharp voice bellowed suddenly. Thomas hopped up from his seat and issued a crisp salute, along with the four other officers in the control room.

The XO entered first, a tall and square-jawed man who looked a lot more serious than he usually came off as. He was followed by a hasty Captain Warren, his slight paunch straining the lowest buttons of his tan short-sleeved shirt. On his head he wore a Navy baseball cap, the dark blue looking almost black in the dim lighting of the bridge.

“As you were,” Warren said gruffly. Thomas slowly took his seat again, exchanging a concerned glance with Davis. The captain was likely aware of the approaching IRGC ships, but for him to be here with three boats looming so close meant that something was going on. “Listen up and listen good, because I’m going to say this quick.” The captain frowned deeply. He normally wore a frown—Thomas couldn’t recall ever seeing Warren smile—but this frown seemed particularly dismayed. “Orders have just come down the pipe. There’s been a change in ROE. Any ships that fire within a half-mile proximity are to be considered hostile and dealt with using extreme prejudice.”

Thomas blinked at the sudden rush of words, failing to comprehend at first.

Petty Officer Miller forgot himself for a moment as he said, “Dealt with? You mean destroyed?”

“That’s right, Miller,” said Captain Warren as he locked eyes with the young man, “I mean destroyed, demolished, obliterated, devastated, wrecked, and/or ruined.”

“Um, sir?” Davis spoke up. “If they fire at all? Or if they fire upon us?”

“The release of a weapon that could result in a loss of life, Lieutenant,” Captain Warren told him. “Whether aimed at us or not.”

Thomas couldn't believe what he was hearing. The IRGC had fired rockets plenty of times since he had been aboard the *Constitution*, many of those times within a half mile of them. He found it exceedingly bizarre and coincidental that the rules of engagement would be changed so swiftly—and at the precise moment when an Iranian ship was bearing down on them.

“Look,” said Warren, “I don't like this any more than you do, but you all know what happened. Frankly, I'm surprised it took the government this long. But here we are.”

Thomas knew precisely what the captain was referring to. Mere days earlier, a terrorist organization had attempted to blow up the USS *New York*, an Arleigh-Burke destroyer that was moored at the Port of Haifa in Israel. And only two days ago, the same insurgent cell had taken out an underwater tunnel in New York City. Captain Warren had convened the entire crew in the mess hall to tell them the dire news. The CIA had caught wind of the attack just hours before it was carried out and managed to save a lot of lives, but hundreds had still perished and far too many were yet unaccounted for. The scale of the attack was not nearly that of 9/11, but it was still one of the most substantial attacks on US soil in the last hundred years.

“This is the world we live in now, boys,” said Warren, shaking his head in disdain. Clearly he was thinking the same thing as Thomas. They all were.

“It's veering off,” said Gilbert through the radio, jarring Thomas out of his thoughts and back to his console. The ensign was right; the third ship was just shy of point-three miles and steering toward the west. “Looks like I'll be out twenty bucks.”

Thomas let out a sigh of relief. In another minute the ship would be gone, beyond a half-mile range, and the *Constitution* would continue its easterly patrol route toward the strait. *Please don't do anything stupid*, he thought as he said, “IRGC cruiser is at point-two-eight, veering east. Doesn't look like it's interested in us, sir.”

Warren nodded, though if he was as glad as Thomas, he didn't show it. The lieutenant could guess why; the rules of engagement had changed, and quite suddenly at that. How long would it be before they found themselves in another situation like this one?

Lieutenant Davis looked up sharply and suddenly. “They're hailing us, sir.”

Captain Warren closed his eyes and sighed. “All right. Relay this, and be quick about it.” More than just the communications officer, Davis was fluent in Arabic and Farsi. He translated the captain's message as Warren spoke it, listening and talking at the same time. “This is Captain James Warren of the USS *Constitution*. The US Navy's rules of engagement have changed. Your superiors should be aware of this by now, but if you are not, we are fully sanctioned by the American government for the use of deadly force should any vessel—”

“Rocket out!” Gilbert cried in Thomas's ear.

“Rocket out!” Thomas repeated. Before he even knew what he was doing, he tore the headset from his head and dashed to the port windows. In the distance he saw the IRGC cruiser, as well as the brilliant red streak soaring in a high arc in the sky, a plume of smoke trailing behind it.

As he watched, a second rocket fired off from the deck of the Iranian ship. They were fired on a trajectory parallel to the *Constitution*, far enough off that they would hardly make waves for the destroyer.

Thomas spun to the captain. Warren's face had turned a shade whiter. “Sir—”

“Return to your post, Lieutenant Cohen.” Warren's voice was strained.

A knot of dread formed in Thomas's stomach. “But sir, we can't seriously—”

“Return to your post, Lieutenant,” the captain said again, his jaw flexing. Thomas obliged, lowering himself slowly to his seat but not taking his eyes off of Warren.

“This doesn't come from the admiral,” he said, as if trying to explain to them what he knew had to happen. “Not even from the CNO. This is from the Secretary of Defense. Do you understand that? It's a direct order in the interest of national security.”

Without another word, Warren plucked up a red phone mounted on the wall. “This is Captain Warren. Fire torpedoes.” There was a moment of silence, and the captain said again, forcefully, “Affirmative. *Fire torpedoes.*” He hung up the phone, but his hand lingered upon it. “God help us,” he murmured.

Thomas Cohen held his breath. He counted the seconds. He reached twelve before he heard Gilbert’s voice, soft and breathy and almost reverent through the radio.

“Jesus almighty.”

Thomas stood, not leaving his post but gaining a partial view of the port window. They heard no explosion through the thick armor-plated glass of the bridge, designed to sustain heavy ballistic fire. They felt no shockwave, absorbed as it was by the vast Persian Gulf. But he saw it. He saw the orange fireball rise in the sky as the IRGC ship was, as he had predicted, destroyed in seconds by a wave of torpedoes from the US destroyer.

The green blip vanished from his screen. “Target destroyed,” he confirmed quietly. He had no idea how many people they had just killed. Twenty. Maybe fifty. Maybe a hundred.

Davis stood as well, looking out the window as the orange fire dissipated, the ship torn asunder and sinking rapidly into the depths of the Persian Gulf. It might have been the angle, or the reflection of sunlight, but he could have sworn he saw his eyes gloss with the threat of tears.

“Cohen?” he said quietly, his voice almost a whisper. “Did we just start World War Three?”

Five minutes earlier, the furthest thing from Lieutenant Thomas Cohen’s mind had been war. But now, he had every reason to suspect he wouldn’t be making it home to Pensacola in three weeks.

CHAPTER THREE

“Excuse me,” said Zero, “do you think we could drive just a bit faster?” He sat in the back seat of a black town car as a White House chauffeur took him home to Alexandria, less than thirty minutes from Washington, DC. They drove mostly in silence, for which Zero was thankful; it gave him some precious minutes to think. There was no time to sort through the deluge of newfound skills and history that had been unlocked in his head. He needed to focus on the task at hand.

Think, Zero. Who do you know is in on this? The secretary of defense, the vice president, congressmen, a handful of senators, members of the NSA, the National Security Council, even the CIA... Names and faces flashed through his mind like a mental Rolodex. Zero sucked in a breath as a tension headache began to form at the front of his skull. He had investigated many of them, had even found some evidence—the documents he had locked in the safe deposit box in Arlington—but he feared it wouldn’t be enough to definitively prove what was happening.

In his pocket, his cell phone rang. He let it go.

Why now? He didn’t need his newfound memories for that part. It was an election year. In a little more than six months, Pierson would either be reelected for a second term or ousted by a Democrat. And nothing would drum up more support than a successful campaign against a hostile foe.

He was certain that Pierson was not a part of it. In fact, Zero recalled during Pierson’s first year in office when he signed a bill decreasing US military presence in Iraq and Iran. He was opposed to further war in the Middle East without provocation... which was why those in the shadows needed the Brotherhood’s catalyst.

And while the US decreased their presence, the Russians increased theirs. Maria had mentioned that the Ukrainians were nervous that Russia intended to seize oil-producing assets in the Black Sea. That’s why she had made a cautious alliance with them to share information. The US conspirators were in bed with the Russians. The US would get the strait, and the Russians would get the Black Sea. The United States would do nothing to stop Russia from their endeavors, and Russia would respond in kind, possibly even lend support in the Middle East.

Two of the world’s superpowers would become richer, more powerful, and nigh unstoppable. And as long as there was peace between them, there would be no one to oppose them.

His phone rang again. The call registered as unknown. He wondered briefly if it could be Deputy Director Cartwright calling. Zero’s direct boss in the Special Activities Division of the agency was noticeably absent at the Oval Office meeting with President Pierson. It could have been official business that kept him away, but Zero had his doubts. Still, the caller (or callers) had not left voicemails and Zero did not bother to reach out to the CIA.

As they neared his home on Spruce Street, he made two calls. The first was to Georgetown University. “This is Professor Reid Lawson. I’m afraid I’ve come down with something. Most likely the flu. I’m going to see a doctor today. Can you see if Dr. Ford is available to take my lectures?”

The second call was to the Third Street Garage.

“Yeah,” the man that answered said in a grunt.

“Mitch? It’s Zero.”

“Mm.” The burly mechanic said it as if he had been expecting the call. Mitch was a man of few words, and also a CIA asset who had helped Zero when he needed to rescue his girls from Rais and a ring of human traffickers.

“Something’s come up. I may need an extraction for two. Can you be on standby?” The words rolled off his tongue as if they had been well-rehearsed—because they had, he realized, even if he hadn’t spoken them in some time. He couldn’t risk asking Watson or Strickland; they would likely be watched as carefully as he was. But Mitch operated off the radar.

“Consider it done,” Mitch said simply.

“Thank you. I’ll be in touch.” He hung up. His first instinct was to have his daughters taken to a safe house right away, but any deviation from their normal schedule might instigate suspicion. Mitch’s extraction was a failsafe in case he had reason to believe the girls’ lives were in imminent danger—and despite the trepidation over this heightened sense of paranoia, he had plenty of reason to believe it was justified.

Home was a two-story house on a corner lot in the suburbs of Alexandria. To the non-street side was a vacant home currently up for sale, having been the former residence of David Thompson, a retired CIA field agent who had been killed in Zero’s foyer.

He unlocked the door and quickly punched in the security code for the alarm system. He kept it set that the code needed to be entered every time someone came or went, regardless of who was home at the time. If the code wasn’t entered within sixty seconds of the door opening, an alarm would sound and local police would be alerted. In addition to the alarm system, they had security cameras both outside and inside, bolts on the doors and windows, and a panic room with a steel security door in the basement.

Still he feared it wouldn’t be enough to keep his daughters safe.

He found Maya lying on her back on the sofa and playing a game on her phone. She was nearly seventeen, and often vacillated between unprompted teenage angst and the foreshadowing of becoming a discerning adult. She had inherited her father’s dark hair and sharp facial features, while taking on her mother’s fierce intelligence and biting wit.

“Hey,” she said without looking away from the screen. “Did the president feed you? Because I could really go for Chinese tonight.”

“Where’s your sister?” he asked quickly.

“Dining room.” Maya frowned and sat up, sensing the urgency in his voice. “Why, what’s going on?”

“Nothing yet,” he answered cryptically. Zero hurried through the kitchen and found his younger daughter, Sara, doing homework at the table.

She glanced up at the sudden intrusion of her father. “Hi, Dad.” Then she too furrowed her brow, seemingly aware that something was amiss. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, sweetheart, I’m fine. Just wanted to check on you.” Without another word, he quickly headed upstairs to his home office. He already knew what he needed and exactly where to find it. The first item was a burner phone that he had picked up, paid in cash with a few hundred prepaid minutes on it. Maya had the number. The second was the safe deposit box key. He knew where it was as if he always had, though earlier that morning he never would have remembered what it was for or why he had it. The key was in an old tackle box in his closet, what he had dubbed his “junk box,” filled with all sorts of old things that he couldn’t bring himself to get rid of though they hardly seemed worthwhile.

When he returned to the kitchen, he was not all that surprised to find both of his daughters standing there expectantly.

“Dad?” Maya said uncertainly. “What’s going on?”

Zero took his cell phone from his pocket and left it on the kitchen counter. “There’s something that I have to do,” he said vaguely. “And it’s...”

Incredibly dangerous. Monumentally stupid to do alone. Puts you directly in harm’s way. Again.

“It’s something that means people are likely going to be watching us. Carefully. And we need to be prepared for that.”

“Are we going to a safe house again?” Sara asked.

It broke Zero’s heart that she had to even ask that question. “No,” he told her. Then he scolded himself, remembering that he had promised them honesty. “Not yet. That might come later.”

“Does this have to do with what happened in New York?” Maya asked candidly.

“Yes,” he admitted. “But for now, just listen. There’s a man, an agency asset named Mitch. He’s a big guy, burly, with a bushy beard and wears a trucker’s cap. He runs the Third Street Garage. If I give him the go-ahead, he’s going to come here and bring you somewhere safe. Somewhere that not even the CIA knows about.”

“Why don’t we just go there now?” Sara asked.

“Because,” Zero replied honestly, “there’s a chance that people might already be watching us. Or at the very least, keeping an eye out for anything strange. If you don’t show up for school, or if I do something out of the ordinary, it might ring some alarms. You guys know the drill. You don’t let anyone in, you don’t go with anyone, and you don’t *trust* anyone except for Mitch, Agent Strickland, or Agent Watson.”

“And Maria,” Sara added. “Right?”

“Yeah,” Zero murmured. “And Maria. Of course.” He reached for the doorknob. “I won’t be long. Lock up behind me. I have the burner; call if you need me.” He headed out the door and strode quickly to his car, dismayed to find that the memory of him and Maria together was rattling around his head again.

Kate. You betrayed her.

“No,” he muttered to himself as he reached the car. He wouldn’t have. He loved Kate more than anything, anyone. As he slid behind the wheel and started the car, he searched his memory for any indication that he was wrong, that he and Maria had not had an affair while Kate was still alive. But there was none. His relationship at home had been a happy one; Kate was none the wiser about his work as a CIA agent. She believed his frequent travels were guest lectures at other colleges, research for a history book, summits, and conventions. She supported him fully while taking care of the two girls. He hid his injuries from her, and when he couldn’t, he made excuses. He was clumsy. He fell. At least once he had been jumped. The agency helped with his cover stories and, on more than one occasion, went so far as to create fake police reports to substantiate his claims.

She didn’t know.

But Maria did. Maria knew this entire time that they had been together while Kate was still alive, and she had said nothing. As long as Zero’s memory was fractured, she could tell him whatever he wanted to hear and withhold anything he didn’t know.

He suddenly realized how tightly he was gripping the steering wheel, his knuckles white and his ears burning in anger. *Deal with that later. There are more important things to do right now*, he told himself as he headed to the bank to retrieve the evidence that he could only hope was enough to put a stop to this.

CHAPTER FOUR

There was little traffic in the early afternoon as Zero drove quickly to the Arlington bank. Twice he blew stop signs and even slammed the accelerator through a yellow light, each time reminding himself that avoiding scrutiny would be a good idea, and that a traffic violation would no doubt get flagged in the CIA system, alerting the agency-oriented conspirators to his whereabouts.

But his mind was hardly on the rules of the road. He had taken the precautionary measures to keep the girls safe, at least for now; next he would retrieve his files from the deposit box. That much was easy. But then would come the difficult part. *Who do I take it to? The press?* No, he realized, that would be too messy. Despite any muck and mire he might drag names through, the process of dismissing any of the figureheads from their posts would be lengthy and involve trials.

The United Nations? NATO? Once again the political and judicial process would hinder real progress. He needed something rapid; to bring what he knew to someone with the power to do something immediate and irreversible.

He already had the answer. *Pierson*. If the president was truly unaware of the plot, Zero could appeal to him. He would have to get the president alone somehow, bring him everything he had and knew. The president could stop all of this and could dismiss those responsible for it. Pierson seemed to hold Agent Zero in high regard; he trusted him and treated him like a friend. Although those traits had caused Zero to cast doubt and aspersions on Pierson in the past, he was now armed with his memory, his real memory, and he saw the president for what he was: a pawn in this game. Those in power wanted four more years so that they could manipulate things to their liking, in a manner that meant longevity regardless of who was in office.

He parallel-parked two blocks from the bank, no simple task with only one good hand. Before getting out of the car he reached over, popped the glove box, and rooted around until he found the small black tactical folding knife that he had stowed there.

Then he hurried down the street to the bank.

Zero tried to look patient as he waited for the three customers in front of him to finish their business, and then presented his photo ID to the teller, a middle-aged woman with a kind smile and too much lipstick.

“Let me get the branch manager,” she told him politely.

Two minutes later a man in a suit led him through a vault door to the deposit boxes. He unlocked the narrow rectangular door to 726, slid the box out, and set it on an otherwise empty steel table, bolted to the floor in the center of the room.

“Take your time, sir.” The manager nodded to him and gave him some privacy.

As soon as the man was gone, Zero lifted the lid to the box.

“No,” he murmured. He took one step backward and looked over his shoulder instinctively, as if someone might be there.

The box was empty.

“No, no.” He pounded a fist on the table with a dull thud. “No!” All of his documents, everything he had dug up on those that he knew were involved in the plot, were gone. Every piece of illegally obtained evidence that could potentially force the dismissal of heads of state was gone. Photos, transcriptions, emails... all of it, vanished.

Zero put his hands on his head and paced the room back and forth rapidly. His first thought was the most likely solution: someone else knew about the documents and took them. *Who else knew about this box?* No one. He was sure of it. *You definitely didn't give the information to someone and forgot about it?* No. He wouldn't have done that. He almost laughed at himself, at how insane the notion was that he might forget something that he didn't know he knew only hours ago.

But then Zero remembered something else, not an unlocked memory, but one that he had experienced only days earlier, in the office of a Swiss neurosurgeon.

I should forewarn you, Dr. Guyer had told him before performing the procedure to bring Zero's memories back. If this works, some of the things that you recall may be subconscious: fantasies, wishes, suspicions from your past life. All of those non-memory aspects were removed with your actual memories.

Zero had frowned at that. *So you're saying that if I remember things, some of the things I remember may not actually be real?*

The doctor's reply had been simple, yet harrowing. *They'll be real to you.*

If that was the case, he reasoned, couldn't it be possible that he had done something with the documents himself? Could he have imagined that they were here, in this safe deposit box, when really they were elsewhere?

I'm losing my mind.

Focus, Zero.

He pulled the lockback knife out of his pocket, unfolded it, and carefully wedged the razor-sharp tip into the edge of the bottom of the box. He worked it back and forth gently, careful not to scratch it, until the bottom panel came loose.

He breathed a small sigh of relief. Whoever had taken his documents didn't know about the false bottom he had installed in the box, less than an inch above the real bottom. Nestled beneath it was a single object—a USB stick.

At least they didn't find the recordings. But is it enough? He wasn't sure, but it was all he had. He snatched it up, pocketed the knife and the USB drive, and then carefully replaced the false bottom. Then he slid the box back into its narrow vault and closed the door.

When he finished, Zero headed back to the lipsticked teller.

"Excuse me," he said, "can you tell me if anyone else accessed my safe deposit box in the past two years?"

The woman blinked at him. "Two years?"

"Yes. Please. You keep a log, right?"

"Um... certainly. One moment." Fingernails clacked against the keyboard for a long minute. "Here we are. There has only been one access to your deposit box in the past two years, and it was only a couple of months ago, in February."

"It wasn't me," Zero said impatiently. "So who was it?"

She blinked at him again, this time in confusion. "Well, sir, it was the only other person authorized to access the box. It was your wife. Katherine Lawson."

Zero stared at the teller for longer than the woman found comfortable.

"No," he said slowly. "That's impossible. My wife passed away two years ago."

She frowned deeply, the lipsticked corners of her mouth drooping as if they'd been tugged. "I am very sorry to hear that, sir. And that is certainly strange. But... we require photo ID, and the person that accessed the box obviously had it. Your wife's name wasn't taken from the box's lease when she passed."

Zero remembered putting her name on the lease. Kate hadn't known about it at the time; he had forged her signature as a joint lease so that someone would know about it in the event of his death.

And only two months prior, someone had pretended to be her, had even gone so far as to create identification that could pass as valid to a bank, and taken the contents of his box.

"I assure you," the teller told him, "we will look further into this matter. The branch manager just left for the day, but I can have him reach out to you tomorrow. Would you like to report a theft?"

"No, no." Zero waved a hand dismissively. He didn't want to get any legal authorities involved and have the safe deposit box flagged in any system that the CIA might see. "Nothing was taken," he lied. "Let's just forget it. Thanks."

“Sir?” she called after him, but he was already at the door.

Someone came here posing as Kate. He knew there was little he could do about it now; the bank might still have the security footage from that day, but they wouldn’t allow him access unless there was an investigation and a warrant.

But who? The agency was the most obvious culprit. With the vast CIA resources, they could have created a passable ID and sent a female agent in under the guise of Kate. But Zero hadn’t accessed the box in years. If they knew about it back then, why would they wait until only two months ago to get into it?

Because I came back. They thought I was dead, and when I wasn’t, they needed to know what I knew.

Another thought flashed through his mind: Maria. *Are you sure you never told her about it? Not even in case of an emergency?* She was one of the best covert agents he had ever known; she could have found a way. But still he came back to the question of why she would do that now, why wait if she knew about the safe deposit box.

He suddenly felt tired and overwhelmed. He had lost so much of what he had uncovered before, the smallest shred of potential evidence sitting on a USB stick in his pocket. He had no idea how much time he had to get Pierson alone, try to convince him of what was happening, and somehow persuade him to look further into those responsible with almost nothing to go on.

It felt insurmountable. He realized grimly that if he had still been Reid Lawson, trapped in the hell of his partial memories as Agent Zero, he might have given up. He might have scooped up his daughters and whatever they could carry and fled somewhere. The Midwest, maybe. He might have stuck his head in the sand and let things happen as they would. Reid Lawson’s highest priority was his girls.

But Agent Zero had a responsibility. This was not just his job. It was his life. This was who he truly was, and there was no way in hell he was going to sit idly by and watch a war unfold, watch innocent people die, watch American servicemen and Middle Eastern civilians be forced into a conflict that was manufactured for the benefit of a handful of megalomaniacal men to maintain their power.

He heard the footsteps like an echo of his own and resisted the urge to turn around. As he neared his car, parked two blocks from the bank, the heavy footfalls of boots kept pace with his almost stride for stride.

About ten feet behind you. Keeping their distance. They’re walking heavy; definitely a man, probably close to six foot, two-ten to two-twenty.

Zero didn’t stop at his car. He walked right past it to the next corner and turned right onto a side street. As he walked past a flower shop, the same one that he had once bought bouquets for his girls before picking them up from a safe house six blocks to the west, he checked his periphery. It was something that he had instinctually done as Reid Lawson, but with his memories also came back his skills. It was as easy as glancing in a mirror; without averting his gaze from the sidewalk ahead, he focused on the outermost borders of his field of vision.

A man in a black T-shirt was crossing the street toward him. He was large, easily two-fifty, with a neck as thick as his head and heavily muscled arms testing the limits of his shirtsleeves.

So this is how it’s going to be. The hairs on Zero’s arms stood on end, but his heartbeat remained steady. His breathing normal. No sweat prickled on his brow.

He wasn’t being paranoid. They were after him. They knew. And he was more than ready to meet the challenge.

CHAPTER FIVE

Without breaking his stride, Zero turned right again, slipping down a narrow thoroughfare between two buildings. It was barely six feet across, not even wide enough to be called an alley. About halfway down its length he stopped and turned.

At the mouth of the throughway stood one of his two pursuers. The man was around his age, a few inches taller, with a wiry frame and a few days' worth of coarse dark hair on his chin. He wore black boots and jeans and a black leather jacket.

"Baker," Zero said instinctively. This man was a member of the Division, a private security group that the CIA occasionally contracted to assist with international affairs. They were veritable mercenaries, the same group that had made a bid for his life not a week ago at the Brotherhood's compound outside of Al-Baghdadi. The same group that had attempted to jump Agent Watson and kidnap his daughters in Switzerland.

But this man in particular was familiar to him. As soon as Zero saw his face, he remembered: back in 2013, the Division had been called in to help out with a hostage situation between a faction of Al Qaeda and a dozen US soldiers. Baker had been among them.

The mercenary raised an eyebrow. "You know me?"

Shit. Zero scolded himself for blurting out the man's name. He had shown his hand. He shrugged and tried to play it off. "Some things come back. In pieces."

Baker smirked. "Sure, Zero. What was in the bank?"

"Money. I made a withdrawal."

The merc shook his head. "I don't think so. See, I called it in. You don't have an account there. But techs noticed a safe deposit box in you and your dead wife's name."

Zero saw red for a moment at the offhanded comment about Kate and nearly lost his cool, but he forced himself to remain calm.

"I'm guessing you made a withdrawal," Baker said, "but not money. What was in the box, Zero?"

Guessing? Either Baker was bluffing, or the agency really didn't know about the safe deposit box before now. Which meant that the CIA was not responsible for the missing documents. *But he could be lying.*

Zero heard footsteps behind him and glanced quickly over his shoulder to see the big man from the street corner stepping into view at the opposite end of the narrow causeway. His head was shaved bald but his chin was obscured in a thick brown beard, the bottom lip jutting in a scowl. He looked like he could have been a linebacker or a professional wrestler.

I don't know him. Must be new, Zero thought wryly.

When he turned back to Baker, the wiry mercenary had one hand inside his jacket. It came back out slowly, and Zero wasn't the least bit surprised to see it gripping a black Sig Sauer.

"What's that for? You going to shoot me in broad daylight?" Zero held up his damaged right hand. "I'm unarmed and one-handed."

"I've seen what you can do with one hand," Baker said nonchalantly as he screwed a suppressor to the barrel of the pistol. "This is for self-defense. What was in the box, Zero?"

Zero shrugged a shoulder. "You're going to have to shoot me first." *How the hell am I going to get out of this?* He wasn't taunting when he said he was one-handed. He was at a huge disadvantage against one of them, let alone two.

"Our orders are nonlethal force," Baker remarked. He looked past Zero to his burly cohort. "What do you think, Stevens? A shot to a kneecap isn't lethal, right?"

The big man, Stevens, didn't respond—at least not in words. He merely grunted.

Nonlethal force. These two weren't sent to kill him; they were sent to take whatever he had retrieved from the bank, and likely determine whether or not they should bring him in. *It's too late to*

kill me now. The powers-that-be needed to know what he knew, and who else he had told. It might not be too suspicious to those not involved in the plot if Agent Zero suddenly ended up dead, but if they had to take out others—Strickland, Watson, Maria—people would start asking the wrong sort of questions and poking around where their dirty laundry might be found.

I need a distraction. “Say, how’s Fitzpatrick?” he asked as casually as he could. He knew he would be goading them, but he needed to buy some time. “Last I saw him he was kind of . . . smeared, for lack of a better term.”

Baker’s lip curled slightly. The leader of the Division, Fitzpatrick, had been hit by a car in a New York parking deck by Mossad Agent Talia Mendel. As far as Zero knew, Fitzpatrick was still alive, but he didn’t know the extent of his wounds.

“He’s alive,” Baker replied evenly, “despite your friends’ best efforts. Seventeen broken bones, a punctured lung, loss of vision in his right eye.”

Zero clucked his tongue in dismay. “I should really send him some flowers—”

Baker snapped the pistol up in both hands. “That’s enough. It’s been real nice catching up, but if you don’t tell me what was in the box, I am going to shoot you. And then I’m going to have Stevens here drag your bleeding body by the ankle to a nice quiet place where we can hook you up to a car battery until you tell us exactly how much you remember.”

Zero wrinkled his nose. “That sounds unpleasant.”

Baker fired a shot. The gun made a *thwip!* and a small chunk of the brick façade to Zero’s right exploded, sending small pieces of stone smacking against his face.

His hands were up in an instant. “Whoa! All right. Jesus. I’ll tell you.” Still his pulse hardly quickened.

I have what they want. I am in control here.

“It’s a USB stick. It has information on it.”

“Give it here,” Baker ordered.

“Can I reach into my pocket for it?”

“Slowly,” Baker growled, the Sig Sauer trained at Zero’s forehead.

“Okay.” Zero showed his empty left hand, wiggling the fingers, and then slowly snaked the hand down to his pants pocket. *Baker is about five yards away.* With his hand in his pocket, he gripped the USB stick with two fingers, pinching it between the index and middle. *Stevens is about seven yards away.* He palmed the lockback knife with his pinky and ring fingers, securing it with his thumb. *Just like the Tueller Drill.*

That morning, he would have sworn he had never heard the name Dennis Tueller, but anyone who had ever been trained to bring a knife to a gun fight would know it. In 1983, Sergeant Tueller ran a series of tests to determine how quickly an attacker with a knife could cover a distance of approximately twenty-one feet—and if a defender with a holstered gun could react in time.

Less than two seconds. That was the average time it took an attacker to sprint twenty-one feet—seven yards—to a target. The problem was that Baker’s gun wasn’t holstered.

But Stevens hadn’t drawn yet.

“See?” Zero raised the USB stick, pinched between two fingers, keeping the back of his hand facing Baker.

“Toss it,” Baker demanded. Over the mercenary’s shoulder, a few passersby talked and laughed as they walked by the mouth of the narrow alley. A young man among them glanced down the causeway, but with Baker’s back to them he didn’t see the Sig Sauer. Instead the man just flashed a brief frown and kept right on walking.

I could really use a distraction. But Zero wasn’t willing to call out to anyone, to put anyone else in harm’s way.

Baker shifted the grip on his pistol to one hand and held the other out, palm up, waiting for Zero to toss the USB stick.

So he did. He curled his arm back and tossed the USB drive toward Baker in an underhand motion, flicking it into a high arc. As he released the stick, he slid the lockback knife from his palm to his fingers.

Then he catapulted himself from his mark like a shot, snapping open the knife as he did.

As Baker's gaze rose from his target to the skinny black drive soaring in an arc through the air, Zero sprinted from his position—but not toward Baker. He hurtled toward the larger man like a shot.

One-point-four seconds. He had performed the Tueller Drill a thousand times, had trained for this exact scenario, even remembered it as clearly as if it had happened yesterday. A high-precision radar gun in a CIA training field had clocked him at an average of one-point-four seconds to reach a target approximately seven yards away.

The amount of minute math that crossed his mind in an instant was staggering. It had always been there, ingrained through insane amounts of repetition and study, locked away in the recesses of his limbic system, waiting for the opportunity to burst out again. Average human reaction speed was a half second to three-quarters of a second. Even a professional like Baker required at least a quarter of a second between shots on a semi-auto pistol like the Sig Sauer. And Zero was a moving target.

The big man, Stevens, was not quick. He barely had the pistol free of his holster, his eyes involuntarily widening in surprise at Zero's speed as he vaulted toward him. The blade was already snapped open. Zero launched himself the last six feet, leaping toward Stevens and sliding the tip of the knife, in and out, one motion, into his throat.

With his wrapped right hand he reached out for Stevens's big shoulder and, as the knife tip slid out again, Zero slingshot himself around the large man's body. Two shots rang out behind him—*thwip-thwip* from the suppressed pistol—and struck Stevens in the chest as Zero landed behind him. Sharp, astounding pain burned in his injured hand, but the adrenaline was there now, coursing through him as he dropped the knife and reached around for Stevens's pistol before the big man could fall. He snapped it out of the beefy fist and, safe behind his broad human shield, fired two shots at Baker.

He was a good shot with his left hand, though not quite as good as his right. One of the shots missed. Glass shattered somewhere beyond the alley. The second thunderclap of a shot—Stevens's Beretta wasn't outfitted with a suppressor—struck Baker in the forehead.

The mercenary's head snapped back. His body followed.

Zero didn't wait around or stop to catch his breath. He sprinted ahead again, grabbed up the USB stick that was still lying on the cement, and then ran the opposite way down the alley. He stuffed it in his pocket, along with the bloodied knife, and then took Stevens's Beretta with him. It had his fingerprints on it.

Somewhere a car alarm whooped loudly. The shattered glass he'd heard must have been a car window. He hoped no one had been hit.

The large man's chest heaved up and down. He was still alive. But Zero didn't have the luxury of finishing him off or waiting around; besides, with the knife wound to the throat and two shots to the chest, he'd be dead in seconds.

People shouted in alarm from somewhere nearby as Zero sprinted to the end of the alley, stuffing the gun in the back of his pants as he did. He turned the corner and looked all around in bewilderment, hoping that he looked as much the shocked passerby as anyone else.

As he hurried to the end of the block, he heard the shriek of a woman—no doubt discovering the two bodies in the narrow alley—and then a male shout, "Someone call nine-one-one!"

They had to die. There was no way around it. He had known it as soon as he had accidentally tipped his hand and said Baker's name. He knew it when he showed them the USB drive he had retrieved from the bank.

Oddly, there was no remorse. There was no “what if?” of whether or not he could have talked them out of trying to take the drive or seeing them from his perspective. It was a situation of him or them, and he decided it wasn’t going to be him. They made their choice, and they chose wrong.

The entire ordeal, from tossing the USB stick to fleeing from the alley, had unfolded in a matter of seconds. But he could see every moment clearly like a slow-motion instant replay in his head. The strange thing was that when Baker had fired the gun mere feet from his head, hitting the brick wall, Zero’s thoughts were not of how close the bullet had come, or that Baker could have easily killed him if he wanted to. It wasn’t of the girls. Instead he was keenly aware of the dichotomous nature of his scholarly mind against his rediscovered memories. Zero was cool, calm, and believed, perhaps due to some hubris or experience or a combination thereof, that he was still in control of this situation.

It was a bizarre sensation. Worse still was how much it frightened and thrilled him at the same time. *Is this who I am? Was Reid Lawson a lie? Or have I been living my life for two years with only the weakest parts of my psyche?*

Zero strode to the end of the block, looped back around toward the flower shop, and went straight to his car. He could see that a sizable crowd of onlookers was gathering around the corner, many in shock or even crying at the sight of two dead bodies.

No one was paying any attention to him.

He drove casually, maintaining the speed limit and careful not to blow any stop signs or lights. There was no doubt that police were en route, and the CIA would know in moments that shots had been fired and two men had been killed a mere three blocks from the bank that the Division had reported Zero to have been at.

The question was what they would do about it. There was nothing at the scene that could definitively link him to it, and whoever sent the Division mercs after him—Riker, he presumed—wouldn’t be able to admit it openly. Still, he needed help, and more than he could ask of his fellow agents. They would be watched as well. If this was the type of open season it was going to be on Agent Zero, then he needed allies. Powerful ones.

But first, he needed to get his girls to safety.

As soon as he felt he’d made a safe distance from the grisly scene in the alley, he pulled into a gas station and around to the back. He buried the gun, the knife, and the safe deposit key in the dumpster under offensively awful-smelling trash. Then he got back into the car and made the call. It rang only twice before Mitch answered with a grunt.

“Need extraction right away, Mitch. I’ll meet you somewhere.”

“Meadow Field,” the mechanic said immediately. “You know it?”

“I do.” Meadow Field was an abandoned airstrip about twenty miles south. “I’ll be there.”

CHAPTER SIX

Maya parted the blinds of the window near the front door for what must have been the twentieth time since their father had left. The street outside was clear. An occasional car drove by, but they didn't slow or stop.

It scared the hell out of her to think what her dad might be caught in the middle of this time.

Just for good measure, she crossed the foyer to the kitchen and checked her dad's phone again. He had left his personal cell behind, on silent, but his screen showed that he had missed three calls since Maya had last talked to him.

Maria apparently was desperate to get in touch with him. Maya wanted to call her, to tell her that something was going on, but she refrained. If her dad wanted Maria to know, he would contact her directly.

She found Sara in the same position she had been in for the last half hour, seated on the sofa in the living room with her legs drawn up beneath her. There was a sitcom on TV, but the volume was so low she could barely hear it, and she wasn't looking directly at it anyway.

Maya could tell that her sister had been suffering in silence ever since they had been taken by Rais and the Slavic traffickers. But Sara wouldn't open up, wouldn't talk about it.

"Hey, Squeak, how about something to eat?" Maya prodded. "I could make grilled cheese? With tomato. And bacon..." She smacked her lips, hoping to amuse her little sister.

But Sara merely shook her head. "Not hungry."

"Okay. Do you want to talk about anything?"

"No."

A wave of frustration rolled over her, but Maya swallowed it. She had to be patient. She too was affected by the events they had experienced, but her reaction had been anger and a desire for retribution. She had told her dad that her plan was to become a CIA agent herself, and it wasn't simply teenage angst talking. She was very serious about it.

"I'm here," she told her sister. "If you ever feel like talking. You know that, right?"

Sara glanced over at her. A smile very nearly passed her lips—but then her eyes widened and she sat up suddenly. "Do you hear that?"

Maya listened intently. She did hear it; the sound of a powerful engine rumbling nearby. Then it stopped abruptly.

"Stay here." She hurried back to the foyer and once again parted the blinds. A silver SUV had pulled into their driveway. Her pulse quickened as four men got out. Two of them wore suits; the other two wore all black, with tactical vests and combat boots.

Even from this distance Maya could see the insignia emblazoned on their sleeves. The two black-clad men were from the same organization that had attempted to kidnap them in Switzerland. Watson had called them the Division.

Maya rushed to the kitchen, sliding in her socks, and pulled a steak knife from the bamboo block on the counter. Sara had risen from the couch and hurried to join her.

"Go downstairs." Maya held the knife out, handle first, to her sister. "Get in the panic room. I'll be right behind you."

The doorbell rang.

"Don't answer it," Sara pleaded. "Just come with me."

"I'm not going to open the door," Maya promised. "I'm just going to see what they want. Go. Close the door. Don't wait for me."

Sara took the knife and hurried down the basement steps. Maya crept carefully to the front door and peeked through the peephole. The two men in suits stood right outside.

Where did the other two go? she wondered. Back door, most likely.

Maya jumped a little as one of the two men knocked briskly on the door. Then he spoke, his voice loud enough to hear from outside. “Maya Lawson?” He held up a badge in a leather ID holder as she peered through the peephole. “Agent Coulter, FBI. We need to ask you some questions about your father.”

Her mind raced. She was certain that she was not going to answer the door for them. But would they try to force their way in? Should she say something, or pretend they weren’t home?

“Ms. Lawson?” the agent said again. “We would really prefer to do this the easy way.”

Long shadows danced against the floor of the foyer in the setting sun. She glanced up quickly to see two shapes passing by the rear entrance, a sliding glass door that led to a small deck and patio. It was the other two men, the ones from the Division, stalking around behind the house.

“Ms. Lawson,” the man called out again. “This is your last warning. Please open the door.”

Maya took a deep breath. “My father isn’t here,” she called out. “And I’m a minor. You’re going to have to come back.”

She peered through the peephole again to see the FBI agent grinning. “Ms. Lawson, I think you’re misunderstanding the situation.” He turned to his partner, a taller and burlier man. “Kick it in.”

Maya sucked in a breath and backpedaled several steps. The doorjamb cracked, splinters of wood hurtling through the air, and the front door flew open.

The two agents took one step into the foyer. Maya felt frozen to the spot. She wondered if she could make a run for the basement and get to the panic room in time. But if Sara had done as Maya had told her and closed the door, they’d never get it shut again before the agents caught up to her.

Her gaze must have flitted toward the basement door, because the closer of the two agents smirked. “How about you stay right there, little lady?” The agent that had spoken through the door had sandy hair and a face that might have been friendly and boyish if they hadn’t just kicked their way in. He put his empty hands up. “We’re not armed. We don’t want to hurt you or your sister.”

“I don’t believe you,” Maya said. She glanced over her shoulder quickly, just for a half second, to see the shadows of the two black-clad men still stalking outside on the deck.

WHOOP! WHOOP! WHOOP! A siren suddenly blared out through the house, an earsplitting klaxon that had all three of them looking around in bewilderment. It took Maya a moment to realize that it was their alarm system, activated when the door was kicked in and set to go off in sixty seconds if the code wasn’t punched in.

The police, she thought hopefully. The police will come.

“Shut it off!” the agent shouted at her. But she didn’t move.

Then—glass shattered behind her. Maya jumped and spun instinctively at the sound as the sliding patio door exploded inward. One of the black-clad men stepped through.

She didn’t stop to think, but a memory flashed through her mind in an instant: the hotel in Engelberg, Switzerland. The Division man posing as CIA, forcing his way in, attacking her.

Maya spun again quickly to face the FBI agents. One of them was near the panel, but he was facing her as the alarm continued to blare wildly. The eyes of the other agent, the boyish one, were wide and his hands were slightly in the air. His mouth was moving, but his words were drowned out by the screaming alarm.

Strong arms grabbed her from behind and she yelped. She struggled against her assailant, but he was strong. She smelled sour breath as the man wrapped her tightly, immobilizing her.

He hauled her off her feet and held her there, legs kicking and arm forced upward at a painful angle. She wasn’t strong enough to fight him off.

Relax, her brain instructed. Don’t struggle. She had taken self-defense classes at the university with a former Marine who had put her in this exact scenario—a larger, heavier assailant grabbing her from behind.

Maya tucked her chin down, almost touching her clavicle.

Then she slammed her head backward as hard as she could.

The Division man holding her cried out in pain as the back of her skull connected with his nose. His grip fell slack, and her feet touched the floor again. As soon as they did, she twisted her body, ducked her head low to get out of his arms, and then dropped her weight in a crouch.

She was all of a hundred and five pounds. But as she dropped, the man's arm still looped in her elbow, he was suddenly a hundred and five pounds heavier, and his balance was thrown by the sharp blow to his face.

He teetered and sprawled onto the tile of the foyer. Maya jumped backward, away from him, as he fell. She glanced over her shoulder to see the second Division man standing in the broken doorway, seemingly hesitant to make a swift move now that she'd dropped his pal.

She was only a few feet from the basement door. She could make a run for it, get to the panic room until the police arrived...

The mercenary in the doorway reached behind him, and he pulled out a black pistol. Maya's breath caught in her throat at the sight of it.

CRACK! Even over the blaring alarm they both heard the sharp sound. Maya and the mercenary both spun again.

The FBI agent who had kicked in the door, the one closest to the alarm panel, had his head stuck in the drywall of the foyer. His body was limp.

A figure lumbered forward and swung the tire iron again, landing a solid smack across the second agent's jaw. The sound of it set Maya's teeth on edge, and the agent slumped like a limp noodle.

As the Division merc lifted his gun at the new threat, the burly man reared back and hurled the tire iron through the air. It flipped end over end, passing by Maya by less than a foot, and smacked solidly into the merc's forehead. He barely made a sound as his body fell backward through the broken doorway.

The large man wore a trucker's cap over a bushy beard. His eyes twinkled blue. He nodded to her once and gestured toward the alarm panel.

Maya's legs felt like jelly as she rushed over to it and punched in the code. The alarm finally fell silent.

"Mitch?" she said breathlessly.

"Mm," the man grunted. On the floor of the foyer, the Division member that Maya had dropped attempted to get to his feet, holding his bloody nose. "I'll take care of him. Call nine-one-one. Tell them there's no problem."

Maya did as he instructed. She hurried to the kitchen, snatched up her dad's cell phone, and dialed 911. She watched as Mitch the mechanic stepped over to the Division merc and lifted one heavy brown boot.

She looked away before he dropped it on the man's face.

"Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?"

"My name is Maya Lawson. I live at 814 Spruce Street in Alexandria. Our alarm system went off by accident. I left the door open. There's no emergency."

"Please hold one moment, Ms. Lawson." She heard the clacking of a keyboard for a moment, and then the dispatcher told her, "We have a patrol car on the way, about three minutes out. Even if you say there's no emergency, we'd still like to have someone stop by. It's protocol."

"Really, everything's fine." She glanced over at Mitch desperately. They couldn't have a cop come by with four bodies in the house. She wasn't even sure if any of them were dead or just unconscious.

"Even so, Ms. Lawson, we'll have an officer at least check in. If there's no emergency, then there's no problem."

Mitch reached into a pocket of his oil-stained jeans and pulled out a flip phone that must have been fifteen years old. He dialed a number and then grunted something quietly into it.

"Um..." The dispatcher hesitated. "Ms. Lawson, are you certain there's no emergency?"

“I’m certain, yes.”

“All right. You have a nice day.” The dispatcher abruptly ended the call. From beyond the shattered glass door, Maya heard sirens suddenly erupt in the distance—fading quickly.

“What did you do?” she asked Mitch.

“Called in a bigger emergency.”

“Are they... alive?”

Mitch glanced around and then shrugged one shoulder. “He’s not,” he grunted, gesturing toward the agent with his head in the wall. Maya’s stomach churned as she noticed a thin rivulet of blood running down the drywall where the agent’s head was jammed in it.

How many people are going to die in this house? she couldn’t help but wonder.

“Get your sister. And your phones. We’re leaving.” Mitch stepped over the Division merc’s body and over to his friend. He grabbed the man by the ankles and dragged him into the house, and then scooped up the black pistol.

Maya hurried down the stairs to the basement. She stood in front of the camera that was mounted over the door to the panic room. “It’s just me, Sara. You can open the door.”

The thick steel security door pushed open from the inside, and her sister’s timid face appeared. “Are we okay?”

“For now. Come on. We’re leaving.”

Back upstairs, Sara noted the carnage with wide eyes, but said nothing. Mitch was rummaging in the kitchen. “You got a first-aid kit?”

“Yeah. Here.” Maya slid open a drawer and pulled out a small white metal box with a hinged lid and a red cross on the top.

“Thanks.” Mitch pulled out an antiseptic wipe and then snapped open a razor-tipped knife. Maya took a step back at the sight of it. “I’m real sorry,” the mechanic said, “but this next part is going to be a little unpleasant. You both got trackers in your right arm. They gotta come out. It’s subcutaneous; under the skin and above the muscle. That means it’s gonna sting like hell for a minute, but I promise it won’t be too bad.”

Maya chewed her lip nervously. She had nearly forgotten about the tracking implant. But then, much to her surprise, Sara stepped forward and tugged up her right sleeve. She reached for Maya’s hand and held it tightly. “Do it.”

*

There was a lot of blood, but not much pain as Mitch made quick work of the two trackers. The implant was hardly the size of a grain of rice; Maya marveled at it as Mitch dabbed the half-inch long cut and pressed a bandage over it.

“Now we can go.” Mitch took the first-aid kit, the mercenary’s gun, both of the girls’ phones, and the two tiny implants. They followed him outside and watched as he put the phones and the implants in the agents’ SUV. Then he made another call on his flip phone.

“I need a cleanup,” he grunted. “Zero’s house on Spruce Street. Four. One car. Take it west and then vanish it.” He hung up.

The three of them climbed into the cab of an old pickup that had “Third Street Garage” emblazoned on the side. It rumbled to life and pulled away from the curb.

Neither of the girls looked back.

Maya, seated in the center between Mitch and Sara, noted the mechanic’s thick knuckles, his fingertips stained in both grease and blood. “So where are we going?” she asked.

Mitch grunted without taking his eyes off the road. “Nebraska.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Zero parked the car right on the abandoned airstrip of Meadow Field. He had taken a slightly circuitous route there, sticking to back roads and avoiding the highways for fear that the CIA might have flagged his car—which he was certain they had.

Meadow Field was comprised of just a single runway, the building and hangar long since torn down in the fifteen years of disuse. Weeds and flowers sprouted up through cracks in the tarmac and the ignored grass on either side of the runway grew tall with disregard.

But despite its appearance, it was a gratifying and welcome sight for Zero. About thirty yards away was an old pickup truck, the side of it painted with stenciled letters that read “Third Street Garage.” The burly mechanic leaned against the driver’s side door, his trucker’s cap pulled low over his brow.

As Zero hurried over to the truck, his daughters climbed out of the cab and ran to him. He grabbed one of them in each arm, ignoring the pain in his broken hand as he squeezed them both tight.

“You okay?” he asked.

“There was some trouble,” Maya admitted as she hugged him back. “But we had help.”

Zero nodded and released them, but stayed down on his knee so that he was just about eye level with Sara. “All right, listen to me. I’m going to be straight with you.” He had been thinking about it the whole ride here, what he would say to them, and he’d decided to just lay it out. Their lives were already in danger as it was, and they deserved to know why. “There are some powerful people who want to start a war. They’ve been planning it for a long time, and it’s all for their personal gain. If they’re allowed to get away with this, it will mean a lot of innocent people dying. I’m going to talk to the president directly and alert him to what’s going on, but I can’t trust that he won’t put his faith in the wrong hands. This could very well lead to a new world war.”

“And you can’t let that happen,” Sara said quietly.

Maya nodded solemnly.

“That’s right. And...” Zero breathed a heavy sigh. “And it means that things are probably going to be bad for a little while. They know that the two of you are the easiest way to get to me, so you need to disappear and hide out until this is all over. I don’t know when that will be. I don’t know...” He stopped himself again. He wanted to tell them, *I don’t know that I’ll survive this*, but he couldn’t bring himself to say the words.

He didn’t have to. They knew what he meant. Tears welled in Maya’s eyes and she looked away. Sara hugged him again, and he squeezed her tightly.

“You’re going to go with Mitch, and you’re going to have to do whatever he says, okay?” Zero heard tremors in his own voice. He was keenly aware, now more so than ever, that this might be the last time he ever saw his girls. “He’ll keep you safe. And you watch each other’s back.”

“We will,” Sara whispered in his ear.

“Good. Now you stay put for a minute while I go talk to Mitch. I’ll be right back.” He let go of Sara and strode over to the pickup truck where the mechanic was waiting idly.

“Thank you,” Zero told him. “You don’t owe me anything. I appreciate all of this, and when it’s done I’ll pay you back in whatever way I’m able.”

“No need,” the mechanic grunted. His trucker’s cap was still pulled low, obscuring his eyes while his thick beard covered the rest of his face.

“Where will you take them?”

“There’s an old WITSEC house in rural Nebraska,” Mitch said. “Small cabin just outside a small town, practically middle of nowhere. Hasn’t been used in years but it’s still a government listing. I’ll take ’em there. They’ll be safe.”

“Thank you,” Zero said again. He didn’t know what else to say. He wasn’t even sure why he was so easily able to trust this man with the two most important people in his life; it was a feeling, an instinct that transcended logic. But he had learned long ago—and relearned only hours ago—to trust his instincts.

“So,” Mitch grunted. “It’s finally happening, isn’t it?”

Zero blinked at him in surprise. “Yes,” he said cautiously. “You know about all this?”

“I do.”

He almost scoffed. “Who are you really?”

“A friend.” Mitch checked his wristwatch. “Chopper should be here any moment. It’ll take us to a private airfield, where we’ll hop a plane out west.”

Zero deflated. It didn’t seem like he was getting any more answers out of the mysterious mechanic. “Thanks,” he murmured once more. Then he turned back to say goodbye to his girls.

“You’re back,” said the mechanic behind him. “Aren’t you?”

Zero turned. “Yeah. I’m back.”

“When?”

He chuckled. “Today, if you can believe it. It’s been a very strange afternoon.”

“Well,” Mitch said. “I wouldn’t want to disappoint you.”

Zero froze. An electric tingle ran up his spine. Mitch’s voice had changed suddenly, no longer the grunting basso from just seconds prior. It was smooth and even, and so oddly familiar that Zero forgot about the Division and his situation and even his waiting daughters for a moment.

Mitch reached up beneath the brim of his trucker’s cap and rubbed his eyes. At least that’s what it looked like he was doing, but when his hand came away there were two tiny concave discs on his fingertips, crystalline blue.

Contacts. He was wearing colored contacts.

Then Mitch took off the trucker’s cap, smoothed his hair, and looked up at Zero. His brown eyes looked forlorn, almost ashamed, and in an instant Zero knew exactly why.

“Jesus.” His voice came out in a hoarse whisper as he looked at his eyes.

He knew those eyes. He’d know them anywhere. But it couldn’t be. It wasn’t possible. “Christ. You... you were dead.”

“So were you for a couple years there,” the mechanic said in his smooth, almost lilting tone.

“I saw your body,” Zero choked out. *This can’t be real.*

“You saw a body that looked like mine.” The burly man shrugged one shoulder. “Let’s not pretend I wasn’t always smarter than you, Zero.”

“Good god.” Zero looked him up and down. He’d put on about thirty pounds, maybe more. Grown out the beard. Wore the trucker’s cap and colored lenses. Changed his voice.

But it was him. He was alive.

“I don’t believe it.” He took two steps and hugged Alan tightly.

His best friend, the one who had his back on so many ops, the one who had helped him have the memory suppressor installed instead of killing him on the Hohenzollern Bridge, the one that Zero thought he had found dead, stabbed to death in an apartment in Zurich... he was here. He was alive.

He thought back to the discovery in Zurich. The dead man’s face had been puffy and bloated, and his mind had immediately linked the doppelganger to Reidigger. *Your mind fills in the blanks*, Maria had once told him.

Reidigger had faked his own death, just like he had helped Kent Steele fake his. And he had been living under the guise of a well-connected mechanic only twenty minutes away.

“All this time?” Zero asked. His voice was hoarse, and his vision blurred slightly as a well of emotions bubbled to the surface. “You’ve been keeping an eye on us?”

“As best I could. Watson helped.”

That's right. Watson knows. It was John Watson who had first introduced Reid Lawson to Mitch the mechanic—but he had only done so when Reid's daughters were taken, when the stakes were too high and the CIA was of little help.

"Does anyone else know?" Zero asked.

Alan shook his head. "No. And they can't. If the agency catches on, I'm a dead man."

"You could have told me sooner."

"No, I couldn't have." Alan smiled. "Without your memory intact, would you have recognized me? Would you have believed me if I simply told you?"

Zero had to admit he had a point.

"Was it Dr. Guyer? Did you go to see him?"

"I did," Zero said. "It didn't work at the time. It happened later, with a trigger word. And now..." He shook his head. "Now I know. I remember. I have to stop it, Alan."

"I know you do. And you know that there's nothing I'd like more than to be by your side while you do."

"But you can't be." Zero understood completely. Besides, Alan had a task that was, in Zero's eyes, just as significant to stopping a war. "I need you to keep them safe."

"I will. I promise I will." Alan's eyes lit up suddenly. "That reminds me, I have something for you." He reached through the open window of his truck and pulled out a Sig Sauer pistol. "Here. Compliments of the Division merc that assaulted your house."

Zero took the pistol incredulously. "The Division was at my house? What happened?"

"Nothing we couldn't handle. Those two are definitely your kids." Alan grinned, but it faded quickly. "You need help too, you know. Call Watson. Or your new pal, the Ranger."

"No," Zero said adamantly. He refused to compromise Watson or Strickland any further than he already had. "I'm better on my own."

Alan sighed. "Just as bullheaded as ever." In the distance, the telltale rotors of a helicopter drew nearer. "That's our ride. You take care of yourself, Zero."

"I will." He hugged Reidigger once more. "Thank you for doing this. When all this is over, you and I are going to sit down and have a very long conversation over several beers."

"You got it," Reidigger agreed. But there was a melancholic dip in his tone, one that suggested he was thinking the same as Zero was at the moment—that one or both of them might not survive this ordeal. "Until then—don't trust them."

He frowned. "Who?"

"Anyone in the agency," Alan said. "They were ready to kill you before, and they were happy to have me as the triggerman. They're not going to make that same mistake again. This time around they'll send someone who won't lose a minute of sleep putting a bullet in the back of your head."

"I know." Zero shook his head. "I was thinking of at least getting in touch with Cartwright. I don't think he's in on it—"

"Christ, what did I just say? No one, you understand?" Alan's gaze bored into his. "Especially not Cartwright. Zero... two years ago, Cartwright was the one that sent me and Morris after you on the bridge."

"What?" A shiver ran up Zero's spine.

"Yes. He didn't send the Division. He didn't send any killer asset. The order came down the chain for your assassination and Cartwright didn't argue it. He sent us."

A wave of fury rose like heat in his chest. Shawn Cartwright had pretended to be a friend, an ally, and had even warned Zero against trusting others like Riker.

The pounding of the chopper's rotors roared overhead as it hovered over Meadow Field. Alan leaned in and said in his ear, "Goodbye, Zero." He clapped his friend on the shoulder and strode away to meet the helicopter as it descended to the tall grass.

Zero hurried over to his waiting girls and hugged them both tightly once more. “I love you both,” he said in their ears. “Be good and take care of each other.”

“Love you too,” Sara told him with a squeeze.

“We will,” Maya promised as she wiped her eyes.

“Now go.” He let them go, and they hurried over to the black helicopter. They both glanced back at him once more before climbing into the cabin with Alan’s help. Then the door slid closed, and the chopper lifted off again. Zero stood there for a long moment, watching it as it got smaller and smaller in the sky. His head was still spinning from the knowledge that Alan Reidigger was somehow alive, but knowing that his daughters were in Alan’s hands gave him hope—and all the more determination to survive this.

Finally he tore his gaze from what was now a mere speck on the horizon and headed back to the car. For a few brief moments he sat there behind the wheel, wondering if that was the last time he would ever see his daughters. The sound of blood rushing in his ears was deafening.

He reached over and turned on the radio just for some noise. A male broadcaster’s voice immediately filled the cab.

“Our top story today continues to be the unfolding situation in the Persian Gulf,” the host said somberly. “Only hours ago an Iranian battleship fired rockets at the USS *Constitution*, an American destroyer on patrol with the Navy’s Fifth Fleet. In response, the *Constitution* returned fire, destroying the Iranian vessel and claiming the lives of all seventy-six crew members aboard.”

They’re moving fast. A pit formed in Zero’s stomach. He hadn’t expected this to unfold so quickly. *That just means I have to move faster.*

“The Iranian government has already issued a public statement,” the broadcaster continued, “in which they expressed their outrage over the destruction of their ship and proclaimed, and I quote, that ‘this event has been a clear and blatant act of war.’ Though there has not been a formal declaration, it appears that Iran is intent on igniting a new conflict with the US. White House Press Secretary Christine Cleary issued a very brief statement in response, stating only that President Pierson is fully aware of the situation and his cabinet is working quickly to convene the joint chiefs. He is expected to address the nation this evening.”

So that was their next play. The Brotherhood’s attack on American soil would stir the people into a state of xenophobia against Iranians, and the “attack” on the USS *Constitution* was a timely follow-up to incite a war. The president would meet with his advisors, and they would convince him that a renewed conflict in the Middle East was their only course of action.

Unless, he thought suddenly, he had a new advisor.

He pulled a card out of his pocket and dialed the number on it.

“Sanders,” answered the female aide who had approached him on the White House lawn.

“This is Agent Kent Steele,” he told her. “We met earlier today—”

“I recall,” she said abruptly. There was a tension in her voice, undoubtedly due to the recent events. “What can I do for you, Agent?”

“I need to speak with President Pierson.”

“I’m afraid he’s in a meeting,” said Sanders. “I’m sure you’re aware of what’s happening—”

“I am.” This time Zero cut her off. “And that’s why I’m calling. This is matter of national security, Ms. Sanders. So you can either get me a meeting with President Pierson, or you can explain to him later that you stood between him and everything that’s about to happen.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Less than a half hour later, Zero found himself once again in the White House, being ushered down a hall toward the Oval Office. He tried to smooth the wrinkles from his shirt, though it hardly mattered under the circumstances.

He was admitted to the president's inner sanctum, where he was surprised to find Pierson alone. Zero had expected a flurry of activity, a coterie of aides and cabinet members making calls, setting up laptop networks and communicating with a dozen different agencies and foreign powers.

Yet there was none. President Pierson rose from his desk when Zero entered, looking as if he'd aged a decade since only a few hours earlier. His tie was loosened around his neck and the top two buttons of his pressed white shirt were undone.

"Agent Steele." Pierson stuck out his right hand, and then scoffed at himself and shook Zero's left. "Sorry. Forgot about the hand. Jesus, this is a mess."

"I've heard." Zero glanced about the office. "I have to admit, I was expecting more of a reception."

"The joint chiefs are gathering currently in the Situation Room." Pierson sighed and leaned against his desk with both hands. "I'm expected there any minute. While I'm glad you're here, Zero, I'm afraid this meeting is going to have to be postponed."

"Mr. President," Zero pressed, "I have information." The fingers of his left hand lingered near his pocket, inside of which was the USB stick. "Before you convene with the joint chiefs, there's really something I need you to—"

"Sir." The door to the Oval Office opened just a few inches, and the face of Emilia Sanders peered in. Her gaze flitted from the president to Zero and back. "They're ready for you."

"Thank you, Emilia." Pierson tightened his tie to his throat and ran his palms down the front of his shirt. "I'm sorry, Zero, but my attention is required elsewhere."

"Sir." He took a step forward and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial level. He had to throw a Hail Mary; there was no way he could let Pierson enter the Situation Room uninformed. "I have very strong reason to believe that you cannot trust the men that are advising you."

The president's brow furrowed. "What reason? What do you know?"

"I have..." Zero started, but he threw a glance over his shoulder to find a Secret Service agent standing in the doorway to the Oval Office, waiting to escort the president to the Situation Room. "I can't explain it right now. All I need is five minutes. Alone."

Pierson rubbed his chin. He looked tired. "Come with me."

"Sir?"

"Sit in on this meeting. Afterwards, I'll give you your five minutes." Pierson started toward the door, and Zero followed. It was all he could; he couldn't dissuade the president from attending a meeting regarding a crisis of national security. And if it would get him five minutes alone with Pierson, then he would follow him into the lion's den.

*

The John F. Kennedy Conference Room, located in the West Wing basement and known to most as the Situation Room, was the intelligence management center of the White House, more than five thousand square feet of communications equipment that allowed some of the most powerful men in the world to maintain security from a single place.

And Zero, it seemed, had just been awarded earned a seat at the table.

President Pierson swept into the room on the heels of two Secret Service members, who immediately positioned themselves on either side of the double doors that granted them access. Zero followed behind him. Now this was the flurry of activity that he had expected upon arrival; there were fourteen people occupying the long rectangular table that ran the length of the room, and every one of them stood when the president entered.

Zero glanced around quickly, scanning the faces. He recognized nearly all of them; the National Security Advisor was present, the Homeland Security Advisor, the White House Chief of Staff, Secretary of Defense Quentin Rigby, DNI John Hillis, and Press Secretary Christine Cleary, among others. He couldn't help but note wryly that besides himself, Pierson, and Cleary, every other person in the room was a man over fifty-five.

He was mildly relieved to see that the CIA did not have a presence there. He'd half-expected to find Director Mullen or possibly even Deputy Director Riker rearing their heads. But this was a matter for heads of state, and the CIA was represented by DNI Hillis, who would be the one to relay any orders to Mullen.

"Please, take your seats." Pierson lowered himself into the black chair at the head of the table, closest to the doors. He gestured toward the empty seat to his right and Zero took it.

Several pairs of eyes were on him as he did, but only the Secretary of Defense spoke up. Retired four-star general Quentin Rigby carried a stiffness in his neck and shoulders and wore deep worry lines in his face that suggested he had seen the worst sides of humanity, and though discerning, he was not afraid to speak his mind.

"Mr. President." Rigby remained standing as he addressed Pierson. "I don't think I need to remind you that what we're about to discuss is highly discretionary—"

"Noted, General Rigby, thank you." Pierson cut off the general with a wave of his hand. "Agent Steele is here acting as a security advisor. He's been vetted by the CIA and has proven his capacity for discretion time and time again. Not to mention that he's the only one in this room with any recent experience with the type of situation we're dealing with."

"Even so," Rigby pressed, "it is highly unorthodox, sir."

"I don't think I need to remind *you*, General, that I am the only person that gets to decide who is in this room." Pierson stared Rigby down.

Zero almost smirked. He had never heard Pierson speak to anyone like that; usually his approach was diplomacy and charm. On the one hand, Zero could tell that the president was bedraggled by the events. On the other, it was nice to see him showing some real backbone.

Rigby nodded and lowered himself back into his seat. "Yes sir."

"Mr. Holmes." President Pierson nodded to his Chief of Staff, a short balding man with owlsh glasses. "If you would."

"Of course, sir." Peter Holmes rose and cleared his throat. "At approximately seventeen hundred hours local time, an Iranian battleship fired two rockets at the destroyer USS *Constitution* during a routine patrol in the Persian Gulf. Due to the recent change in ROE, with which I believe we're all familiar, the *Constitution* was authorized to—"

"Excuse me." Zero raised his hand as if he was in a classroom, cutting off the Chief of Staff. "What change in ROE?"

"The rules of engagement, Agent," said Holmes.

"I know the acronym," Zero said shortly. "What was the change?"

"In light of the recent attack on American soil," Rigby cut in, "the president signed an executive order just this morning which dictates that any foreign force that fires within a specific proximity to American military personnel are to be considered hostile and dealt with using extreme prejudice."

Zero didn't let himself show any reaction, but his mind churned. *What a coincidence*, he thought. "And what is the specific proximity, General?"

“We’re not here to outline the details of an executive order,” Rigby shot back. “We’re here to discuss an extremely pressing and volatile situation.”

Rigby was dodging the question. “What was the trajectory of the rockets?” Zero asked.

“Sorry?” Holmes pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“The trajectory,” Zero repeated. “Angle of ascent, descent, type of rocket, proximity, anything. How much of a threat was this ship to the *Constitution*?”

“Enough of a threat for a captain in the United States Navy to make a judgment call,” said Rigby forcefully. “Are you questioning the captain’s judgment, Agent Steele?”

I’m questioning his motivations, he nearly said. But he held his tongue. He couldn’t afford to tip his hand again like he had twice already. “Not at all. I’m merely suggesting that there are three sides to this story. The captain’s, the Iranians’, and the truth. What about cameras?”

“Cameras,” Rigby repeated flatly. He flashed a patronizing smirk. “Do you know a lot about destroyer-class ships, Agent?”

“Can’t say I have a lot of experience.” This time Zero flashed a smirk of his own. “All I know is that the USS *Constitution* is an Arleigh-Burke class destroyer, built in 1988 and first commissioned in 1991. They were the only US destroyer class used from 2005 to 2016, until the Zumwalt class was commissioned. The *Constitution* would be outfitted with an Aegis integrated weapons system, antisubmarine rockets, a passive electronically scanned radar array, and Tomahawk missiles—the latter of which I’m assuming was used to destroy the Iranian vessel and claim seventy-six lives. Considering it is one of the most technologically advanced machines on the entire ocean, and that it’s carrying enough firepower to conquer any number of banana republics, I would assume that cameras weren’t out of the question.”

Rigby stared him down for a long moment. “No cameras picked up the angle of attack,” he said finally. “But you’re welcome to read the captain’s report if you’d like.” The general slid a folder Zero’s way.

He opened it; the first page was a very brief report, only a few paragraphs, from a Captain Warren. The details were sparse. Warren claimed simply that an IRGC ship fired two rockets at the *Constitution*. Neither hit, but the attempt was deemed enough of a threat for Warren to make the judgment call to return fire—with, as Zero had predicted, eight Tomahawk missiles. The enemy ship had been obliterated.

Not only was it overkill, but that was the only part of the report that Zero actually believed. Anything else would have been easy to falsify. The Persian Gulf, and Captain Warren, was thousands of miles away. Far from anyone being able to question him meaningfully.

“Brass tacks,” said Rigby, “are that Iran is publicly considering this an act of war. They say we fired first. We say they fired first. There’s been no formal declaration of war from them, but the American people are going to expect a definitive answer. We cannot abide another attack—”

“Another attack?” Zero interjected again.

Rigby blinked at him. “Were you not in the Midtown Tunnel at the time of the bombing, Agent? When hundreds of American lives were lost?”

Zero shook his head. “That was the work of a radical terrorist faction that consisted of less than twenty men. Not an entire nation or region.”

“Tell that to the American people,” Rigby argued.

Zero said nothing in response, but he knew in that moment that his assumption was right. The conspirators wanted to use the recent attack as a way to rally the people to the cause of war.

“All right,” Pierson cut in, holding up a hand. “Let’s take a step back here. Roland, what sort of global responses are we seeing?”

The Secretary of State, Roland Kemmerer, quickly scanned his notes as he spoke. “Bad news first, I suppose. Intelligence and satellite recon suggests that Iran is already seeking allies in Iraq and

Oman, as well as some Syrian nationalist groups. If they banded together, they would have the ability to close the Strait of Hormuz.”

There was a moment of reverential silence to allow the comment to sink in before Rigby said, “You know how detrimental that could be, Mr. President.”

“Not only would that eliminate a strategic advantage for the Fifth Fleet,” Holmes added, “but we could be facing a major economic downturn.”

“A recession, to say the least. Possibly worse.” Kemmerer shook his head.

Zero bit his tongue to keep from reacting. *Sons of bitches*. This was as rehearsed as a play. They’d been waiting for years for this exact moment. He never would have imagined that he would be present for it, yet here he was, sitting in the Situation Room as these warmongers attempted to sway a president.

Pierson rubbed his chin pensively. His face was ashen; not only was he the sole person responsible for whether or not America would go to war, but a recession was clearly not something he had considered previously. “Is there any good news?”

The Secretary of State sighed. “Eventually. The UN wants to investigate the incident. The European Union, China, Japan, and most other allies are already issuing proclamations of neutrality in any future conflict that might arise. Except for one.”

Zero knew it well before Kemmerer even said it.

“Russia.” The Secretary of State fidgeted slightly in his seat. “It seems their own trade agreements with Iran have been deteriorating. They’re ready to lend their support if we need it.”

“President Ivanov has already pledged resources to our cause if we decided that it was in our best interests,” said Holmes.

“War,” the president murmured. “Might as well call it what it is. If war is in our best interests.”

Zero glanced over at Pierson. The president’s complexion had taken on a sallow aspect, and he stared blankly at the shiny mahogany tabletop. Despite how adept Zero was at reading expressions and tells, he couldn’t say whether or not Pierson was buying the load of bullshit that his cabinet was selling. But if he had to guess, he would say that Pierson was caving.

“General Rigby,” the president asked, “what’s your position?”

Here it comes. The blatant advice that the US go to war in the Middle East.

“It is my position that we mobilize the Fifth Fleet,” said Rigby, “and show them our full potential in the Persian Gulf. We can call in additional assets from the Gulf of Oman. But...” The general paused and shook his head. “I cannot advise that we initiate a war over this.”

Zero balked. He couldn’t hide his reaction this time; his mouth fell open slightly at the general’s remark. Rigby was playing a part, he was certain, but it was still a curveball.

“I believe that we should hold our position in the Gulf and let the Iranians know that we want to avoid conflict in any way possible,” he continued. “If they act, we react, but until then, we stay the course.”

“With all due respect, General,” said Holmes, “I’m not sure that perspective will sit well with the American people in the wake of recent events.”

“No,” Pierson agreed, “but the general is right. We can’t allow this situation to get blown out of proportion, and I don’t believe the Iranians are going to declare war without further provocation. Mr. Holmes,” he addressed his Chief of Staff, “let’s begin immediately on an address to the nation. We’ll explain that the attack in the Persian Gulf did not result in any loss of American life, and that we will not be goaded into any hostilities.”

“Yes sir, Mr. President.”

Zero’s mind was working a mile a minute. He had fully expected this to be the meeting in which the US declared war on Iran and took swift action to control the Strait of Hormuz...

Oh. The realization struck him like a brick to the head. To declare war now would make their intentions too obvious. He, Agent Zero, had figured it out, and while he knew he was fiercely

intelligent—there was that hubris again—others were too. Someone else could assume the same as him. No, these people had years to plan this. They weren't in any rush.

He had thought, had assumed that this entire meeting was the play. But this was just the rehearsal. Which meant... *There is going to be something else. Not an attack. Not a fight.*

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