

MIND+BODY

A NOVEL

AARON DUNLAP

Mind + Body

Pronounced, "Mind and Body." Alternative formatting, "Mind & Body."

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ISBN 1440414793

EAN-13 9781440414794

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Real-life products, equipment, and techniques are portrayed as accurately as possible.

Cover design by John Godfrey

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When it is not in our power to determine what is true, we ought to accept what is most probable.

— *René Descartes*

To believe something, one must imagine that it is more probable than not.

— *Cyrano de Bergerac*

At times truth may not seem probable.

— *Nicolas Boileau-Despréau*

CHAPTER 01

I was seventeen, almost eighteen, the first time I killed someone.

It was kind of an accident, in the same way that bubble gum is *kind* of a food. I hadn't set out to kill him, honestly, but I wasn't exactly trying *not* to kill him either.

To be fair, the guy tried to kill me first. That I had most likely broken his arm and nose before he tried to kill me would probably have been brought up by the prosecution at my murder trial, if there had ever been one. If there had been, though, I or my overpriced attorney (I'm assuming that if I had one, he would be overpriced) would have mentioned the extreme duress I was under. My father had recently died, my school life had gone completely out of control, I had more than a little bit of pepper spray in my eyes, and I was acting to defend my life and the life of the girl I was with.

But alas, there was no murder trial. There was hardly an investigation, really. As an average teenager, that night would have probably been the high – or low – point of my young, naive life. It would probably have been the topic of discussion in a lifetime of counseling and

group therapy. It might have motivated a period of heavy drug use and the abandonment of friends and family, followed by an inspirational recovery that I might later write about in a best-selling autobiography, that would surely be described by Newsweek magazine as, “A haunting, yet uplifting story of tragedy and the re-discovery of life that every person, young and old, must read.” My life wouldn't move in that direction, though.

Being put in a situation where you have to decide whether or not to probably kill someone to protect your own life should have affected me profoundly, but it didn't. It bounced off me like rain off glass.

Around two weeks later, when I killed someone again, this time much more deliberately, I was affected even less. There was no murder trial for that one, either.

I'm getting ahead of myself, though.

If what I'm trying to insinuate is that I'm not a normal teenager, I have to confess that I was painfully normal for most of my life, up until the moment my father died.

It was a usual night; a school night.

I was putting off an English assignment. The document I was supposed to be writing was opened on my computer, but I was watching a movie on TV instead. I don't even remember what it was called, some B-horror movie on cable about a giant mutated snake was eating people. Said snake was in the middle of eating Wil Wheaton when my house phone rang.

Twelve seconds later, I heard my mother screaming downstairs.

He'd had a heart attack at work, and died on the way to the hospital. He was in his forties and by all accounts seemed perfectly healthy. He hadn't had a full physical in a while, but it wasn't like he ate nothing but cheeseburgers. He smoked in college, he'd told me once, but hadn't since.

Daniel Baker, my father, was a research scientist at the Marine Corps University Research Center in Quantico, Virginia. That is, until that night. Then he was just dead.

The nature of his work demanded a large measure of secrecy. I had a very small idea about what he did up there in Quantico, and we

were given no clue about what he was doing when he'd had the heart attack beyond that brief, emotionless phone call.

It's not all too unusual, where I grew up, for such secrets to infect people's lives. I'd lived in Fredericksburg, Virginia my whole life. Quantico – a self-contained “city” that's home to the nation's largest Marine Corps base, the Marine Corps University, DEA University, FBI Academy, and a few other assorted pillars of dread – is about half an hour's drive from Fredericksburg. So too is the CIA headquarters in Langley and the Pentagon, and Washington D.C. isn't all that far, either. Everybody who worked for these societies of secrets tended to live in the suburbs outside of them, like Fredericksburg. A lot of kids my age were just as clueless about one or more of their parents' occupation. If they didn't tell us, we didn't ask. “Don't ask questions,” is a kind of unofficial motto for the youth of the area.

We knew it wasn't all cloak and dagger business with fast cars, encoded messages dead-dropped inside payphone Yellow Pages, and pistols under pillows. Even the most mundane of government jobs requires some level of secrecy. In a way, it's comforting, knowing that the job is being done and that the secrets are safe.

It's no comfort, however, to a kid whose father had died.

For the next week I existed in a state of disconnection from reality. The edges of the world, my world, were dulled and prodded uselessly at my senses while I walked around, spoke to relatives, bought a suit, attended a funeral, and when not doing any of these, sat alone in my room. The relatives and family friends who came over before and after the funeral wore empathetic faces that squawked of sympathies and if-there's-anything-I-can-do...s. Sentiments and familiar stories bounced off the walls and mingled with the scents from the floral arrangements. I just sat there, pretending to pay attention, but wallowing in the daze I'd seeped in since I'd first heard, and trying very hard to concentrate on the thoughts spinning around my head.

I wasn't very close with my father, nor was I very distant. He was just... my dad. A fixture in my life that I assumed would always be there. That he couldn't talk about his work or anything having to do with it handicapped many opportunities for conversation. We'd talk about school or old movies. He could help with science or math homework, subjects in which I had little interest. With classes I liked like English or

history I was usually on my own. He didn't say "I love you" as much as fathers on TV, if that's any kind of measuring stick, but I didn't have any doubts about it, really.

These were the things I thought about endlessly. I thought about my relationship with him, and what his absence would mean for my future. If I decided to go to college, he couldn't write me a letter of recommendation on prestigious Marine Corps letterhead. He couldn't help me with the math and science courses that would be required for any degree. He couldn't tell my mother that, maybe I should get my own place to live and that, maybe they should help pay for it.

I'm not the sort of person who maps out their life with any sort of detail, but with such a huge chunk removed, I felt helpless. I felt like I'd been kicked out of the reality I was happily swimming through and was now flapping around on the shore of some new existence I hadn't requested and didn't want.

With an absurd naïveté that in hindsight could be mistaken for genuine insight, I thought then that my life would never be the same.

CHAPTER 02

One of the very few nice things to come from my father's untimely death was that I was excused from school for practically as long as I wanted.

I was a senior in high school at the time, and although I did well in most classes I loathed the very notion of being inside the building. If I had been just a bit younger during the Attention Deficit Disorder and Ritalin craze that swept the nation a few years ago, I probably would have been swept up in it. They'd say the reason I was so disinterested in classes was that I couldn't focus or that my brain was working harder than most other kids, so I should be put on a neuro-stimulant that single-handedly changed the already-aging idea of a school nurse from an applicator of bandages and thermometers to a dispensary of pre-prescribed medications.

I doubted I suffered from any definitive brain disorder, though. I just didn't like spending all day in a school, being given information and then instantly asked to recall it, and being fed mass-produced chicken nuggets at lunch. The US government, the largest governing body on the planet is tasked with educating its children in everything needed to be successful in adult life, and this is the best they can do? By the end of

each day I would always feel exhausted mentally and physically, not from difficult classes but from trying to parse enormous chunks of boredom into pieces small enough to handle without causing an aneurysm. I'd head home each day with the eagerness of a recently paroled inmate and decompress my brain with some television or video games before going to bed way too late and wake up way too early, just to deal with it all again.

I was grateful, then, for the respite from institutionalized learning.

The day after the funeral my mother had an appointment with the family lawyer to go over my dad's will. At the last minute, someone had called my mom and asked that I come along as well. It was the sort of thing that I'd typically protest, waking up early and going to a stuffy office to hear about the particulars of section whatever, paragraph blah, but it seemed like it would make a useful distraction from the mental stupor into which I had degraded.

The office, the walls, the books, the desks, the legal terms, it was all so boring, however, that once I'd been in the office for a few minutes I'd returned to walking-zombie status until my attention was pulled by a very large number and a slight gasp from my mother.

"He did what?" She asked.

The lawyer across the desk from us fidgeted slightly, adjusted his glasses, and returned his eyes to the stack of documents in front of him.

"Almost a month ago," he said, "he changed his personal life insurance policy from a coverage value of \$250,000 to \$750,000."

"He didn't say anything about that to me," my mom said, confused. "Are you sure this is his paperwork?"

"That's not all," the lawyer said, pulling a new document to the top of the stack. "Soon after, he updated his will with our office and changed the beneficiary details. The original total, \$250,000 is to go to the closest surviving relative, like usual. This would be you, Mrs. Baker."

The lawyer paused and re-read a few sentences to himself. "The remainder, \$500,000," he continued, "is to go directly to Christopher Daniel Baker." He looked at me, and said, "You."

My mother and I sat in silence for an extended moment.

I'd heard of families receiving a nice payout like this after a death, but that was always for crazy-rich people. Wasn't a life insurance policy meant to make up for how much money the person would have made if he were alive and working? We definitely aren't a \$750,000 household. More importantly, how did I just go from having \$112 dollars to my name to having \$500,112 in seven seconds?

"In a trust, you mean?" my mom asked.

The lawyer shook his head. "Usually, that's what would be done in the case of a minor. Money is set aside in an escrow or trust until the person turns eighteen or twenty-one or graduates college or gets married, whatever the estate-holder specifies. Not here, though. Daniel specifically stated that the money is to go to Chris, in full, regardless of age."

I could have sworn there was a high-pitched ringing in my ears. Half a million dollars.

My mother turned to me, her face a product of shock and denial. "Did he say anything about this to you?"

I shook my head slowly. "A few— a few months ago I asked him how much apartments cost in DC. I don't remember the conversation very well."

Her eyes went to the left, in thought.

"You're almost eighteen," the lawyer said to me, interrupting the silent contemplating across the desk. "Were you accepted at any colleges?"

"I haven't decided about college," I said.

"Oh," he said, looking disappointed.

"College doesn't cost five-hundred thousand, does it?" I asked.

Both adults shook their heads, slowly. "Maybe if you were planning on becoming a doctor," the lawyer said. I was surprised he didn't include, "or a lawyer."

I wasn't planning on becoming anything. I guess I figured I was going to try for a few months to get a job at a newspaper or something in data processing, fail, then go to a community college until I was sufficiently numbed to the idea of college and then transfer to a university to give myself an extra four years to figure my life out.

With \$500,000, assuming this was for real, things would be quite different. I could buy a house or apartment, paying cash, and only need to work for enough money to cover food, clothes, taxes, and utilities. I could buy a plot of land on one of the Caribbean islands and build a nice little villa, earn money teaching rich tourists to make bead necklaces or maybe write some bad novels on an antique desk looking out a window at the ocean.

I could spend my whole life trying to figure out why the hell my dad had left me that much money.

Did you know that you don't pay any taxes on life insurance death benefits?

When the papers were signed and we went home, my mom began to investigate my dad's financial records and found that after my dad increased his life insurance payout from \$250,000 to \$750,000, the increased premiums nearly ate through my dad's entire paycheck. There was no way we could have stayed afloat with him paying that much to the insurance company every month.

It seemed like either my dad was expecting a very serious raise, or he knew that he was going to die.

CHAPTER 03

Not even a death in the family can keep you from public school for as long as you'd like.

One week after my net worth increased by something like thirty zillion percent I was back in school, back to reality. To be honest, I was starting to look forward to going back. Somehow, sinking into familiar routines seemed like the most amazing thing I could have done. Sitting around the house or walking around the neighborhood was doing me no good, not with the compounding mysteries seeping into my life.

Monday morning, I walked those halls again and let myself slip into the empty anonymity provided by a crowd of peers. Freshmen with their stupid-huge backpacks, sophomores telling inside jokes so satisfied that they're cooler than at least one group of people, juniors walking with their noses in books and looking distraught over all the stress they're under, and seniors leaning against locker doors, their backpacks long since abandoned and only carrying few things absolutely necessary to get through the day. Life seems so much easier when peer groups are categorized so rigidly.

Anonymity went out the window when I entered my first class and sat down. From the second I walked in the door, hushed conversations were severed as 40 eyes dug into me and trailed me as I slumped into the first empty desk I saw. I darted my eyes around, everybody avoided eye contact. I lined my pencils up on my desktop while the room sat in a still, thick silence.

They had to have heard about my dad's death, but I hoped the word hadn't gotten about regarding my ill-gotten gains. It shouldn't have; I didn't tell anybody. Still, if everybody knows, I'd need to hire a bodyguard just to hold off the ironic requests for loans. I tried to imagine how much bodyguards cost; I remembered reading somewhere that a legitimate executive security firm charges about a thousand dollars per day. I could get a bodyguard for 500 days, and then I wouldn't need one anymore. Spending all your money to keep people from getting your money – that should have been a *Twilight Zone* episode. Hell, it probably was. By the hundredth episode they had to have been repeating their hubris-related ironies.

I decided it'd be cheaper to fly to New Zealand and start my life over and surround myself with people who don't know or care about whether I have a father or what insane amount of money he may or may not have left me. Actually, it'd probably be cheaper to have anybody who knows about the money assassinated. I pondered the options for a moment, I could spend a lot of time trying to track down an actual hit squad, or I could just float the notion around gang neighborhoods and wait until something catches. And there's always the Yakuza.

The teacher walked in the classroom with his coffee cup freshly warmed up, finally drawing some of the attention off of me and pulling me from my daydreaming. He started to begin the typical class-opening procedures when he noticed everybody's silence, and followed the sight-lines and finally saw me. He, too, stared at me in silence for a moment.

Maybe I could just start passing out hundred dollar bills for people to pretend they aren't so freaking uncomfortable around me. I drew a breath and prepared to say something when the door opened again. A girl took a step in and read my name from a piece of paper. She was an office aide, and had a summons for me to come to the counseling office at my earliest convenience.

Oh, God.

I'd been to the counseling office twice before, a customary meeting in freshman year so I'd know who my counselor was and for her to find out if I had any brain problems I'd like to talk about, then again in junior year to talk about colleges and application deadlines. I still couldn't figure out if the counselors are supposed to be academic or social counselors. I can't imagine there's a path of psychology education that includes recommending colleges.

Her chair was uncomfortable, and there was a bowl of mixed hard candies positioned on the desk square between me and her.

"I heard about your father, of course," she started, "First, I'd like to offer my sincere condolences."

I grinned weakly. I'd already had a week and a half of sincere condolences.

"I've notified all your teachers," she continued, "so they'll be understanding and will be able to work with you regarding assignments and such."

"I'm sure gossip did the job before you got there," I said, glancing out the window into the parking lot. She smiled.

"Yes, people talk." Her face quickly transformed to a too-sincere look of empathy, quite a talent; "Is anybody making you uncomfortable or hurting your feelings regarding it?"

I looked back and forth between her and the candy. "No."

"Oh. Okay, good. Well just understand that people, teenagers and children specifically, tend to focus their attention through inappropriate avenues when they're actually just uncomfortable or intimidated. If someone gives you trouble or makes you feel bad or worse, you can let me or an administrator know. Or a teacher."

I really wanted to leave. "Okay," I said, simply.

There was a slight pause.

"So, were you and your father close?" she asked finally.

Oh, God.

After I was through with that mess, I slipped out of the counseling office was trying to decide whether I should return to class or just go home when my own name pulled me from my thoughts.

“Chris?” a girl’s voice said from behind me. Someone my age was talking to me? I turned around; it was Amy Westbourne – a girl I’d known slightly for a few years. We’d had a few classes together and talked occasionally. She was about fifty feet away, walking toward me.

“Yeah?” I said loud enough to cover the distance.

“You’re back,” she said, now a bit closer. She was speaking like I’d just gotten back from Disney World.

Amy was my age, thin, and borderline punk-trendy. She had neck-length dark blonde hair with streaks or lines, whatever you call them, of reddish and... darkish. I never understand girls and their hair, but whatever it was, she looked good. When I first met her she dressed rather clean-cut, but over the years she transitioned to worn punk-style thrift store-style shirts that probably cost \$28, jeans, and those cloth wrist things that punky girls always wear. Looking at her, you’d know she’d never done a rebellious thing in her life, but she carried herself well enough that you’d never consider her a poser.

Not that I ever paid a lot of attention to her or anything...

“Yeah, I’m back,” I said, now standing in the middle of the hallway.

“That’s good,” she said, stopping just a few feet from me.

“Coming from C.O.?” she asked after a pause, looking at the door to the counseling office.

I looked down at the floor, not wanting to direct the conversation to its inevitable climax of awkward condolences and uncomfortable silence. “Yeah,” I finally said, letting my voice trail off.

She nodded, interested. “Oh, because of your dad and everything?” she asked, also interested.

She wasn’t patronizing me. That was new. “Yeah,” I said, a bit taken aback.

She made a crooked grin and said, “Yeah, they did the same thing when my grandpa died last year. A lot of attention you really don’t want.”

“Yeah,” I said, for lack of anything better to say. I looked around for a moment, then back at the hallway leading to my classroom.

“Everybody seems like they’re afraid of me. I’ve been through half a minute of one class and I’m already sick of it here.”

She smiled. “They’re are just nervous. They think you’re going to be scratching at your wrists and writing bad poems, and if they talk to you you’ll just explode a bunch of gross emotions all over them.”

I smiled. “Seems like it.”

There was another pause, though not altogether uncomfortable.

“Okay,” she said starting to step in the other direction, “well don’t feel bad. I’ll see you in fourth.”

I watched her back up and I nodded, distant. She turned around and walked toward the classrooms. The conversation was over. The first decent conversation I’d had since forever was over, and I felt myself sinking back into depression. I had to get the pretty girl to say more things to me.

“Uhh...” I said, desperate to think of something to say. She was still walking.

“He left me half a million dollars,” I said, uncomfortably loud. I bit my tongue.

She stopped and turned back toward me. “Huh?” she asked.

Oh, God.

CHAPTER 04

“So... you could buy a house, you know,” she’d say.

“A big house. And a car,” I’d reply.

“Or, a small house and a medium house. Right next to each other,” after some thought.

“Or the House of Representatives. And a car,” I’d say finally.

This went on and on.

I’d told Amy pretty much everything. She’d been more interested than shocked or anxious for a loan. Through the weeks we’d gone over all the details, formulating theories about mysterious deaths and mysterious sums of money. Ideas floated around such as that my dad was not a medical researcher but a secret agent who’d been killed in action, or perhaps he was a robot assassin from the future, or he was a hologram and never really existed. All three seemed equally likely.

It was nice to be able to talk to someone. After a few weeks the dead-dad-kid stigma started to wear off at school, but the break from contact seemed to make people question why they ever talked to me in the first place. I suppose I’m just not that interesting and the few recent

things that seemed to make me interesting I'd elected not to tell anybody. Except Amy.

Nothing notably weird happened for about a month. One Thursday at school I was lost in thought while walking through the halls during lunch. I find when I don't have something particular to think about I end up thinking about everything; hallways, lockers, and people just blur through the periphery. I'm usually able to stay above the surface enough to avoid running into people or falling down a flight of stairs, but apparently not so much today. It was lunch time, so most people were either in the cafeteria or outside in the cold trying to hide the fact that they're smoking. For this, it was surprising to find three poser Mexican gang drifters standing around one otherwise-empty hallway.

In Fredericksburg there isn't much in the way of "gang activity," but as in any suburb there's plenty of poser activity. The town is close enough to Washington D.C., however, that some of the posers have friends who have friends who actually are gang members, and so after taking classes at their blue ribbon schools and dropping their books off at their five bedroom houses, they play make-believe that they're hard-boiled gang members raised on the streets. Nothing new.

I wasn't looking, I walked right into one of them as he was making some elaborate gesture in the middle of some I'm-sure-hilarious joke. I was walking pretty fast, and the one I hit was jarred back a foot or so and dropped the clear plastic drink container he was holding.

"Ay, watch where you're going, son!" the one I hit said; the others turned toward me and fell into their stereotypical straight-from-the-TV behavior: slowly surrounding me and watching the first one, the one I hit, apparently their ringleader, for instructions. I opened my mouth to apologize and hopefully slide my way out of there when I noticed that whatever was spilling out of the container the first guy dropped had splashed onto my arm after the impact. It looked like orange juice, it smelled like rubbing alcohol. Oh, the sweet rebellion. I couldn't help but laugh, which probably looked like I was laughing at them. One guy standing to my right pushed me suddenly, and chimed in, "Something funny, son?"

They all say "son" too often.

I swallowed my laugh, but couldn't help but say, "I'd be less obvious if you poured the vodka right in a bottle of orange juice. Putting it all in a clear bottle... it's trying too hard."

I should have shut up.

The first guy didn't seem to like that. "Maybe you should mind your own business, bro," he said, looking me up and down. I guess I wasn't his son anymore. I probably shouldn't have said that out loud either.

I have to say, I'd never been slammed against a locker before. It's not very awesome; the handle goes right into the small of your back.

Very quickly this had turned from a funny situation into a me-getting-pummeled situation.

Two of them were holding my arms and shoulders firmly against the locker. After making sure the hallway was clear, the ringleader swung his fist sharply into my stomach. No wind-up, no pull-back, just the punch. I heard the slap of the fist against my abdomen, then felt the dull, hallow feeling, like being scooped out with a spoon. I was pretty sure I had never actually been punched before. Don't recommend it.

"Not laughing now," he said after drawing his fist back.

The pain wasn't as bad as I expected. I didn't double over or pass out or cry like a girl. I just winced and exhaled sharply. For my own sake, maybe I should have exaggerated a bit. The ringleader seemed dissatisfied, he stepped forward and threw another quick punch, into nearly the same spot. This one hurt more. I think I may have winced.

I tried to pull away from the lockers but the, let's call them "goons" moved their hands from my arms to my shoulders to hold me firmer.

I tried to rationalize all of this in my head. He was overreacting because his friends were there, sure, but this was a respect thing. I'd disrespected him so he had to punch me until, what? Until I was punched to death? Until someone came and broke up the fight? Until I apologized? If my options were die, wait, or apologize, I'd shirk my pride and just get it over with.

"Okay, okay," I said, holding my hands up as far as I could, about as high as my chest, "I'm sorry."

He looked at me for a few seconds, a stupid, empty expression on his face. With his respect returned, he should let me go, right?

“Oh, you bet you’re sorry,” he said as he threw another punch, this one into my side.

This was just illogical.

The goons laughed like idiots, then one stopped suddenly and looked to my left. A kid I didn’t recognize had come around the far corner of the hall. He stopped in his tracks for a second when he saw us and recognized it as a fight, then backed up and ran back around the corner.

The ringleader huffed, an actual huff, seeming to prepare for his grand finale before they had to disperse. I saw him draw back his fist, for once. This punch wasn’t coming for my gut, I knew. This one would be in the face.

He threw the punch. I winced preemptively as the fist drew toward me, seeming to slow mid-air until it just hung there suspended in time.

Something weird seemed to happen in my head. The world had slowed down, got mushy, and stopped entirely. Walls in my mind crumbled, and everything I thought I knew about anything changed in an instant. A thousand images and sounds suddenly splashed against my brain like buckets of paint being dumped on a canvas. Then there was a pain, a deep, throbbing pain like an ice cream headache that started at the base of my skull and radiated outward until my entire body was numb.

With my head still throbbing and my body still numb, time seemed to un-pause and that fist was again on an intercept course with my face. With a perverse clarity, and as if it were the only thing to do, I grabbed the clenched fist from the air with my left hand and spun it counter-clockwise. Instantly, I found my right hand going around the back of the ringleader’s head and I pulled his face into the lockers behind me, his face hitting just above my right shoulder.

As he slumped to the ground I was peeling the hands from my arms, then putting a palm into one of the goon’s throats, my knee into the back of the other, then the whole body of the first goon into the second. They both tripped over the ringleader and toppled over each other onto the floor. It was a short burst of hands connecting with faces

and necks that was over so quickly I could barely track each move as I performed them.

They were all down now. My head hurt.

My head hurt, and apparently I was a ninja.

Voices echoed behind me, distant and distorted. My head was pounding harder and louder, like ten glass bottles had been broken over my head. I felt dizzy and lost my balance. I stumbled against the opposite wall, groping it for support. Through a fog I felt a hand grab my shoulder and another grab my opposite arm.

Without pause I pivoted on my heel, freed the grip from my arm, and was preparing to push someone's shoulder out of socket when I realized that just below the tuft of shirt I was now grabbing was a shiny silver badge. I was holding the left arm and right shoulder of our school's very frightened police liaison.

Everything went fuzzy for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 05

I'd never been sent to the principal's office before.

At my school, the role of dealing with students typically reserved for a single principal is split up among a small fleet of “administrators” who are assigned to certain students seemingly at random. I understand this is common now among modern high schools. The administrator I was assigned to was Mr. Comstock. Replacing the first ‘o’ with a ‘u’ has always been a popular teenage antic around here, and is one of the reasons I loathe admitting that I am, in fact, a teenager.

I'd spoken to Mr. Comstock only a few times in my life, even though it seemed like he'd been around me forever. When I was in elementary school, he worked there in the office somewhere; he transferred to my middle school during my second year there, and he and I started at this high school at the same time. He must either be very easily dissatisfied or so horrible to work for that he just gets slid around the system so nobody has to deal with him for too long.

I'd apparently broken one person's nose and collapsed another's larynx. The kid who'd walked in on the fight, a freshman, had run to the nearest adult, who called the school's assigned police officer. Said police

officer arrived on scene just as I was tossing one kid – the one whose larynx I collapsed – onto another. When my head stopped thumping and I could stand up, I was taken to this office and left alone. Through the glass panel of the closed, probably locked door I saw paramedics rolling stretchers down the hall.

Mr. Comstock had been on the phone since I got there, talking with various people including the police. After a few minutes of silent contemplation as to the source of the pain in my head, I heard Mr. Comstock begin to wind down the conversation and then he hung up the telephone and looked to me, himself seeming frazzled and anxious to say something. He started to tell me then about the collapsed larynx and broken nose until the phone rang yet again. He apologized and answered it.

“Yes?” he spoke into the handset parked on his face.

“Yeah... he... *it's* here,” he continued, spinning his chair around and facing the window.

I looked around at the pictures in the office, each with a smiling teenager in front of the same grayish backdrop; other students of his who donated wallet-sized prints of their school pictures. In any other job, having a collection of photographs of underage minors would seem somehow inappropriate.

The desk between him and me was littered with papers of various colors; a keyboard and an impressive flat screen monitor sat in the corner next to a black and silver Swingline stapler and a navy blue New England Federated Bank mug stuffed full of capped roller ball pens, probably Bic.

Comstock was still on the phone. Looking at him, I guessed he was probably in his mid-forties. There was no wedding ring on his finger, and he had deep pinkish eyeglass pad imprints on the bridge of his nose which he rubbed occasionally. I noticed a bottle of saline drops on the shelf behind the desk and figured he must have just switched to contacts now that the contacts-are-for-chicks stigma had finally worn thin. I looked back at the flat screen monitor again, it was a Sony and the school's computers were all Dell; he must have bought the monitor himself and brought it in so he'd look better than everyone else. Or maybe he just had eye fatigue.

It seemed like these small details were flooding my consciousness. It felt unusual and slightly amplified the headache.

On the shelf in the back were a few books, one of Yeats poetry and three Tolstoy novels; all of their spines were in perfect condition having probably never been opened. This guy seems to spend a lot of time worrying about what people think of him.

“That would seem a bit strange,” he said to the phone, “I don’t know if I can make that float. It’s not my job. It might be expensive.”

There was a pause, and he hung up.

“Okay,” he said to me at last. “The student handbook specifies that fighting in school results in suspension or expulsion, you probably know that.”

I sighed, and started to unscrew my predicted life outline from the wall of my mind for the third time since my dad died.

“Obviously,” he continued, “that doesn’t make any sense. If we followed that rule, some kid who gets punched in the face for no reason and pushes back would have to be punished for it. I guess we’re trying to raise people to get punched and just stand there.

“Except in, say, Sharks versus Jets style fights or petty adolescent boy/girl jealousy bouts, usually in a fight there’s one guilty party and one guy getting pummeled. Punishing someone for getting attacked is just dumb. So we usually don’t. It’s in the book because it’s hard to explain the stance of ‘it’s okay to get in a fight unless you’re a bad person’ in print.”

He stopped and thought for a second.

“So. You certainly put the hurt on those kids, but you obviously didn’t go down that hall looking for trouble. Plus, we found the... *illicit beverage* Marcos had. That’s illegal, bringing alcohol into a public school. So four gang-types with contraband alcohol attack you, a kid with no administrative record or any history of violence and who recently suffered a death in the family – which might explain the unusual torrent of aggression. As far as we’re concerned we’ve got no real beef with you. The kids’ parents might press charges against you, but that seems unlikely. They’ll be going from the hospital to the police station.”

“Huh,” I said, a bit surprised. My head was starting to clear up.

“You probably don’t want your mom finding out about this anyway, so on the administrative front I can just pretend you weren’t even involved.”

“I guess I could get in fights more often,” I said.

He let out a tight laugh. “The way you tore those guys up, I’m surprised to hear you haven’t been in any. Have you taken karate classes or something?”

“Umm... no.”

“Weird. Well I guess there’s no telling how someone will react when he’s about to get pummeled on. The fight or flight response is pretty powerful. I read a story about some guy who was mugged, never thrown a punch in his life, but he puts the mugger into a coma. He says his guardian angel helped him. Weird stuff.”

Weird indeed.

CHAPTER 06

After that particularly delightful conversation with Mr. Comstock wherein I was let off the hook for being attacked and defending myself like any rational person with Spider-Man powers would, I left the administrative offices and found myself in a mob. Much of the school was still on lunch break, and dozens of students were standing around the main hallway milling about and talking excitedly amongst themselves. They'd probably gathered for the show of ambulances and stretchers. Beats cafeteria chicken nuggets.

“There was a fight upstairs in the back hall. Like six guys got sent to the hospital.”

“Who started it?”

“I dunno, the ones I saw were all Mexican dudes.”

As I took a few more steps into the crowd a few faces began to turn toward me. Fingers pointed, voices hushed. Rumor spread through the masses outward like a radio pulse, and people yet again had a reason to single me out. Fantastic. I started cutting through the mob and heading toward the door when Amy wedged her way through to intersect with me.

“You’re here,” I said as she fell into step with me. A trail of “it was *him*?” echoed behind us.

“I’m everywhere,” she said with a grin. “Did you see the fight?”

“I *was* the fight.”

We’d broken free of the largest part of the crowd and ducked into one of the side halls by then.

“You mean you were *in* the fight? Ohmygod are you okay?” she looked me over, trying to find where I’d hidden the pints of blood I should have been leaking.

Am I ok? I considered that for a moment. A long moment.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Somehow I just put three kids in the hospital.”

She looked in my eyes, trying to find the part of that which made any sense.

“I don’t know,” I said before she could say anything. “I physically ran into a bunch of those Mexican gang wannabe guys, I said some stupid stuff to them, they put me against the lockers and as one was about to cave my face in, I kind of freaked out and went all kung-fu on them and was about to clock Officer Rhodes in the face when I blacked out.”

“That’s... different. So you beat them all up?”

“Yes.”

“All of them?”

“All of them. I broke one nose and collapsed one windpipe, I’m told; though I could swear I felt a wrist break and the guy I kned in the back will probably have some coccyx fractures once they x-ray him.”

I looked around; people in this hall were starting to look at me, too. I grabbed Amy’s arm above the elbow and started walking toward the door to the student parking lot.

“Have you taken karate classes or something?” she asked in stride.

“No; and that’s what Comstock asked me right before he told me I wasn’t in any trouble and that they wouldn’t even tell my paren- my mom.”

“That seems unusual.”

We stopped in front of the door. “Everything seems unusual now, and it just keeps getting more and more so. I think I’m done here, for now.”

“Done with what?”

“Done with school, I’m not coming anymore. It was bad enough with all the ‘his dad died’ stuff, now people are all going to know that I uncharacteristically kick ass. I’d say my hopes of just fading into the background are ruined.”

“You can’t drop out now. School’s done forever in like two months!”

“I don’t need to drop out. We need 22 credits to graduate and with all my A.P. English classes and those dummy computer classes I tested out of I’ve got 21 as of this semester. There’s two months of school left and I just need to pass two of my classes. I can do that without trying, so I will.”

She stood with her mouth open. I pushed the door open behind me with my foot and stepped backwards through it.

“I’ll talk to you later,” I said, grabbing the door for a moment as it swung shut. She just looked at me.

My cell phone buzzed as I was getting into my car. I pulled it from my jacket pocket and flipped it open. Black-against-green letters spoke of a new text message from Amy:

STARBUCKS 3.30

I sighed, flipped the phone shut and tossed it into the passenger seat. As I drove off, I looked up at my high school shrinking in my mirror, and hoped I’d never see it again.

CHAPTER 07

It was only one thirty, but I went right from school to the nearest Starbucks. I would have gone home, but my mom may have been there and I didn't know how to explain that I was done with high school and that life generally sucks without it sounding like mundane teenager issues. I sat in a hard wooden chair in the back of the shop with my back to the wall, my hands spinning a warm cup of espresso, steamed milk, and flavored sugar while my brain ran in circles.

I kept telling myself that I'm overreacting, that I must be manifesting some weird emotions over my dad's death. I hadn't really shown any emotion after it, never screamed at the sky and asked God why bad things happen to good people. I just... dealt with it. People around me were probably wondering why I was so passive about it, afraid I was internalizing it and was going to explode someday. Explode like, collapse a larynx and break a nose.

Maybe that was it. I was just holding it all in, the massive weirdness of the life insurance money had distracted me from my grief and I never noticed it until it broke free and broke the nose of whoever was closest to me. Maybe.

Amy got there around two twenty, sooner than I expected. When she walked in the door she smiled at me, held up an index finger and got in line at the counter. I whistled, and pointed at the iced passion tea lemonade sitting across the tiny round table from me. She held in a laugh and walked over, sitting across from me.

“How gentlemanly,” she said.

“That’s what you got last time, so it’s ‘your drink’, right?” I asked.

“I guess. I also like the gingerbread latte, but they’ve probably stopped doing those now that Christmas is just a memory.”

“Probably,” I said, sipping my gingerbread latte.

She was going to try to talk me out of leaving school, say I’m overreacting, echo the voice in my head.

“So,” she started. I gulped. “This makes four things now.”

I exhaled in relief and said, “Yeah.”

“Well, your dad’s strange passing, the insane amount of money, you wailed on those guys like you’re a samurai, and Comstock let you off without even a call home? That’s four.” She thoughtfully chewed on the end of her straw.

“I said ‘yeah’, not ‘*yeab?*’”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

I thought for a minute, about what I’d realized before she got here, but she cut me off, “You don’t think this is like, repressed angst for your father or something? I mean all these weird things, they’re not like a coincidence y’know? There’s some... *thing* going on.”

I looked at her. “Totally,” I said.

“And actually,” I continued, “There are five things. Since the ‘fight’ I have felt... different.”

“Different how?”

“I don’t know, it seems like I’m seeing things different; thinking differently. In Mr. Comstock’s office, I was paying attention to every little thing, making assumptions about him and his life based on tiny things like eyeglass pad imprints on his nose and that all the fancy books

on his shelf are unopened. I usually don't know what color people's eyes are even if I've known them for years. Now I'm remembering eyeglass pad imprints? Who notices those things?"

Amy thought for a moment, then smiled and covered her eyes with her right hand. "What color are mine?" she asked.

I sighed and said, "Green. And your ears are pierced twice but you only wear one pair now so the upper piercings are going to close soon. Your shoes are Vans, gray and blue, with the laces tied at the top and the ends tucked in. Your keys are in the left outer pocket of your jacket and there are two keys on the ring besides your car and house key."

She looked at me silently, trying to figure me out.

"The guy to my right," I continued, "two tables over, is a smoker and either cheats on his wife or recently lost a lot of weight. He's about 38, 188 pounds, and works in an office within a quarter mile of here. The lady behind you is either married to – or the mother of – someone who recently became blind. There are nine people total in this place, two exits, one with an alarm, and unless the Brinks truck pulling into the parking lot is for the place next door, there's between three and five thousand dollars in the safe right now."

I drank the last of my coffee.

"Umm," Amy started, "so, yeah, five." She bit her bottom lip for a moment, and looked around the room. "Cheats on his wife?" she asked at last.

"Yeah, or lost weight. Actually, yeah, cheats on his wife. His wedding ring is loose, it moves a bit whenever he moves his hand, he probably takes it off and puts it back on a lot. He also keeps eyeing the brunette behind the counter and gave you two glances when you came in. He might have just lost weight since he had his ring sized, but that suit is tailored nicely and is at least two years old. Cheats on his wife."

"This seems familiar somehow," Amy said, looking back to me.

"Well," I said, "it's kind of exactly like a scene in *The Bourne Identity*."

"Never saw that," she said.

“Really? It’s the best movie ever,” I said, trying not to hyperventilate in a fanboy fit. “This guy is pulled from the Mediterranean with no memory and two bullets in his back, later finds out he was a CIA hitman but botched a job and got shot. Before he figures that out, he wonders why he knows all of the license plate numbers on the cars outside a diner he’s in and all that. You’d be Franke Potente.”

“Okay,” she said, “is it possible that you’re a CIA hitman and don’t remember it?”

“Not likely,” I said.

“So you’re serious about leaving school?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Yes.”

“So we should put together these mysteries and try to figure them out. Maybe get some leads.”

Okay...

So we put everything on the table, started jotting things down on paper napkins. There were five points of weirdness but only two of them had workable leads. Number one was my dad dying, the only connection could be that it had something to do with the Corps. Number two was the money, there’s nothing to follow up on. Number three was the fight, but whether or not I demonstrated an abnormal physical proficiency, there are no loose ends to investigate. Same story with my suddenly acute attention span, the fourth item on the list.

The only thing with a lead was number five: Comstock’s abnormal behavior.

“There is something,” I said.

“What?” Amy asked.

“When I was in Comstock’s office guessing what brand his pens were, he got a call from someone. I could almost swear they were talking about me. It was right before he told me I was not in trouble, but it almost seemed like he didn’t want to. On the phone he said ‘I don’t know if I can make that float,’ and ‘it could be expensive.’”

“As if someone paid him to get you off the hook, or to keep you out of trouble?”

“And he was ever so subtly trying to ask for more money because he went totally off the book and could get in trouble himself.” I said, circling “Comstock” on the list of leads.

“So who would pay to keep you out of trouble?” Amy asked.

“My guardian angel,” I said. “Someone who either really likes me, or doesn’t want a lot of attention on me.”

“And how do we figure out who that is?” she asked.

I crossed my arms and thought for a minute. “Bank records,” I said, “I’ll need to see his bank account.”

“Aaaaand, how do we do that?” Amy asked, “Hack the bank database with our magical CTU computers?”

“Looks like I lied,” I said, “looks like I will be going back to school.”

CHAPTER 08

The biggest thorn in the paw of my grand plan to stop going to school was that my mom would probably notice that I wasn't going to school.

It wasn't an issue, however. When I got home my mom was running around the house shuttling clothes from closets and drawers to open suitcases.

"Are we going somewhere?" I asked, setting my car keys on the kitchen table.

She stopped in place and stood up, looking at me for a moment.

"I am," she started. "I've been talking to Aunt Cathy on the phone and I don't think she's doing very well, with the divorce and then your father. I'm going to spend a few days out there with her until she's feeling better."

Cathy is my dad's sister and I always suspected her to be a bit batty. She didn't come from Delaware for my dad's, her brother's, funeral; said she wouldn't be able to drive herself, and nobody could pick her up.

My mom continued, “Would that be alright? I mean, will you be okay by yourself for a while?”

She must have noticed that I was handling things better than I had been at first. My dad died in January, it was now March. Seems like enough time to me.

“I’ll be fine,” I said. “Nothing major going on, just school. Are you leaving tonight or tomorrow?”

Nothing major.

She left early the next morning, before I would normally leave for school. Before she left she told me not to throw any wild teenage drug parties. I told her I wouldn’t know how if I wanted to. She left, I went back to bed.

It’s a marvelous feeling, to sleep right through the start of the school day. Skipping school is one thing, playing sick is one thing, but just not going to school is another feeling entirely. It felt like freedom. The kind of freedom that will cost you later, but at the time seems worth it.

I woke up again around ten and sent Amy a text message saying I’d meet her in the school library during lunch. I spent a while not thinking about my problems, just sitting around the house, longing for my innocence again, for the time when I had two parents and my biggest concern was – hell, I had no biggest concern.

After a leisurely drive to school, for once not having to do mental arithmetic to calculate how many stop signs I’d have to blow to not be late for my first class, I marched from the parking lot into the school and straight into the library. I’d missed three classes already; freedom bells were still ringing in my head. Classes were out for lunch and teenagers loitered around the building dealing with their own fragile little lives. I didn’t pay attention to whether anybody noticed me as I walked through the school.

The library was big. Not *Breakfast Club* big, but one of the largest rooms in the building nonetheless. Fear of school shootings had changed the industry-wide library design standard from rows and rows of tall bookshelves to long hedgerows of waist-high shelves bisecting the room at angles. Tables were scattered wherever there was room, and librarians

stood vigilant behind the front desk making sure nobody spoke too loudly, ate any food, or shot anyone.

Amy sat at a table in the back of the library, sneaking chips from her backpack in defiance of the no-food rule. I pulled up a chair across from her.

“You just get here?” she asked, her eyes glued to a magazine.

“Yeah. Someone took my parking spot.” I said. I hadn’t bothered to eat today, but her chips weren’t too enticing. I hate Fritos.

“I thought you said you’d be coming to school.” She was now rotating her focus between me, her Fritos, and the Newsweek in her hand.

“I said I’d come to school, not go to classes.”

She rolled her eyes.

“So,” she said after a while, closing the magazine, “what’s your plan for snooping through Comstock’s bank records? Should I be wearing a repel harness and Kevlar?”

“Shoot,” I said, “I forgot to plan the rest of that.” I’d been pretty distracted by my now complete lack of parental oversight. I pondered for a moment how I intended to gain access to another person’s bank records when the idea struck me.

“How’s your phone voice?” I asked as I mentally unraveled my plan. “Can you sound like a grown-up?”

“I can,” she said, her voice a bit thicker and sounding as much like a standard adult white woman as one would imagine possible.

I grinned and asked for a pencil and something to write on.

After lunch was fourth hour, when typically Amy and I had the same study hall, a class either spent sitting in silence or doing homework due later that day and put off the night before.

People tell me that in the West coast and other parts of the world they’re called periods. When I say fourth hour, I mean fourth period. Follow?

Anyway, it was fourth *hour* but Amy and I weren’t in class. We were in the administrative offices, suspiciously hiding in a small, empty

office down the hall from Mr. Comstock's. The empty office was pretty sparse, outfitted only with a built-in desk and a complicated telephone. The lights were off, only a small amount of light filtered from the hallway in through the rectangular window in the door.

Having finished writing down my master plan, I slid the notebook Amy had given me over to her where she sat behind the desk. She read through it quickly.

"Can you do it?" I asked.

She nodded, but asked, "How do you know what bank he uses?"

"He has a coffee mug from New England Federated on his desk."

She grinned nervously and shook her head, picked up the handset and dialed the school's primary phone number. As it started to ring she handed the handset to me and said, "You should ask for him."

Outside the small room I could hear the phone ringing in the main office just a few feet away. I took the handset from Amy and asked why.

"They might notice if I call twice as two people."

"Huh. Smart," I said, putting the handset to my ear just as an office worker answered it.

"May I speak to Mr. Comstock, please?" I said, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Just a moment," the voice on the phone said. I handed the phone back to Amy and said to her, "Connecting."

Amy took the phone and nestled it to her ear with her shoulder and picked up the notebook and a pen.

"Hello, Mr. Nathan Comstock?" Amy said after a moment in the slightly modified voice we'd worked on. She crossed a line off of the notebook page.

"Hi, this is Sarah from New England Federated Bank's fraud monitoring department. I'm calling today because our computer has flagged some suspicious-looking activity on your account."

I swallowed hard. I really hoped he had an account at that bank and didn't just collect free mugs. Amy's eyes darted back and forth for a moment before she quietly sighed in relief and crossed a line off of the page.

"Okay," she said into the phone. "First I'll just need to verify your identity as the account owner. Could you verify the last four digits of your social security number?" She wrote something down.

She continued reading, "Thank you very much, Mr. Comstock. Now regarding the suspicious activity on your account I'm seeing two separate charges this morning at a Citgo station in Bowling Green totaling \$53.49 together and then shortly thereafter a charge of \$478.88 at a Circuit City store in the same town. Can you verify whether you authorized those purchases or not?"

She smiled. "You didn't? Okay, sir, I'm going to mark this account for fraud investigation and for the time being we will remove these charges and restore the balance to your account. Are you near a computer? Okay, can you log into your account right now and verify these charges no longer appear?"

She nodded to me, it was working. I peeked out the window for a minute.

"Uh huh," Amy said into the phone. "Great. So I'm going to get started on processing the investigation request for your account and we'll cancel your current debit card and mail you a new one, but if you could go through your account history online for a few minutes, just looking for charges you didn't authorize, that would be good. If you see any other unauthorized charges you can call me directly by dialing New England Federated's toll free number and pressing extension 7129."

She read him the 800 number I'd gotten from the phone book, reminded him to look right now for unauthorized charges, said goodbye, and hung up. She leaned back in her chair and sighed as though she'd given birth.

"That's not easy!" she said.

"You did great," I said, "Now just one more call to make."

"And why can't you make this one?" she asked, hand on the handset.

“Because I sound like a 17-year-old boy. It’s much harder to tell female ages based on voice than guys, and you need to be a parent for this one.”

She sighed again, picked up the phone and pressed Redial. When someone in the office picked up, Amy spoke into the phone with her “parent” voice, “Hi there, I was just at the school picking up my daughter for a doctor’s appointment and in the front parking lot, that’s the staff parking lot, isn’t it? Yes, mm hmm, well when I drove by it I saw a group of young men wearing football jerseys apparently vandalizing one of the cars. One of them had a hammer I think, and they ran away when I drove by but it looked like they were doing something to a grayish tan Sebring. I hope they weren’t—” and she trailed off, pulling the phone away from her mouth. Then she blew into the microphone, and then hung up.

“Damn dropped calls,” she said to me with a grin.

“Okay, I said. “It’s on. Just have to wait for the call and hope it comes soon.”

We both pressed against the door. A few seconds passed, then just down the hall a phone rang. A few seconds later, Comstock’s door swung open and he ran down the hall past us.

“Amazing,” I said.

“I’ll watch the door,” she said. “One knock means danger and two knocks means mega danger.”

We crossed the hall. I slipped into Comstock’s office and Amy stood in front of the door, blocking the window with her body. I stepped behind the desk and my heart sank when I saw a blank monitor screen. I sat down at the desk, and pressed the power button on the monitor.

The screen took a few seconds to cycle back to power, but the black screen soon quickly snapped to full color. Internet Explorer was open, and I was looking at New England Federated’s website. Comstock was still logged in.

“Bingo.”

CHAPTER 09

Nathan Comstock was showing an account balance of \$8,876 in checking, \$43,605 in savings. That seemed a bit high for a school administrator. That was also as far as I probably had time to check while crouched in front of Nathan Comstock's desk in his office in what could be described as a bubbling cauldron of law-breaking.

What I was after was his entire banking history, and fortunately modern banking websites make this easy by allowing you to download your transaction history log files to import into financial software like Quicken. I navigated to the Export option, selected an ambiguous filetype that wouldn't be restricted to a single financial application, and downloaded it to the desktop.

So... now what? Shoot, I probably should have thought ahead about these kinds of things. I had to get the file out of there without leaving evidence. I could e-mail it to myself but that would leave traces, and I didn't bring a USB drive or a blank CD with me. Could this PC even burn CDs?

I moved some papers out of the way of the desktop's tower and examined the cover of the CD drive, squinting to make out the small emblems. DVD, Compact Disc, CD-R/RW.

"Bingo," I said again to myself, soon thereafter realizing I need to stop saying *bingo*.

After some searching I found a blank CD in a desk drawer and stuck it in the CD drive. I started burning the file onto the disk; it seemed to be taking for-bloody-ever. I cracked my knuckles as I watched the progress bar drag across the screen. Amy was still standing outside the door, blocking the window. I saw her bobbing back and forth slightly, probably more nervous than I as she was on the front line.

While I waited I fixed the items on the desk that I'd disturbed; I was wiping the keyboard keys off with the sleeve of my shirt when I heard a light tap on the door. I stopped moving entirely for a moment, and then inched toward the door. A lady was talking to Amy; I couldn't make out her voice. I heard Amy say, "-was supposed to talk to him about-" something, her back still covering the narrow window, she began tapping furiously on the door with a knuckle. This lady must want in.

Nowhere to go; the window looking outside didn't open and there were no closets to hide in. My heart began racing as I darted around the small office. I heard the doorknob jiggle, so the only thing I could do was turn off the computer's monitor and dash to the opposite end of the room, tuck myself against the wall that the door was now opening against.

The door opened swiftly, catching me off guard and pinning me against the wall. I grabbed the doorknob on my side and held the door open; if it closed I'd be standing there pressed against the wall of my principal's office for no good reason. I heard papers rustling around the desk. I peeked through the door's window and saw an office assistant hovering over Mr. Comstock's desk, lifting documents and folders as if searching for something. I ducked away from the window, and noticed that to my right, through the gap between the inside end of the door and the doorframe I could see out into the hall, Amy was standing there looking both confused and nervous. I waved my free hand, as much as I could, to get her attention. Her eyes, darting around, finally met mine. Her eyebrows shot up and she covered her mouth quickly to mask a

gasp. I tried my best to mouth “hold the door open” but she couldn’t read it.

I slid closer to the doorframe and waved her toward me. She stepped across the few feet between us and I whispered, “Hold the door open.” The recognition came over her face, and she stepped forward and leaned in the office and extended an arm to hold to door. I slowly released the handle and felt her take the weight of it.

After a few moments, Amy said aloud, “Is there something I can help with?” Her voice trailed off as she seemed to realize she might have made a mistake, if she stepped away from the door and it stayed open it might look suspicious.

“Not really,” the woman said, “just looking for Mr. Comstock’s wallet. He needs his ID for a police report.”

Behind the door, I was smiling but knew Amy wouldn’t be. Her voice shaking slightly, she asked “Did something happen?”

Papers stopped rustling for a moment. “Oh, nothing serious. Just his car was vandalized. Oh, here it is!”

A few seconds later, she was out of the room and the door swung shut. I uncompressed from the wall and finally began breathing regularly. Just then, the computer speakers made a slight jingle noise and the CD tray ejected from the computer. I grabbed the disk, returned to computer to where it was when I found it, and slipped out the door and fell into step behind Amy who was walking as casually as possible out of the office suite.

Returned semi-safely to the school’s main hallways, I was about to laugh when Amy turned on her heel and hit my shoulder with her open palm.

“Ow,” I said despite a general lack of pain.

“What the hell was that?” she grunted under her breath. “I thought she was going to go in there and catch you with your hand in the cookie jar.”

I rubbed my shoulder, as society seemed to demand, and said, “That’s not my fault. You did great, though. There and on the phone. That was really great.”

She stood there a moment, looking cross. “I thought the call about his car being vandalized was just a distraction,” said Amy.

I smiled again, “It was a distraction. But if it turned out to be a phony call it might have been suspicious coming just moments after a call luring him into logging into his bank account.”

Amy sighed, and started walking again. “So how did you know about his car?” she asked.

“That it was vandalized? It became quite clear to me after I threw a hammer through the rear windshield on the way into school.”

Back in the library, where none of the librarians seemed to care that we weren’t in class so long as we weren’t eating or shooting up the place, we headed to the computer lab and sat down at one of the open computers far enough away that the screen wouldn’t be clear to passersby. I logged into a guest account inserted the disk I burned, noting that the CD was covered with my fingerprints, and navigated to the bank transaction history file. The file opened in Excel, and described every transaction in both accounts from now dating back as far as I could go (two years).

After some inspecting, I’d located his paycheck direct deposits from the school. They were clearly labeled as deposits from the Fredericksburg School District and were consistently a \$2200 deposit every two weeks.

“Almost \$53,000 a year,” Amy said, “that’s... I don’t know. That’s more than a teacher makes.”

“Yeah, but it’s not unusual for a principal I think. But he’s almost got that much in his accounts right now. Between the \$8,876 in checking and the \$43,605 in savings, that’s almost exactly a year’s wages. That’s a lot to have accessible, and not in a retirement account or something.”

I’d done a bit of research into finances when I received a \$500,000 check hand delivered to me by a bonded courier with an off-duty cop.

I kept looking through the transactions, sorting them by deposit amounts.

“Whoa,” I said.

“What?” Amy said, leaning closer to the screen.

“Look at this. Besides the direct deposits from the school, every month there’s three other direct deposits in a row. Every month they’re for different amounts each, but look, if you add them up...”

I selected the three deposits from this month (\$1301, \$2134, and \$2565), and added them together (with a sum() formula in Excel), together they equaled \$6,000 exactly. I did the same with the three deposits the previous months, all different amounts but totaling \$6,000 together.

“So he’s making an extra...\$72,000 a year on top of his school salary?” Amy asked.

“That’s what it looks like. These deposits go back as far as the transaction history.” I said.

“Does it say who the deposits are from?”

“No. That’s the weird thing. Direct deposits have to list the issuing bank’s account holder. It’s the law. All these have is an account number. The only people who could issue deposits without disclosure would be...” I paused when I realized what I was about to say. The weight of it bounded against my mind and pulled my jaw down.

Amy spoke up, “What, Chris?”

I closed my mouth and bit my lip. Finally, giving into the conclusion and seeing no alternatives, I said it.

“The government.”

CHAPTER 10

I leaned over a glass counter, the edge digging into my stomach. Amy stood next to me, watching expectantly over my shoulder. A salesman stood behind the counter, each hand hovering a few inches from the two selections my eyes darted between. I liked the silver one; Amy had her eye on it since the beginning. The other was silver and graphite with clean lines; the light hit it beautifully. There was a gold one down in the case that actually looked kind of nice, but was way – *way* too tacky. I scratched my chin; they were both so expensive. I shifted my weight between my feet and sighed, then pointed at the one on the right; the silver and graphite one.

“This one,” I said to the store keeper, “the H&K. I’ll try this one.”

“Ok, sure,” the man said. “How many boxes of ammo do you want?”

The shooting range was Amy’s idea. After the reconnoitering at school the day before, we both felt like spending some time away from conspiracy theories. I suggested movies, she suggested pistols.

She'd gone online and found a gun store with a pistol range in Lorton that rents their guns for the range. We drove my white '99 Honda Civic; it took about 50 minutes on I-95 which took us right through Quantico. From the highway all you could see of Quantico was the dense woods of the USMC base on either side of the road but somehow it still felt creepy. Somewhere behind those trees was a university with a lab that my Dad worked in for over 25 years and I'd never even been there. I kept driving, but I knew somewhere beyond the forest and brick there were probably answers to questions I haven't gotten around to asking yet.

When we got to Lorton we stopped at a branch of the bank where I'd put most of my money and I withdrew a few hundred dollars. I requested hundred dollar bills, so when the man at the gun store told us that we had to be 18 years old to use the range I could hold up a few hundreds and say, "even if I pay with twenties?" That worked, well enough, and now I had to choose a gun knowing nothing about them. Amy picked hers in a snap; she'd told me her dad was in the Corps when he was younger and that he had a Beretta 92 that he let Amy shoot a few times, so she was the expert between the two of us. I just picked the one that looked the coolest, which was apparently a Heckler & Koch USP with a silver slide.

"It's a choice weapon," the shop guy said, "they made them especially for the US Special Ops."

"Neat," I said, feeling kind of silly.

Amy wanted us, or me specifically, to go shooting because she figured that if I *am* indeed able to fight unusually well – maybe I'm also able to shoot unusually well. Short of picking random fights, there's no easy way to test my fight skills again, but testing my firearm skills is only a rental away.

I grabbed the gun and a box of .45 ammo and sauntered into the shooting range with huge earmuff things on my head. Amy followed behind me with two paper sheets with plain-looking black silhouettes printed on one side. The indoor range was otherwise empty, with about 15 firing positions all in a row. I set my gun down on the platform inside one of the positions and Amy set up in the one next to it. I figured out how to attach the target sheet onto the metal clips and sent it back a few feet with a rickety-sounding electronic pulley.

Amy slid bullets into the clip of her gun in silence, and I tried to emulate her as if I knew what I was doing. After about eight rounds, the resistance of the spring was making it near impossible to slide any more bullets into the clip; I figured they must use machines to load them to capacity, or maybe it was just that my hands were shaking. I held small explosives in my hand, lead and steel wrapped around combustible powder. The earmuffs made my quickened pulse echo back into my ears. I gave up on loading more rounds and slid the half-full clip into the gun to a satisfying click. Amy watched me with a half smirk on her face.

I set the gun back down and gestured to Amy for her to go first. She didn't understand, and pulled the muff away from one ear and asked, "What?" which barely made it through my own ear protection.

I freed one of my own ears and said, "You take a few shots first." I hoped my nervousness wasn't showing.

She smiled, and stepped back into her firing position. I had to step out of mine to see what she was doing. She pulled back on her gun's slide, held the gun straight forward with both hands, held her breath, and pulled. A loud bang tore through the concrete room and a lead bullet tore through the paper hanging about twenty feet away from her. Mister black target man had a fresh hole in his shoulder. Looked easy enough.

I went back to my partition and picked up my gun. It felt heavy now, the cold metal sucked the heat from my hand. I was holding a lethal weapon. I could kill someone. It's a creepy feeling.

I held up the gun as Amy had, pulled the slide back as Amy had, and pulled the trigger as Amy had. Nothing. Stupid safety.

I flicked the switch on the side of the gun from a white S to a red F and readied again. I held my breath, aimed at the middle of the target's featureless face, and squeezed the trigger. The gun bucked loudly in my hand and as the slide kicked back an empty cartridge sprung out, spun through the air, bounced off the partition wall to my right, and popped me right in the cheek. It was hot, as if it just been party to a controlled explosion of magnesium and sulfur. I yelped and swiped at my cheek. Nobody ever seems to talk about the flying cartridges or show them in movies. Those little buggers have a mind of their own.

Through the muffs I could hear Amy laughing. I turned around and saw her behind me covering her mouth and giggling, but she wasn't

looking at me. I followed her eye line over to my paper target, dangling happily from the clips in perfect health. I hadn't even hit the paper.

"What the hell?" I yelled, pulling down my ear protection. "How did I miss? How could it be that complicated? You point and you shoot."

Amy shrugged, still giggling, and went back into her position and began popping more rounds into her target.

I growled and picked up my gun and fired through five more rounds. A few of them hit the paper; one actually hit the target... in the arm. This was surprising. It seems like if you aim at something and shoot, you should hit where you aim. There shouldn't be too much more to it. Sure, super-spy accuracy wouldn't be so simple, but the bullet should go in the general area of where I point.

I finished my rounds and dropped out the clip. I went through another clip's worth of bullets, and another's. My box of ammo was half spent. I dropped the gun and stepped back. Amy was having a blast, it seemed.

"I guess that answers your question," I said once she'd stopped and taken off her earmuffs. "I'm not Jason Bourne."

"Yeah, you don't have the shoulders," she said.

I pointed at my depressing target, "Or the weapons training."

"Well," she said in deep thought, "When you got in that fight, were you thinking about what you were doing or just doing it?" She was holding the gun still, down at her side.

"I didn't think about it, I was too freaked out by the guy about to smash my face in. It was an instinct, like maybe watching a bunch of action movies was just burying all those fight scenes into my subconscious."

"You've seen enough gun fights, too," she paused for a second. "So don't think about shooting, just pick up the gun and shoot. Don't think about your arms or aiming. Close your eyes, take a breath, open them, and shoot."

So I got back in my firing position and slid my ear covers on. I slid a newly loaded clip into the gun, and set it down on the platform in front of me. What a waste of time.

I looked up at the target; the lifeless outline of a man was mocking me. Don't think, just shoot. That's what they told soldiers in World War II so they wouldn't have to consider the fact that they were killing human beings. Just shoot. Shoot the damn gun.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, as Amy suggested. Eyes still closed, I took more deep breaths and visualized the target hanging in front of me. I imagined he was that Mexican kid, about to punch me – no, about to shoot me. He tracked me down and brought a gun, he was going to shoot me in the face. He was going to shoot me, then Amy – just like he shot my dad. I could see the stupid little grin and stupid little pseudo-mustache so popular among people in the midst of puberty. He shot my dad. He killed my dad and he's going to kill me.

I opened my eyes, picked up the gun, and slowly let out my breath. I unloaded three shots in rapid succession. Three cartridges fell gracefully to the ground and danced around my feet. I put the gun down, felt my arm pulsing. I looked up at my target, finally, and there they were. Three holes, in a straight line, from the heart up to the base of the throat, all equally spaced. He didn't look so happy anymore.

I turned around to Amy who was staring, mouth open, past me and at the target. I pulled off my earmuffs and said, "Can you go get me some more ammo?"

CHAPTER 11

Always in threes. When I tried to shoot like a normal person, I couldn't get more than two shots off before the recoil kicked my aim off the target. But when I turned my brain off, stopped thinking about the muscle movements, and just tried to shoot on instinct – like how I tie my shoes on instinct or throw a Frisbee without thinking about all the different arm and hand movements that come together – three shots in a straight line.

I killed the silhouette guy at least 100 times.

After about two hours altogether Amy had enough shooting, and by the male-female transitive property so had I. We went back into the store and returned the eye and ear protection, and set two emptied handguns on the counter.

“How was it?” the guy asked me. He was a portly guy, had a big gut squeezed between two suspender straps.

“It was... the same as usual,” I said when I remembered that I'd told him before that I went shooting all the time. Keep your lies straight.

“No, I mean the USP. It’s a clean shot, isn’t it?” His accent was a bit thick, didn’t sound like Virginia. Georgian, if I had to guess. The state, not the country.

“Oh,” I said. “Yeah, I took right to it.” Amy smiled and walked past me to go look at the pocketknives. There was another customer, a guy wearing an orange camouflaged hunting coat looking at the knives as well, between squeaky drags through the straw of a Taco Bell cup.

The store owner wiped my gun down with a rag, oiled the slide and cleaned the barrel with a long brush, then affixed a metal trigger lock and placed the gun back in the glass case behind a tag that said,

USED
H&K USP .45
\$580

“Is that cheap?” I asked the guy.

“Hell yes,” he said in a snort, “new ones go for over a grand.” I stepped over to look at the unused handguns to verify.

“Why are used ones so cheap?” I asked, “Do they wear down?”

“Naw,” the guy said with a wave of his hand, “People think they gotta buy new so it’ll still be ‘pristine’ or whatever. That’s bunk, though. It’s just like buying cars. You buy a new car just so you can say nobody’s driven it before, but a used car’ll be broken-in a bit but just as good. A brand new gun won’t shoot as good as it could, it doesn’t have the grease worked in and the barrel hasn’t been set from the heat yet.”

“Set?” I said, looking down at the used USP I was using. I wanted that gun.

“Yeah, set. The heat from cartridges firing will make the metal warp a bit, so a new gun is made with the intention of having it do that. Like making a cotton shirt too big because they know it’ll shrink in the wash.”

“So there’s no problem with buying a used gun?” I asked. Amy was still looking at knives. The Taco Bell cup guy was looking over at me now.

“As long as the gun is maintained and there’s no defects. And trust me, I maintain these guns like they were babies.”

Sure, grease them down and scrape out the gunk. Just like a baby.

“So...” I started, trying to shift back into the smooth guy who talked my way into renting a handgun while underage. “Could I buy this one?”

He frowned. “Did you happen to turn eighteen in the last two hours?”

I frowned too, “Even if I pay with a lot of *twenties*?”

He laughed, “I’d love to, kid, but there’s no way. The age limit for using the range is just a store policy, but the age limit for buying is the law. As lax as the gun laws are here in Virginia, I could still lose my store license or go to jail. Not happening. Shame too, because I have a bunch of accessories for this gun that are on sale this week.”

Well, I hate to pass up a sale. I wasn’t sure how old Amy was; maybe she was eighteen already and I could give her the money so she could buy it. I called her over and asked her if she’d turned eighteen.

“No...” she started.

“You’re seventeen still? Damn.” It was a really pretty gun.

“Actually, no. I’m sixteen still,” she said a bit sheepishly.

“You’re sixteen?” I said a bit too loud, then quieted down. “How are you a senior, then?”

Amy sighed. “My birthday was like the day before the cutoff and when I changed school districts in seventh grade I’d already had a bunch of classes from the seventh grade here, so they put me in eighth.”

Huh.

The storeowner looked a bit annoyed by now. I shrugged at him, and headed for the door with my rolled up paper target. “We can take these, right?” I asked as I walked out the door.

“No matter how old you are,” he said with a stupid little grin.

In the parking lot, we both walked toward my car when over my shoulder I heard someone call, “Hey, kid.” It was the guy with the orange hunting jacket; he’d replaced his Taco Bell cup with a lit cigarette he was puffing ably from. Amy and I stopped, and without thinking I moved my arm around her waist and edged her around so she was behind me.

“What?” I said.

“You said you wanted to buy a used H&K?” he said, then gestured with his head over to his beat-up pickup. I handed Amy my keys and our rolled up target sheets and told her to put them in my car. She looked up at me with concerned eyes for a moment, then took the items from my hands and backed toward my car.

I crossed the parking lot toward the orange jacket guy and when I was close enough said, “Yeah, why? Are you selling one?”

He smiled, “As it happens, I am. I have a USP about two years old that I was going to try to sell here, but he told me he wasn’t buying any because he had one already and didn’t think it’d sell. I was hoping you were going to buy it in there so he’d take mine finally, but I figure if you want one so bad you could buy mine.”

He opened the driver’s side door of his truck and pulled a metal case from under his seat and unlocked it with a key from his chain. In it was a retail box with an all-black USP printed on the lid.

“It’s black?” I asked, trying to keep myself positioned so I could run or kick this guy in the gizmos if he tried anything weird.

He nodded then took a drag from his cigarette, then said, “I just used it for target practice. Cleaned and oiled it regularly. Great gun still, I just don’t use it very much because I like SIGs and wanted to trade it in for a P226.”

He took it from the foam fitted box and handed it to me, unloaded. I looked it over; it was just as slippery as the one I’d used. The sights were in fine condition, and there was no rust under the slide. I dropped out the magazine and pulled the trigger, it clicked normally. The serial number wasn’t scratched off either.

“Hasn’t been used in any bank robberies?” I asked.

He laughed and said, “Nope. I told you, I’m a SIG man.”

It felt the same as the gun I’d just fell in love with, it just didn’t have the Hollywood-favored silver slide.

“How much?” I asked, trying to imagine how much cash was in my wallet.

“How much was the one inside?” he asked, looking at the store’s door.

“Four eighty,” I lied.

“Then how’s four fifty sound? He was only going to give me \$400 for the trade in anyway.”

“Does it need a registration or permit or anything?” I asked, hesitating.

“No, man. This is Virginia. Don’t need a permit to carry, a license to own, or a registration to buy. Just need a concealed weapons permit if you intend to walk around with it tucked in your pants or something.”

What a great state.

I paid him, took the gun back to my car and avoided all of Amy’s questions, then walked back into the gun store as the truck was pulling out.

The door chimed behind me as it closed, the owner behind the counter looked annoyed to see me again.

“You said you have USP accessories on sale now? How about I buy some while they’re on sale, and when I come back next month when I’m 18 I’ll be all set.”

Ten minutes later I walked back to my car with a plastic bag filled with five boxes of low velocity .45 rounds, three extra clips, a cleaning kit, and the graphite-handled five inch pocket knife Amy had been looking at, for the hell of it.

CHAPTER 12

Trying to ignore the fact that there was now a – well, two – lethal weapons in the back seat of my car, we stopped at a Wendy’s in Lorton before the expressway so we could have the some food since it was around 6 PM and we hadn’t eaten since breakfast.

I got a spicy chicken sandwich with fries and Dr. Pepper, Amy got a double cheeseburger with a side salad and a milk.

“Milk? Are you sixteen or six?” I said as soon as she’d ordered.

“What’s wrong with milk? It does a body good.”

I fought every instinct to make a lewd joke about that.

“Besides,” she continued, “they make them in these cool bottles now and offer them at all the fast food places so hopefully there’ll be fewer fat kids running around in the future.”

“I don’t think it would be hard to stop fat kids from running around,” I said as our trays were served up.

We found a table and unwrapped our sandwiches like Christmas presents. Amy asked if I’d told my mom about anything. I said that I hadn’t yet, not because I wasn’t sure if she was “one of them” but

because I was never sure if I wasn't making too big a deal about everything.

I felt like too much attention was being put on me when Amy was around, so I asked her if she told *her* parents where she was going today.

"Did I tell my dad I was going an hour upstate to shoot guns with a boy? No, I didn't." She jabbed at a tomato slice from her salad with her fork.

With a boy. Was that a joke about what this might look like, or what it was? I didn't know anything about either. Jeez, she's sixteen. I don't know why that seemed so young to me, only seventeen myself. Maybe she was going to turn seventeen soon, because if not I was going to become two years older than her in a month. I could ask her when her birthday is, but I don't want to keep bringing that up.

I realized just then that I hadn't said anything in quite a while, so I pulled my eyes from Amy's salad and asked her, "So what *did* you tell him?"

"That I was going to the mall with some girlfriends. He doesn't like to deal with girl stuff so he doesn't keep track of my friends well enough to know I don't have any girlfriends," she said.

Her hair kept falling from behind her ear and into her face. The streaks of color had mostly grown out and what was left had nearly faded away completely. I noticed she wasn't wearing the "I'm a punk" wristbands she used to wear, and her shirt wasn't heralding any bands or ironic 1980s fads. She wasn't using pencil under her eyes anymore either, it made her face look more innocent, younger.

"What about your mom?" I asked. I never heard her say anything about her mother in the few times the conversation wasn't on me. Amy held her lower lip in her teeth for a moment before saying, "My mom left about six years ago."

"Oh," I said. "Sorry."

She shook her head. "No, it's all right. She had a breakdown or something, said she couldn't live with my dad anymore and at first said she couldn't even look at me. She moved out, never got around to filing for divorce. After a few months she started talking to me again, she calls

every once in a while. Kind of distant, still, but I dunno. My dad's been different since then too; he left the Marines and started doing construction. Sometimes I think he did something that freaked the hell out of her, but he never talks about it."

"Wow." I didn't know what else to say.

Her face flushed for a moment. "Yeah," she said.

"Do you have any siblings?" I asked.

"Nope, only child syndrome, just like you."

Just like me.

"But anyway," Amy continued, "since he keeps his distance from me I get plenty of freedom. If I wanted to I could be doing all kinds of wild stuff."

"Like driving an hour upstate to go shoot guns with a boy," I said. We both laughed, I was glad I could bring some levity to the conversation at last.

Amy pulled a napkin around in front of her. "I don't have a pen," she said, "but this makes, what, six?"

"What? The shooting?"

"Yeah, the shooting. I'm not like an expert on the matter, but you shouldn't be able to shoot like that."

And so the conversation was back on me. "Might bunch it together with the fight thing. Maybe something is just different with my brain where I memorize all the stuff I see in movies, fight scenes and gun fights, and it all simmers there under the surface waiting to be summoned up."

Amy snuck one of my fries.

I thought for a second and said, "Maybe I'm some weird Remembers Everything Kid, and the FBI or NSA has been paying Mr. Comstock to keep an eye on me and stop the word from getting out until they could figure out a way to use me."

Amy frowned, "And your dad got close to finding out so they killed him?"

I shrugged. “Maybe he just died. People die. Maybe this is all just some crazy way for me to keep my mind off of the fact that my dad is dead.”

Amy looked disappointed, “I asked you about that before, at Starbucks, and you said you thought this was real.”

“Maybe I wanted it to be real, maybe I wanted to keep going on not even thinking about the reality of the situation and keep my brain in fairy-tale land, maybe I wanted to get you to keep talking to me.”

This conversation was entirely too deep to be taking place at a Wendy’s.

“You think I just talk to you because I think you’re a ninja or Jason Bourne or whatever it is any given minute?” Amy asked defensively.

I didn’t say anything.

“I talk to you,” she went on, “because this is interesting, and *you’re* interesting. And because you talk back, and don’t just think I want to borrow your chemistry notes.”

“You don’t take chemistry.”

“You know what I mean.”

“You didn’t drink your milk.”

“Are you mad at *me* now?”

I pressed my back against the chair and leaned my head back. I didn’t know what I was mad at.

“No. I’m just worried, I think, that if this whole thing is real. If there’s some big, government... *thing* going on here, and it now involves me and guns...” I trailed off.

“What?” Amy asked.

“...then it’s only going to get worse.”

Amy set her elbow on the table and plopped her chin in her hand. “You should knock on wood,” she said.

“You should drink your milk,” I said.

“I’m serious.”

“The table’s formica.”

“That’s not wood?”

“Pretty sure it isn’t.”

“You should find some wood.”

I stood up, we were both done eating. “Come on,” I said, “you can take your milk to go.”

It was dark out now. I pulled out of the parking lot and could see the sign for the highway onramp when a bright light filled my vision. I looked up at my rear-view mirror, the car behind me was flashing brights.

“What is this?” I said to myself, angling the mirror to get the light out of my eyes, then more lights came – these ones red and blue and spiraling. The car behind me was a cop, trying to pull me over.

I swore, and tried to pull over but the road I was on had no shoulder and I didn’t want to just stop in the lane, so I flashed my brakes and kept going slowly until I got to a road I could turn into. It was a residential road with houses on both sides onward as far as my headlights reached. I pulled into the first driveway, and the police cruiser stopped on the road behind my car.

“Were you speeding?” Amy asked.

“No, I don’t thin–” I was reaching for my car’s registration when I suddenly remembered the gun in my back seat; and the hundreds of bullets. And the knife. I might as well have stopped and bought some crack and strapped a dead hooker to my trunk.

I should have found some wood.

CHAPTER 13

I had a psychology class in my junior year at East Fredericksburg High. I loved it. Who cares about algebra homework when you have a paper on sexual deviation due on Monday? The chapter on criminal psychology was interesting, too, and it was right around the time the “Beltway Sniper” was shooting folks in and around my town so we spent a long time going over false empowerment and all that; but my favorite was mental disorders – the pinnacle of which is Dissociative Identity Disorder.

People call it “Multiple Personalities” usually. It’s fascinating, the reality of it. Sure, it’s used as a cheap plot device in a lot of bad fiction to the point that most people start to question whether it really exists (like amnesia), but the mechanics of it are downright admirable.

You see, in some cases when a person’s body is experiencing some severe trauma his mind eventually decides that it’s not going to deal with it anymore, so it ducks back into the dark recesses of the brain and invents, on the spot, a new personality or character to take its own place and handle the trauma. This usually crops up in cases of repeated trauma, like being consistently raped or molested by a relative; the alternate

personality will take over and handle it and leaves the “real” personality with no memory of what went on. You just wake up a few hours later, thinking you were asleep while “somebody else” was dealing with the pains of reality.

This creates massive havoc in the brain’s infrastructure, but the biggest problem is the same one associated with all coping mechanisms. As someone who drinks to forget his problems will soon start drinking for no reason, a person whose brain splits off into multiple personalities to avoid dealing with problems will start doing it for no reason. Coping mechanisms are addictive.

People with DID can go their whole lives without consciously realizing that their life is being shared between two or more identities that simmer below the surface and struggle for control.

If those problems could be solved, the concept has a high value for consumer application, as I see it. There’ve been many times when I have to deal with crap and I wish I could just switch off and have someone take over my body and I can wake up later with problems bypassed. Times like when I have to write essays about books I never read or for some reason have to sit around for hours to wait for something, it would be nice if some broken part of my psyche could take over for me and I could just forget it, then come back when it’s all taken care of.

Obviously, when I got in that fight or shot guns that well and couldn’t consciously account for my actions the first thing I thought of was that maybe my dream had come true and I had formed a separate identity to defend myself. I suppose if someone were to have a split personality, the most ideal would be to have one that could put three attackers on the floor in seconds or tag three bullet holes in a straight ascension in center-mass of a target ten yards away; it’s just not realistic. I didn’t show any of the signs of Dissociative Identity Disorder. I was never missing any time, I was always painfully aware of how unusual the world was becoming.

I hadn’t pulled the winning genetic lottery ticket; my brain was all Chris all day.

If there ever were a time when I’d want to leave my body behind and let someone else deal with things for me, it would have been here.

All I could do was stare at the rear-view mirror, past the police officer stepping out of his car, past the unlit street and shadows of mailboxes and sidewalks, hoping I could see into the inky darkness of the back of my mind. If ever there was a time to have a split personality, this was it, and boy was I trying.

CHAPTER 14

I told Amy to slowly move my unused jacket to cover up the bag in the back seat; she did. It was completely dark out now, the only light available was from my headlights bouncing off the garage door of the house I had pulled up to, and the spinning blue and red cascade from the police car parked on the street behind me. It was enough to let me see that the police officer was walking right up to my window.

He looked young, no older than 30. He had long brown hair pulled back into a tight ponytail. His shirt hung loose around his neck and bagged a bit at the waist.

“Don’t say anything unless he asks you a question,” I said to Amy through my teeth. “Don’t look nervous, we haven’t done anything wrong.”

I put my window down, looked the officer in the face. Driver’s license and state registration in hand.

He looked at me for a short moment, then at Amy for a long moment. “License and registration please, sir?” he said, still looking at Amy. I could feel her getting uncomfortable.

I handed him my information, which finally dragged his attention from the sixteen-year-old girl in the car. He looked at my license, ignoring the registration. “Mr. Baker,” his voice sounded older than he looked; maybe he smoked, “do you know why I pulled you over?”

You’re not supposed to volunteer anything when they ask that. If you say, “Speeding,” you just admitted to speeding and he doesn’t need radar information or witness account. You just did his job for him.

“Could you tell me?” I asked the officer. He stood up straight; I had to lean out of my window to see his face.

“Changed lanes without signaling back there,” he said. I couldn’t remember doing that, but then I couldn’t remember much of anything before this moment.

The officer leaned back in, looked at Amy and said, “Do you have any ID, ma’am?”

She looked at me, I looked at him. “Is there a problem?” I asked.

He looked annoyed, and drew in a breath. “A young lady was kidnapped around this area recently, fitting her description. Just need to check.” I thought for a second, and then nodded at Amy. She pulled her license from her purse and handed it over.

The cop looked at it, said he’d be right back and took our licenses back to his car. I rolled my window back up to keep the cold out.

“That’s weird,” Amy said, “he didn’t say another word about your lane changing farce. Maybe he thinks he’s wrapped up a big kidnapping case.”

I didn’t reply, I was watching in my side mirror as the officer walked away. His shirt was cinched in the back, bunched together into a knot and tucked into his pants, like you do when you’ve got a shirt that’s way too big for you. Like, because it’s not your shirt.

“I don’t think that’s a cop,” I said, still looking in the mirror. I couldn’t see him once he got into the car.

“What do you mean you don’t think it’s a cop? Looks very coppish to me,” Amy asked.

I didn’t say anything; I was too busy thinking. When a cop takes your license back to his car he’s swiping your license through his in-car

computer to check for warrants and at your criminal record, probably radios an update to dispatch, and writes out a ticket if you're getting one. What this guy was doing, I couldn't see. My heart started beating faster.

Strangely, I kept picturing myself throwing my new knife into his throat. Since I'd bought that knife I kept having weird mental flashes of doing all sorts of unseemly things with it. I must have been giddy about owning real weapons now, after a lifetime of playing make-believe.

Regardless, I can't throw a knife into a cop unless I'm sure he isn't one. Besides all the other reasons not to, I mean.

He stayed back in his car for quite a long time; I wished I could see what he was doing. If he was using his computer or writing a ticket he'd have a light on, I realized. What's he doing in the dark?

I turned around and looked at his car out through my rear window, then pressed down on my brake pedal. The car's brake lights illuminated, casting a red glow behind my car and battled the rotating lights from the police car. It was enough to cast some light into the car's front seat. I could see the guy sitting in the driver's seat. I saw him with one hand up to his face and another holding some black object in front of him. He was on a cell phone, it looked like, and holding... I couldn't be sure. Looked like a metal tube, like a short telescope or a gun silencer.

"It's not a cop," I said, finally convinced.

Yellow light soon filled the police car as the driver's door opened yet again and the man stepped out. He started slowly walking toward my car with what looked like our driver's licenses in his left hand and his right hand down at his side. My reflected headlights lit him well enough that I could see his belt holster holding a standard police issue, probably a Glock, no silencer sticking out. Next to that was a large black aerosol-looking can, definitely mace or pepper spray. Handcuffs and beating stick were on the other side. He was walking slowly, deliberately. Time seemed to be slowing down to a crawl, like I was back in that hallway, like a fist was rocketing toward my face with the quickness of a half-inflated zeppelin.

I couldn't feel my heart beating, but thought I could hear something ringing in my ears. It might have been the sound of my brain churning faster than usual. I looked at Amy and said calmly, "You know the recline handle on the side of your seat?"

She nodded, a bit slowly, deliberately. Her eyes seemed to be screaming fear, but I couldn't listen to them now.

"Put your hand on it right now," I said.

The man was up to the rear of my car.

Amy's hand glided across her body like a skater on fresh ice, and disappeared between her seat and the door, she kept looking at me.

"If at any time after I finish this sentence I say the word 'down', pull that lever and lean all the way back, then cover your ears with your hands. If I say 'up', don't pull the handle but turn away toward the window and close your eyes, hold your breath, and cover your mouth and nose with your hands. Do you understand?"

It was me talking, but the words were coming out like the lyrics to a song I already knew. I wasn't thinking about them.

The man was up to my window, now. Tapping on the glass.

I was still looking at Amy. She nodded slowly.

"What are you going to do?" she asked in a whisper.

I didn't say anything.

I didn't have an answer.

CHAPTER 15

Oldest trick in the book.

You hold something out for someone to reach for, and when they do, you grab their wrist and slip handcuffs on. Or rob them. Or kill them. Everybody knows it. It's what he tried to do, and I saw it coming.

I rolled down my window. He held my and Amy's driver's licenses up a few inches outside the window without saying a word. I couldn't be completely sure this wasn't a cop, despite the oldest trick in the book, so I was stuck in a stalemate. I just looked at the two licenses in his left hand, then up at his shadowy face. I kept my hands inside the car.

"So am I a kidnapper, or no?" I asked, unmoving.

He grinned, and moved his hand closer into the car. It felt a bit safer, so I reached my right hand up and pinched them from his hand. Like a spring his hand twirled around and grabbed mine, at the wrist. Oldest trick in the book, all right.

He had my right hand in a death grip and as my left arm shot forward I kept my eyes on his right arm. Amy gasped. Was she reacting slowly or am I just thinking fast? *Watch his hand, watch his hand.*

His right hand drew quickly toward his belt, where his gun perched. Time seemed to slow to an even slower crawl as I eyeballed that hand floating toward the gun – no, he didn’t grab the gun, he grabbed the Mace canister. Or was it pepper spray? By the time I realized what he was grabbing and yelled “Up!” to Amy as loud as possible, I’d already taken a blast of it to the eyes.

Instantly I was gripped by a pain like flaming gasoline was being poured into my eyes and all I could see was white. I clutched my left hand around the man’s right arm and lunged it forward into the frame of my door and heard the bottle rattle around my windshield and dash as I felt a radius or ulna snap in the man’s arm. The man screamed. I was still blind.

Pulling his right arm through my window, I opened the door with my other hand and forced it into the man’s body with my knee. I yanked back on his arm again, slamming his body into the side of the car and his jaw into the roof. I felt his body go limp and let his arm pull away.

I was still in the dark, my eyes still on fire. Random flashes of colored light cut through my vision, pulsing as my blood pumped. The pepper spray had gone up my nose, bringing with it the same pain and heat burning through my eyes. My throat was swelling. Each breath like sharp nails against burnt skin.

I had to get out of there.

I started the car’s engine and pulled the shifter down one gear into reverse.

“You can look,” I said as best I could.

“I already am!” she screamed. “Was that Mace?”

“Pepper spray,” I said through a flurry of coughs. “Can you see the guy?”

I felt her lean across me. “He’s on the ground but he looks mostly okay.”

There wouldn’t be time to change drivers then. “All right,” I said. “You’ll have to direct me.”

“What?” she asked, but I’d already pressed down on the gas.

The police car was about 10 or 12 feet behind me, I knew, parked sideways. My car took off in reverse, and I tried my best to turn the steering wheel so I’d hit its front axle. I couldn’t even try to open my eyes, they weren’t responding. The pain was only getting worse. I tried to say “Hold on” but got stuck on a cough. The impact was harder than I expected, my car’s trunk collided with the front end of the police car and kept moving slowly as it pushed the other car away. Metal and fiberglass scraped against each other violently, but soon enough I was clear and somewhere on the street. I shifted to drive and gingerly moved forward.

“Is he still there?” I asked hoarsely.

“He’s getting up,” Amy said. “Well, slowly.”

This situation refused to get any easier. I felt my face for a second, my skin was dry save for the tears dripping from my eyes. My eyelids were tender to the touch, and everything still hurt. My nose and throat felt as if I’d just snorted a line of cayenne pepper. I needed some water. *No, water is bad.*

“Direct me so I don’t hit anything,” I managed to say as I leaned on the gas.

I was soon at the end of the small neighborhood road and turned sharply onto the main road. Traffic was light as I remembered it, but I was literally flying blind.

“Car in this lane.”

“Move left.”

“Slow down.”

“Where are we going?”

My mind was racing; my eyes and face were killing me. I kept thinking of the words “capsaicin” and “emulsify” but I didn’t know why. I didn’t even know what capsaicin meant and all I knew about emulsifying is that it’s what soap does. Why was I thinking about soap? God it hurt. Capsaicin emulsify, capsaicin emulsify, what did it mean? Emulsify, soap. What does soap do? It takes away dirt. They used to make soap out of fat. Fat. Emulsify. Capsaicin. I must be going insane. I’m driving a car at night down a road I can’t see because a fake cop sprayed me with Mace and I didn’t know why. No, not Mace. Pepper

spray. Pepper spray – peppers, that’s what capsaicin is, it’s the stuff that makes peppers hot!

“Where’s your milk?” I asked suddenly.

“What?” Amy asked, between directions.

“The milk you got at Wendy’s? I need it.” I held my left hand out. In a few seconds there was a cold, plastic bottle in it.

“What for?” Amy asked in mid-panic.

“Fat emulsifies capsaicin,” I said. Still driving, I ripped the cap from the bottle, forced my eyes to open, and dumped the cold liquid straight into my eyes. I screamed and jerked the car to the right. It felt like going from sunburn to frostbite, like icicles digging into my eyes. The bottle of milk ran out faster than I expected.

I shook my head and wiped at my eyes with my wrist and blinked a few times. The pain was still there, but I could at least open my eyes. My vision was blurry, shapeless forms and blobs of light all around me. Better than nothing.

“Where did you learn that?” Amy asked, still in mid-panic.

“I don’t know,” I said, “but I need more. Isn’t there a grocery store on this road?”

“Yeah, right there,” Amy said. The words didn’t help much.

“Where?” I asked.

“Right— HERE!” she said as I felt the steering wheel cut to the right without me. The car turned sharply right and slid to the left, I pumped the brakes but the car went into a full spin then stopped suddenly when the wheels hit a curb.

“Okay,” Amy said, “I won’t do that anymore.”

We got out of the car and she said we were on the street in front of the large grocery store I remembered from the drive up here. She led me by the arm through the parking lot and through the automatic doors.

Amy grabbed a teenage employee and asked where the dairy was. I must have been a sight. He led us both to the back and I felt the air get colder. I could smell the butter, eggs, plastic, and milk.

“Here’s the milk case,” Amy said to me.

“Where’s the whole milk?” I asked. More fat meant more emulsification, I figured.

The young clerk said “here” and I felt a gust of chilled air as one of the milk case doors opened. I lunged forward between him and Amy and grabbed two one-gallon jugs by the handles and pulled them out. I unwound the safety tabs and peeled the caps off with my teeth, stood back, forced my eyes open as wide as I could, and up-ended the two jugs right above my eyes.

Two gallons of ice-cold milk poured out into my eyes, down my cheeks, over my shirt, and onto the floor. The pain from the pepper spray was dulled by the pain from freezing liquid being poured onto my eyeballs. I’m sure I screamed. I fell forward onto my knees, kept pouring. Fell backwards onto the floor, kept pouring. The jugs emptied and I tossed them aside as I lay in a pool of milk. My eyes felt wet and raw.

“Ugh,” I said weakly. “I should have found some wood.”

“What?” the teenage employee asked.

“Nothing,” Amy and I said in unison.

Everything went black again, as I felt my body and mind slip away into sleep.

CHAPTER 16

Black mist seemed to swirl around my mind. Fragments of events shot through my vision like flashbulbs, coming in then fading just as fast. An explosion of gunpowder, a slide lurching backwards, a hot brass cartridge spinning from an ejection port, a hand on my wrist, my hand on someone else's wrist, a sharp spray of fluid right into my eyes, blurs of light and shapeless hues, a fountain of cold white liquid.

I felt the world falling back into place, could feel my back was cold and wet. Sounds were coming back. I thought I heard my name.

I opened my eyes, they felt dry and cold. Light filtered in, I could see the ceiling and walls, then a big tan blob filled my vision. I rubbed at my eyes with my right hand, and then opened them again. The edges of the blur started to fill in, colors separated into shades and shadows. I could see her face now. I was still on the floor, surrounded by milk and Amy.

“You’re pretty,” I said. My voice was weak and froggy. It hurt to speak.

Her mouth tightened to a line. “You’re alive.”

I lay there for a second, trying to remember why I was on the floor of a grocery store. It came to me in a second, and I stood up in one motion. The teenage store clerk was still standing there, his lower lip hanging down and out. He watched me in silence.

“We have to get out of here,” I said to Amy as she stood up on her own. I looked around and started toward the entrance, Amy falling in behind me.

“Should we call the police?” she asked in step.

“No,” I said without thinking. She looked at me and stopped walking in the middle of an aisle. Canned fruits were on my right, Pyrex dishes and cooking utensils on my left.

“Why not?” she asked, her arms folding.

I looked at a few cans of peaches, some in light syrup and some in their own juice.

“Because,” I said, looking at a can of diced peaches in light syrup. “We don’t know if that guy *wasn’t* the police for sure. And even if he isn’t, he’s a lot closer to us than the real police.”

“Then we could stay in here, he’s not going to come after us inside the store, with people around.”

“He’s dressed like a cop,” I said, “he could come in here and do whatever he wanted and people would enjoy the show.”

She scrunched her eyebrows and leaned her head back, looking up at the drop-tile ceiling. A black plastic bubble sunk from the ceiling like a pimple a few feet away, concealing a surveillance camera.

“So what’s the plan, then?” she asked finally.

“Oh, you know me,” I said. “I work better without them.”

The night air outside was colder than I remembered, the chill amplified by the milk soaking the front and back of my shirt which made the fabric cling to my skin. Although I’d just recently run through here, it was the first time I’d seen the parking lot. I got my bearings and saw my car, the depressingly mangled white Civic parked in the wrong direction in the street past the parking lot. The trunk was ripped and bent into an odd triangle where it had struck the police car. Cars driving down the road were honking and pulling sharply into the left lane to avoid it.

We waited until traffic was clear, then Amy ran around to the passenger side and opened the door. I saw a white streak in the corner of my eye, and looked up to see a police cruiser with a familiarly mangled hood around the front passenger side wheel. The car was driving on a cross-street and ripping through the intersection about two hundred yards from where I was standing. It drove on through the intersection and nearly out of sight, and then I heard tires squeal and saw the car make a hard U-turn back toward my direction.

“Time to go!” I said, hopping into the driver’s seat and pulling the door shut. Amy followed suit. The keys were still in the ignition, and the engine turned and started cheerfully. I pulled forward and turned the car around and drove forward as fast as I could convince my car to go. I drove past the freeway on-ramp, knowing highway chases never end well.

I saw the police car turn hard onto this road behind me, heard the car’s engine roar and sputter in attempt to catch up. The road kept winding past businesses and intersections until the trees were getting thicker and thicker and the side streets and businesses were farther between. My car was managing around 60 miles per hour. I could feel the damaged trunk affecting my wind shear and the steering was put off-kilter from the wheels impacting the curb earlier. The police car was close enough that I could see that the front passenger side tire was shredded and was practically running on the rims, which explained why he was running slowly.

Not too slowly, though. He was practically on top of me, his front bumper occasionally scraping against my malformed rear bumper. I didn’t know where exactly I was trying to go, and I knew I couldn’t outrun him. All I could hope was to escape him, which wasn’t going to happen on this road. I turned into the first side street I saw, nearly skidding into a tree in the process.

The pavement soon ran out as I passed a small house set back behind a few trees, and the dirt road began winding through the woods and over hills. The police car wasn’t handling the dirt road as well; it kept cutting to the right, the shredded tire couldn’t gain any traction in the dirt. My headlights were cutting yellow cones of light through the pitch black, casting thick shadows through the trees running tight on each side of the road. The police car was about ten feet behind now, illuminated

only by my taillights. Either he didn't have his headlights on, or they were damaged during the collision.

I could see in the distance that the road turned abruptly to the left, blazing a trail through the woods. I tried to calculate the distance to the turn, and then switched off my headlights. Once again, I was driving blind. The moonlight barely filtered through the bare trees. Amy asked what I was doing. I didn't answer.

When I was sure that I'd gone far enough, I slammed on my brakes and skidded forward about thirty feet then cut hard to the left, barely following the turn of the road. My brake lights probably blinded the man in the police cruiser, and with his steering banking to the right, he had no chance of making the turn. I drove on in the dark, completely unaware of how the road moved. I heard the incredibly loud crunch of the police car crashing into a tree. Then there were no noises besides those of my car.

I stopped and pulled to the side of the road, and looked out my back window toward where the car must have hit. It was only about a thousand feet away, but I could only see a few odd angles and reflections.

I quickly pulled the gun from the cardboard and foam box in the back seat and started feeding rounds into the magazine with nimble fingers. I slid the clip back into the pistol, chambered a round, and handed the gun to Amy. She looked back with deep and inquisitive eyes, illuminated by my car's dome light.

"Take this and get out of the car and hide back in the trees. You know how to use it if you need to," I said.

"What are *you* going to do?" she asked, trembling with the gun still balanced between her two open palms.

"I have to make sure he's..." I was lost under the weight of the situation for a moment, then said, "Make sure he's not still a threat."

She looked at me like she knew what I meant, and then nodded, her hair falling over her face. She opened her door and stepped out. I saw her step into the thick of the woods, her head still low.

I turned off my dome light and pulled back into drive with my headlights still off, then drove forward far enough to turn around with a

sloppy three-point turn. I then drove forward slowly in the direction I'd come and crept toward to the road's turn.

I heard a distant pop, like a marble being dropped on a sheet of aluminum. Then another. The sounds were coming from ahead of me. I heard the sound again, and a small hole appeared in my windshield. Tiny fragments of glass sprinkled onto my dashboard. I heard another pop, and then my windshield grew another hole, a few inches from the first. The glass splintered between the two holes, a spider web of hairline cracks. They looked like bullet holes.

With new resolve I turned forward, and tightened the chest strap of my seatbelt. I tried to slide my seat back but it was as far as it could go. Then I pressed on the gas, as hard as I could.

My car rumbled forward, rattling and deliberate. Another piece of glass fell from the windshield. I accelerated onward, toward the source of the noise.

I turned on my headlights and then fingered on the high-beams, slicing through the darkness in an instant and illuminating the wrecked police car ahead of me. The hood and engine were split down the middle and wrapped around a rather unaffected tree. The car's door was open, and I could see the deflated airbag dangling limply from the steering wheel. Standing between the partially open door and the car's body was the man in the police outfit, his face bloody and broken, holding a gun with his left hand, supported by his right. A long silencer jutted from the barrel of the gun, and from it spat more rounds, drawing new perforations in my hood and windshield. The switch from low-beams to high-beams blinded and startled him, and he drew backwards toward the car's body as my car drove straight into his door, into him, and into the police car.

I'd loosened all of my muscles before the hit, and when my car struck the other head-on I felt as if I were being punched from all directions at once. Something tugged at my chest, then something sprung forward at my face from my steering wheel like a battering ram as I lurched forward and struck it. The noise never seemed to end, echoing around the inside of my skull. Something wet dripped from my nose and down my mouth, tasted like copper.

Then I felt hands across me, groping at my face and across my chest. Something slid around my waist and made a clicking noise, then what felt like snakes slithered across my lap and chest until they were gone. I weakly tried to swat at the hands pulling me to the left, then I heard my name again, her voice, and then saw her face.

“You’re still here?” I muttered.

“I’m everywhere,” she said, just as mysteriously as the first time, then she pulled again and I slid out of the car onto my back, into the dirt.

When my muscles began responding to my requests, I stood up slowly and wiped the blood away from my face with my milky—and now bloody shirt. My arms and legs felt like fire as they moved, and my head seemed to have angry little miners hammering away at the inside of my brain. I tried to push through the pain, and rotated my jaw a few times until I felt like I could speak. I told Amy to stand back for a minute, and then took the gun from her hands.

I walked in a wide arc around the back of my car until my eyes adjusted to the dark. It looked like the police car had a Siamese twin jutting from the left side – my car. The two heaps of metal seemed fused together, my car’s hood had cut into the side of the police car like a finger through a loaf of bread, buckling the top and bottom together. I walked around to the passenger side of the police car and looked through the broken window. It was dark, and I could see the top of our jolly policeman spread across the bench-style front seat, his arms splayed out wildly. At his waist, his body seemed to be lost among the wrecked metal.

He was dead, I was sure.

I started walking back toward Amy, and as I passed the former police car’s trunk I noticed the lid bobbing up and down. One impact had unlocked the lid, the inner trunk light was on, spilling light from around the edges of the lid.

I lifted the lid with my left hand, the gun still in my right. A man’s body lay folded and mangled inside the trunk. He looked to be in his forties, with a large belly and thinning brown hair. He was wearing a white undershirt, no belt, and brown pants with a black stripe down the side of each leg. The same colors as the police uniform shirt the other man wore. His body was contorted violently, from the crash I assumed.

“Hello, officer,” I said to the body.

CHAPTER 17

The absurd clairvoyance and imperviousness of adrenaline was starting to wear off and pain was creeping in through my body. My head started a slow throb; the rest of my body was starting to burn. The old guy in the trunk probably felt worse, though.

I wanted to go find a hole and crawl in and go to sleep. The night was thick around me, insects buzzed around my ears. Two cars had merged into one, and two men were dead inside. My shirt was soaked in milk, both 2% and whole, everything smelled like paprika, it hurt to blink, I had no idea where I was, someone had tried to shoot me, my car was destroyed, and I had a gun in my hand. There's got to be a point where your brain just bids your body good luck and powers down, but I apparently wasn't there yet.

I closed the trunk, wiped my prints off the lid. All I cared about was getting home; everything else – the bodies, the auto carnage – was just peripheral to that.

The plastic shopping bag was still in the back of my used-to-be-a-car, under my canvas jacket. I slipped the jacket on and dropped the USP into the plastic bag after flicking the safety. The airbags in the front seat

were still inflated, so I fished the pocketknife I'd bought from the plastic bag, flicked it open, and punched a hole in the passenger side airbag. I took all the documents from the glove box and stuffed them into the plastic bag. I ignored Amy's questions, so she took a few steps back and sat down on the dirt road and wrapped her arms around her knees.

I used the knife to unscrew the license plate from my car. It wouldn't fit in the bag, so I slid it inside my belt under my jacket on my back. In my trunk was a small AAA emergency kit, from which I took a small package of first aid supplies and a handheld crank-powered LED flashlight. I appraised my car one last time, said a silent goodbye to my trusty ride of the past year, and started walking.

When I got my license shortly after my sixteenth birthday, my dad had bought me the car used from a friend's used car lot. It had a ton of miles on it and was in pretty bad shape, but the Japanese safety record is what my dad was interested in for my first car. He gave it to me on condition that I not do anything to not deserve it, and said I should drive it until it falls apart or until I can buy myself another. Looks like both are the case now.

"Man, your car," Amy said as I pulled her to her feet. She nearly pulled me to the ground when my faulty muscles took the force, but I managed it.

"I can afford it," I said.

I hadn't told her about the guy in the trunk. I squeezed the grip of the flashlight a few times, and a white light soon shot from the three small bulbs at the end. I looked around for a bit, trying to find some landmark for bearing, and started walking in the direction we'd come.

It took about an hour to get back to civilization, off the dirt road, past the lone house sunk behind trees, onto the main road, and to a gas station that was still open. My cell phone told me it was just after eleven when we'd hit the canopy of light and illuminated signs proclaiming the low prices of beer and cigarettes.

During the mostly silent walk, I tried to imagine the information flow leading to me once somebody found the wreck. I took the license plate and all the papers that would lead to me, but there was still the VIN number. They could look that up and see that the car was last registered to Daniel Baker, deceased. It wouldn't take longer than a minute to

connect that to me, since I'm at the same address. Casual glance might make it look like a genuine accident, that I'd just crashed into this police car that was split around a tree and blocking the road. Don't know how to explain my headlights being off, but teenage stupidity is better than vehicular homicide. Well, vehicular self-defense, but that would be hard to explain.

I decided I'd call the state police in the morning, that I'd figure out what I was going to say over the night and if I couldn't think of a way to not involve Amy, I'd let her know our version of the story before I contacted the police. I thought about calling a lawyer, too. The guy who handled my dad's will seemed nice enough, but I had no idea if he was a regular lawyer or some specialized will-handling lawyer or what. Would I need a criminal defense attorney? Johnnie Cochran? What would I say? Do I tell him or the police about the shooting range or buying a gun illegally? I didn't need to, since I never used the gun, but how would I explain being in Lorton?

It kept eating at me, between the throbs in my aching head and the shoots of pain from my feet up through my sore legs and seatbelt-bruised chest. Some guy killed a cop, took his clothes and car, then tried to – what, kill me? If he wanted to kill me he wouldn't have used the pepper spray. Maybe he wanted to kidnap me, try to get my money. How would he know about the money? How would anybody, except the handful of bank tellers whose eyes always slowly widened as they eyed their computer screens after accessing my account? They'd go home from work that day and tell someone about the kid on a joint account with his mother that had over half a million dollars in it. They'd tell someone, and that someone would tell someone else. Then somewhere down the line someone would hire some mercenary to follow and kidnap me?

Does that make sense? If so, I *would* have to think about protection. If people know there's a lowly seventeen-year-old kid walking around the planet with a piece of plastic and a four-digit number between him and half a million bucks, I am in danger. My mom's name was on the account too, since I couldn't have my own bank account as a minor, so she could be in danger too. We'd have to move the money somewhere safer, maybe in bonds locked in a deposit box, or maybe in an account

outside of the country. Swiss bank account; that sounds nice, but I'd probably have to wait a month until I turned 18 for that.

When we got to the gas station, I could finally stop thinking.

Since I was carrying a gun, and didn't feel like being party to any more adventure tonight, I handed the bag to Amy and asked if she could wait outside for a few minutes, then we could switch off. She nodded, took the bag, and leaned against the wall of the station's convenience store.

A heavysset guy only a few years older than me sat behind a thick bulletproof glass partition behind the counter. When I entered he looked at me, decided that I wasn't very interesting, and turned back to his portable television.

I grabbed a black cotton T-shirt with the gas station's logo printed across the front and "Driving Your Savings" printed between two cartoonish tires underneath it, then a box of extra-strength Motrin from one shelf, and some eye drops from the shelf across from it. I took two bottles of Gatorade from the refrigerated cabinet in the back of the store. I almost threw up when I saw the gallons of milk one door over. I paid for the items in cash, and then went to the men's bathroom.

In the mirror was a person I didn't recognize. His hair was disheveled, his eyes were sullen and red. The skin around his eyes and nose was red and puffy. He looked like death incarnate. Not like me at all.

I took my coat off, then peeled the milk/sweat/tear-soaked shirt from my body and threw it in the trash. I liked that shirt, but I figured I could afford to make my wardrobe disposable if I wanted to.

A dark and creepy bruise ran down my chest at an angle, where a seatbelt had gotten in a fight with inertia. It looked like I was wearing a messenger bag with a purple-black strap. I opened the painkillers and took four with water from the sink, and then wrestled with the eye drops for a while. I then put the new shirt on—it was itchy and too big—and then my jacket went over it. I tried to address my hair, then left.

I got to the front door of the shop, stopped, turned around, went back to the bathroom and threw up.

I finally made it back outside to baby-sit the gun so Amy could go inside, I looked through the phone book under a payphone for taxi services. There was one, which advertised itself as a 24-hour service with air-conditioned cars. Nobody uses taxis around here in the suburbs. But I supposed there had to be at least one taxi service for any area, for situations just like this.

I smiled for a second, sure that this sort of thing happened all the time.

CHAPTER 18

We'd come out for a party and our ride had bailed on us. As far as anybody at the cab company was concerned, that's what happened. Forty minutes after I'd called and said I needed a ride from Lorton to Fredericksburg, a depressing minivan pulled up into the gas station parking lot, decked out in requisite checkered striping and business names and phone numbers plastered all over the vehicle's body.

Amy and I rode in silence. She pulled her cell phone from her bag and fiddled with one of the games for a while, and I watched the darkness swoosh by out the window and absentmindedly rubbed the bruise on my upper chest with my right hand. I thought about taking a look at the knife I'd gotten, since I never really got a chance to check it out, but I didn't want to freak the driver out.

It was nearly 1 AM when we were dropped off at my house; Saturday was finally over. The fare went through all of the cash I had left, so Amy had to chip in a few bucks to cover the tip. I felt rather poor for a moment. Just a moment, though.

I had the cab bring us to my house, and not drop Amy off because I wanted to keep her exposure as minimal as possible. If

someone were following us, I didn't want to lead them to her house, and if someone pulled up the taxi company's records or questioned the driver I didn't want him able to give anybody an address. From my place, her house was about a 10 minute walk if you cut through some lawns and hop over a low brick wall dividing two subdivisions.

"You'll call the police in the morning?" she asked as we neared her house.

"After some sleep, yeah," I said.

"And you'll tell me which version of whatever the hell just happened you're going to be using?" she asked. Her hands were in her coat pockets, she watched her feet as she walked.

"I'll try to leave you out of it if I can, but I'll let you know either way."

"You might want a lawyer for when you make your statement. They could try to turn it around and make it your fault. Self-defense can be hard to prove."

"Self-defense against pretend cops with bad pony-tails has to be even harder."

"Does your family have a lawyer? This wouldn't be the best time to fish one out of the Yellow Pages. Someone who knows you and you can trust would be best."

"The only lawyer I know of is the will guy," I said, "and I don't know if he's like a *lanyer* lawyer or just a *will* lawyer. My dad might have had a lawyer he used for other stuff. He never mentioned it."

"You could ask your mom, she'll probably know."

"Man, my mom. I don't know how I'm going to explain all of this."

"Oh, it's easy," Amy said, "just make it a life-lesson thing. 'Hey mom, remember how when I was a kid you always used to tell me that if I ever get hit in the face with pepper spray, to pour a gallon of milk into each eye? Well, you'll never guess what happened to *me* today!' Then just let the good times roll."

It hurt to laugh, just like it hurt to walk, breathe, and think.

When I got home it seemed like all of my muscles were just inches away from going on strike. I could feel them rallying together and starting to disobey orders. I plopped down on a chair at my kitchen table and dumped all of the stuff from the plastic bag from the gun store, then finally peeled my license plate from my back and dropped it to the floor, feeling a nice rectangular impression on my back.

I fished through the strewn papers and instruments of death on the table and found the pocketknife and the box it had come in. I only bought it because Amy had spent a long time looking at it when we were at the gun store in the morning; I didn't know anything about it. I guessed I'd gotten it for her, but with all that'd happened after that there was never a chance. Now it was a used knife. There was a film of white powder all over the handle now. I assumed it was from the air bag I'd used the knife on.

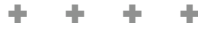
The box said it was an Emerson Knives Inc model CQC-7B. I'd heard CQC used for "close quarters combat" and thought maybe the 7B meant I could use it against seven bad guys before the warranty expired. The box touted a "patented WAVE feature," which the instruction sheet explained was a small hook built into the blade so that you can draw the knife from your pocket and have it unfold in one motion, by making the hook catch onto the side of your pocket and pulling the blade from the handle. The knife was all black with a solid handle that felt like raw fiberglass and a black clip on the side to secure it in your pocket. The blade swung out by thumbing a small disc on the dull side of the blade, just under the previously mentioned "wave" hook, and swinging it out in an arc. The blade itself was black, perhaps that's what the B stood for in the model number, and reflected no light. It wasn't a very long blade, just over three inches, but it looked serious enough. The end had a sharply angled point to it which was defined by the text on the box as a "tanto point." The forward half of the blade edge was smooth, the back half had a toothy serration. I grabbed one of the papers I considered unnecessary and sliced clean through it. Fancy.

I folded the knife closed and set it on the table next to the gun. I frowned, and picked up the gun. There was a round in the chamber and the hammer was cocked. I dropped the magazine out and pulled the slide back to eject the chambered bullet, then locked the slide back and set the

gun down again. A gun and a knife lay beside each other on a kitchen table. Yeah, don't mess with this kid.

I used the back of the chair to stand up uneasily, eyed the stairs to go up toward my room and decided against them. I instead swaggered gingerly toward the living room and spilled onto the couch.

I got myself into a position where only some of my body hurt, and fell asleep wondering how long the next day would seem.



I awoke around noon, according to the clock on the DVD player staring at me from across the room. My head and neck felt tingly, but my arms and legs were responding to my prompts, so I rolled myself off of the couch and onto my hands and knees. Every muscle seemed to be yelling back and forth at each other, but the dull pain was better than last night's full-on burning. I walked in a circle around the couch until my brain started to unhinge from the corners of my skull and meld into one body of consciousness. I'm supposed to call the police or something today, I remembered. The rumbling in my stomach was a higher priority, so I lurched into the kitchen like a zombie and opened the pantry door. Soup sounded good. Anything hot sounded good. A hot bath sounded excellent. With hot Taiwanese girls rubbing my sore legs and back. And chest. And anything else.

I banged and twisted the can opener against the top of a can of chicken noodle until it did its job, then poured it into a pot and set it on the stove over high heat, then sat down at the kitchen counter, a few feet from the table where my small arsenal and library of car owner documentation lay undisturbed. While I waited for the fog to lift, I just sat and rubbed my hands up and down my face until I remembered the bit about my eyes from yesterday. The puffiness seemed to have gone away, and I could blink naturally. I got up and started to look for a spoon to stir the soup with when the front doorbell rang.

I figured it was Amy. I gave myself a look-over. I was still wearing last night's jeans, and the itchy gas station t-shirt. I was amazed I slept at all. I walked toward the door and remembered the bit from yesterday about strange men wanting to kill me. I went back into the

kitchen and peeked out a window that affords a view of the front door and driveway. In the driveway, where my car usually would be, was a black Chrysler sedan with tinted windows. At the front door were two men in plain, black, non-tailored suits that did a rather poor job of hiding the shoulder-hanging gun holsters they were both wearing.

And then the headache crept back in.

CHAPTER 19

Handgun in hand, pocketknife in pocket.

Through the solid front door I could visualize their outlines. I could put two bullets through each, presuming the .45 rounds could pierce the solid-core metal door. Why'd I have to buy low velocity rounds?

A knock on the door, and a voice. "FBI, open up! We need to ask you some questions." The voice sounded grizzly, like a tired old man.

We need to ask you some questions. It sounds better than "we need to shoot you in the face and laugh about it afterwards," but who ever says what they mean these days?

I'd lived in the area long enough to have seen an FBI agent or two, and these guys fit the bill. Suits worn just for the sake of being suits, unremarkable sedans, always traveling in pairs.

I could hear the soup boiling, mirroring the temperament of the blood at the base of my skull. Another pound on the door, sounded like the base of someone's fist. I sighed, still contemplating firing blindly

through the front door. If I'm supposed to be turning myself in for killing someone today, I might as well go for the high score.

Or not. They could in fact be FBI agents; they could have found the car and traced it back to me. Better err on the side of safety, I figured, so I lowered the gun from the door. My shoes were sitting a few feet away, so I grabbed one and set it on the floor in front of the door, turned the deadbolt back, and opened the door a few inches so it caught on the toe of the shoe and was stopped by the friction of the shoe against the floor.

"Badges, please," I said, peering through the two-inch opening of the door. My left hand was on the back of the door, ready to slam it. My right hand was holding the gun behind my back. The two men bent forward to see through the crack. They looked at each other, shrugged, and pulled folding wallets from their belts and held them up.

"Hand one to me," I said again. The man closest to me was older than the other, looked to be in his fifties and with his sagging jowls and slicked-back light hair, he looked like a depressed bulldog. He drew in a breath to speak, then shrugged again and handed the wallet through the crack in the door. I snapped it away with my left hand and slammed the door shut with my knee, turning the deadbolt again as I stepped away from the door.

The wallet was a simple black leather folder, when opened, the gold badge sat sideways on the right fold and a plain blue card was slipped behind a clear pocket. It was a white laminated card with all blue writing. "Department of Investigation. FBI. This certifies that whose signature and photograph appear hereon is a regularly appointed special agent for the FBI." The picture matched the old man outside, the signature said his name was G-something Bremer. If it was a forgery, it wasn't an obvious one.

I kicked the shoe away and opened the door, still eyeing the badge.

"Special Agent Bremer?" I said, "Is there something to differentiate between 'agent' and 'special agent'? Because I only hear about 'Special Agent whoever' and never 'Agent whoever'."

The older one, Bremer allegedly, scowled, exaggerating the lines in his face. The younger one smiled tritely and said, "An agent is a new

hiree, once they go through the FBI Academy in Quantico they're appointed Special Agent."

I handed the badge back to Bremer. "Quantico, eh?" I said, "I hear that's a nice place."

Bremer took the badge and slipped it back over his belt, the annoyance fading from his face. "It isn't," he said.

"May we come in?" the younger one asked. He looked no older than thirty, had thin-framed glasses and wavy blond hair. He had about six inches over his old partner.

"Just a few questions, Mr. Baker," Bremer said, as if on cue, "No funny business, scout's honor."

I frowned. "You don't have any pepper spray do you?"

"Why, do you need some?" Bremer asked, playfully.

"Yeah, thought my soup could use some kick."

I looked them both over; if they wanted to gut me they could have done so already. I flicked the safety on the gun and tucked it into my pants' waist on my back and covered it with the back of my shirt, then stepped back away from the doorway.

"Be my guest," I said.

They both stepped inside, neither of them surveying the room or rest of the house. "I'm *Special* Agent Bremer and this is equally *Special* Agent Rubino, my partner."

Rubino didn't look very Italian, he looked like a Navy man, save for the glasses. When I closed the door, Rubino stood in front of it and Bremer stepped into the kitchen. He seemed to be the one who liked talking, so I followed him.

"You want some soup?" I asked, stepping around the counter and over to the stove to turn the heat down.

"Naw, I only eat soup when I'm sick," Bremer said.

"And you're not," I said.

"What?"

"Sick."

“Not this moment,” he said. He pulled a tall chair from the counter and sat down, resting his elbows on the counter. “So,” he started again, “do you have any questions for us?”

I stirred the soup with a wooden spoon, “I thought you had some questions for me,” I said.

Behind me he said, “We might. But I thought first you might want some answers.”

“About what?” I asked.

“Oh... anything really. Most kids I meet your age are just brimming with questions, about what ‘Special Agent’ means or whether we carry guns and if we ever use them.”

I moved the soup pot from off the heat and turned around, leaning against the front of stove. He was looking at me flatly. I just shrugged.

“But you probably know all you need to about guns,” he said. “The range target sheets they pulled from the back seat of your car this morning had pretty tight grouping. Did your dad teach you to shoot?”

I bit the side of my cheek. “From my car?” I said, trying to sound innocent. “My car was out front last I checked.”

“Huh. Must have been stolen, then. Stolen and taken to Lorton for some shooting, some Wendy’s, and a few gallons of milk.”

“Crazy world we live in.” There was no use denying it, he was pretty convinced.

“Very crazy,” he said, leaning back in the chair, “so crazy that whoever stole your car looks exactly like you and has an accomplice that looks exactly like Amy Westbourne. At least, that’s what the security cameras at Hobson’s Grocer saw, and verified by the testimony of a few shoppers and employees who are not used to seeing teenagers storm through the store and douse their face with two gallons of Dairy-fresh.”

“Builds strong bones.”

“But the craziest part was when a CPA was taking a shortcut to work this morning, he found his path cut off by your car, the one that was stolen by a pair of look-alikes of you and your friend, smashed into

the side of a police car with a John Doe practically cut in half and a dead state trooper sittin' easy in the trunk.”

Okay, so I'm going to jail then.

He sat there for a minute, reading my face. I stood and did the same.

“You never answered my question, though,” Bremer said after a moment. “Did you learn to shoot from your father?”

“I don't think my dad liked guns,” I said through my teeth.

Bremer smiled, “Ah yes, he did always seem the pacifistic type.”

He was lying; he had to be.

Rubino stepped into the kitchen slowly. “Soup smells good,” he said.

I looked back at Bremer, then stepped forward and sat both hands on the counter opposite him. Bremer looked over his shoulder at Rubino, “We were just talking about Dan,” he said.

My dad didn't like to be called Dan.

“He didn't like to be called Dan, remember?” Rubino said. It sounded like rehearsed banter.

“Oh, right,” Bremer said with feigned realization. He then turned back to me. “So you must just be a quick learner, then. With the shooting, I mean.” He made a play gun with his fingers and took a shot at the pot of soup behind me.

“Is this going somewhere?” I asked, trying to keep my voice from wavering.

“As I was saying,” Bremer said, “we just wondered if you wanted to ask us anything.”

“And all you want to ask me is where I learned to shoot? Haven't you been watching the news? Kids these days are learning their combat and car-stealing skills from video games.”

Rubino stepped forward and set his hands on the chair next to Bremer.

“If you don't have any questions for us, then we really don't have any questions for you,” Rubino said. “We just thought, you know, you

might be going through some things and you might want some input from some people as knowledgeable as us.”

“Okay,” I said, “How can I tell if a girl *likes me* likes me, or just likes me?”

Bremer laughed again, “That’s not my department, kid,” he pointed at the ring on his right hand, “Third marriage. Jake might be able to help you there.” He turned to his partner. Rubino just shook his head.

“What we meant,” Bremer said, “is that if you started noticing anything weird going on, like next time if – instead of your car getting stolen – it’s actually you who drives a Civic through a guy with no record or file in any database. Should something weird like that happen, you might want to call us and see if we can do anything for each other.”

They each pulled their real wallets out and slipped out a business card, then slid them across the counter.

In the distance I heard police tweeters, not sirens, calling every few seconds. The noise came closer and closer, until out of my kitchen window I saw two police cruisers, state trooper insignia, racing down the street and pull awkwardly into my driveway. From the first car came a uniformed officer and another man wearing a drab suit and thick overcoat to which a badge was pinned. Two uniforms stepped out of the second car.

“How’s that for timing?” Bremer asked. He turned to Rubino and asked casually, “Why don’t you take care of that, Jake?”

“Sure thing, sir,” Rubino said, stepping backwards out of the kitchen.

I heard him open the front door, and stepped over to the kitchen window to see him walking toward the policemen with his badge held up. Bremer and I watched now as Rubino stepped up to the plainclothes officer and hand him the badge. He spoke for a minute. The officer didn’t look happy. After Rubino stopped talking, the officer began talking back and, waving his arms in the air and I heard some obscenities through the window. The officer spun around and slammed his palm against the roof of the squad car.

“They get antsy when fellow officers turn up in the trunks of their own cars,” Bremer said as he watched the show.

Rubino started talking again, pointing at his own car then at my house, then placed his hands at his hips. The officer swore again, then turned to the dumbfounded uniformed officers watching the exchange and waved them off. The officer got back in the passenger seat of the car he came in, and in a few seconds the police cars were gone.

Rubino came back into the house and said to Bremer, “They’re going to give it some space for a while, but I figure as soon as they can pull some new evidence from their collective ass they’ll be back.” Bremer turned to me, “All righty, sport. You hear that? We can keep them off your case only so long, so it’d be grand if you could help us out sooner rather than later. You have our cards, so when there’s something you want to talk about, give either of us a call.”

“Whichever of us you think would have the better phone voice,” Rubino said.

Bremer stood up and straightened his jacket. “We’ll be seeing you,” he said as he left the kitchen and out the door toward their car.

Rubino held back for a moment, his hand on the doorknob, and said, “And in the unlikely event that you really are in the dark, you might look for answers from that principal of yours.” He looked me over one last time, then stepped out the door.

My thoughts about what the hell had just happened were cut short by my cell phone chirping. I found it on the coffee table by the couch I’d slept on, and answered it without looking at the caller ID

“Hi Chris, sorry I didn’t call before but things have been hectic around here with Cathy,” it was my mother.

“Oh, well, that’s fine,” I said into the phone, looking around the room.

“Okay, and I thought I’d give you the weekend without bugging you. Didn’t figure out how to throw any parties, did you?” she laughed.

“Nope, no parties.”

“Well that’s good I guess. Anything else going on, then? Anything exciting?”

I swallowed, my mouth felt dry and my stomach was rumbling for that soup. A mile or so away from my house were a few cops who wanted my blood and behind them were two FBI Agents – Special

Agents – who seemed to know more than they let on and seemed only interested in playing mind games. An hour away there was a dead police officer and a “John Doe,” apparently in pieces.

“Nope,” I said, “nothing at all.”

CHAPTER 20

Amy's house was bigger than mine. I always thought my place was a bit too big for three people, but Amy's seemed to exaggerate that notion. I'd only seen it in the dark, but now that I'd made the walk in the daytime it seemed larger. Dark tan bricking and copper accents, the front lawn was big enough for a pick-up game of football, if I knew how to play football.

I stood outside the house for a few minutes, looking at the upstairs windows trying to decide which one was Amy's room. I thought about choosing one and throwing a rock at it, but that seemed a bit too Gentleman Caller. I would have just called her phone, but I'd left it at home. After the police and FBI left my house, I had to get out. I felt like my head was going to explode.

When I stood still, the questions kept coming. Repeating over and over, hammering my thoughts. So I started walking. Walking through backyards and over a small brick wall in the only direction that seemed to make sense, toward the only person on earth who seemed to make sense.

So I went up to the front door and rung the bell. A man in his late thirties answered, a longneck beer bottle in one hand and wearing a

USMC T-shirt that didn't suit his gut. When he pulled the door open, the sleeve pulled back revealing the bottom of a "Semper Fi" tattoo on his left arm. As soon as I saw him, I remember Amy telling me how she didn't tell him about anything she did. I was probably the first guy to show up on his doorstep to ask for her, and I could feel his imagination churning horrible thoughts about me.

It probably didn't help that I smelled like milk and peppers and was still wearing that gas station T-shirt.

I croaked, "Is Amy here?" and after a final look-over he nodded and gestured his head toward the stairs. He stepped away from the door so I stepped in and allowed him to close it. Amy's dad scratched at his neck for a moment, then hollered "Amy!"

Upstairs and through a closed door, I heard her yell back, "What?"

"Visitor for you," volleyed Mr. Westbourne. Silence from upstairs.

"She'll be right down," he said after a moment.

I stood there in the foyer, tapping my fingers against my legs. Sunday afternoon football noises came from a TV somewhere down the hall. Mr. Westbourne just stood there opposite me, looking me over. I tried to imagine all the horrible things evident about me that moment. I hoped my eyes weren't red or puffy anymore; usually when a teenager has dry, red eyes your first thought goes to drug use and not to pepper spray use.

I adjusted my posture, looked around at what I could see of the house and tried to seem impressed. He kept looking me over, then his eye caught on the black stainless steel clip hanging out over the right pocket of my jeans. The big, deadly, probably illegal-to-carry knife was still on me.

Great, a kid shows up asking for your daughter wearing a gas station shirt and carrying a knife. Go get the shotgun.

"You always carry a knife, Mr..." he said dryly, before taking a sip from his bottle.

"Baker, sir," I croaked again, "Chris. And, uh.. I just got this yesterday. It's, um... it's an Emerson." I don't know why I said that.

His eyes shot up at that last word. He set his bottle down on a table behind him and said, “An Emerson, really?”

I didn’t know if that was bad or good. Did I just tell him I drove a Pinto or a Jaguar? “Yeah,” I said, unsure whether to sound apologetic or satisfied.

He seemed to liven up, and said, “Really, which one is it?” with an outstretched hand. I delicately pulled the knife from my pocket and handed it over to him. He took it and looked the handle over, then flicked the blade open with a simple flip of his wrist. I hadn’t tried that yet.

“Ah, a CQC-7,” he said. “The classic.”

I guessed I’d made the right choice. I was pretty sure the model number wasn’t printed on the knife anywhere; he must have recognized it by sight.

“You must like Emerson,” he said, “You have any more?”

Before I could answer, he almost squealed, “I have a whole set of them, here, I’ll go get them.” He closed the blade with one hand and tossed it to me, then practically pranced out of the foyer and disappeared down a hallway.

Amy appeared at the top of the stairs. Her hair was wet and tangled, some strands clinging to the side of her face and neck. She was wearing a fresh shirt, featuring an animated frog that looked bored to be alive, and deliberately frayed jeans. Bare feet.

“Oh, you,” she said when she saw me. She started down the stairs when her dad came back, carrying a wooden box that looked like the sort of thing you find dead butterflies pinned to felt inside. I looked apologetically to Amy and held a finger up, then stepped forward to look inside the box her dad had set on the table next to his beer. Inside the box were five or six knives, folded closed in handles that looked more or less identical to mine.

“Here’s a SARK,” he said, picking one up then setting it back down. He pointed at another and said it was a CQC-7B like mine, but without “Wave,” then pointed at another and said it was a CQC-10, then finally picked one up and held it like you might hold a baby dove with a broken wing.

“This,” he said, “is a CQC-12. Just came out about a year ago.”

He flicked the blade out, and I took a step back after realizing the size of it. The blade looked like hot death, about seven inches long with a bowie curve at the end. It made my three-point-something incher look like a butter knife.

“He designed it to match the AK-47 bayonet. This thing is serious business.”

I tried to imagine who “he” was, then just said, “Ah, the 12. I’ve been trying to find one of those.” I looked at Amy, who was standing just to my left now, and smiled just slightly.

He folded the knife shut and stuck it back in the box. “I know a guy who owns a gun shop in Lorton, he gets me a good deal on them,” he said, picking the box up. I looked over at Amy, now she was grinning.

“You wanted that study guide for the algebra exam, right?” Amy asked me.

“Right,” I said, after some consideration.

“Okay, I can print a copy and we can go over it upstairs,” she said, turning around and heading up the stairs. I followed.

“Leave the door open,” Amy’s dad said, still holding the box of knives. I started to laugh, thinking he was joking, then remembered the size of that knife and just shut up.

“I thought you were going to call first with the story,” Amy said when we got in her room. The room was a bit bigger than mine, a few small posters of bands I’ve never heard of decorated the wall behind her bed, an L-shaped computer desk was in the far corner, a fat monitor and a monster-sized printer taking up what room wasn’t occupied by strewn papers and textbooks.

“Change of plans,” I said when my attention returned to her.

“So what’s the new plan?” she asked, taking a seat on the edge of her bed and pointing to the desk chair a few feet away. I pulled the chair out and sat down.

“The new plan is to make a new plan,” I said. Then I told her about earlier that afternoon, about the soup, the FBI, the cops, the general lack of information as to why the FBI was there, and the

ominous suggestion that Mr. Comstock, my high school administrator was behind it all.

She pulled up her legs and sat Indian-style while I told the story, nodding and asking understandable questions throughout.

“I thought we’d figured Comstock was working *for* the government,” she said after the shock and awe wore off.

“We don’t know that,” I said, “we just know that somebody’s paying him a boatload of money from an unmarked account. The money could be coming from out of the country.

“And the guy last night, the fake cop. Nobody said anything about who he was?”

“No, this Bremer guy just said he was a ‘John Doe’ – which means the police or anybody else has no record of him and can’t identify him.”

“They could just be saying that. Hell, he could have been working for the Feds.”

I nodded, “Could be. Whoever he was, I’m mostly off the hook for killing him. Just like I’m off the hook for that fight at school on Thursday, which brings us back to Comstock. And besides that, you know how people are supposed to have nightmares and flashbacks and feel all shitty after killing someone?”

Amy nodded.

“Nothing,” I said.

She frowned, “Well maybe I wouldn’t feel so bad about killing someone who tried to kill me either. If you ran over some old guy crossing the street, you might feel bad, but this guy killed a cop and tried to kill you – if not us.”

We sat in silence for a while.

“So what are we supposed to be doing now, anyway?” Amy said, breaking the calm.

“Waiting? Waiting for the FBI to... something?” I said. I didn’t know.

“It sounds like they want you to do their job for them. The guy, Rubino whatever, he said to start with Comstock, right? Maybe they need you to do some groundwork because they can’t legally go there, or something.”

“Possible. You think they might be interested in his bank records? I still have that CD.”

She shook her head. “If they’re FBI then they can get into his bank account on their own, can’t they?”

I thought for a moment, “Yeah, I think so.”

“The way they kept telling you to ask *them* questions before they’ll talk to you. It sounds like they need you to find something out about Comstock, and when you ask them the right question they’ll start helping you. Like the right question is the passphrase to answers, or something like that.”

I thought about that. Special Agent Bremer did keep saying I should have questions for him, and to call him when I did. Either he wanted me to flat-out ask, “What the hell is going on with me?” or he was trying to tell me I had to figure something out on my own first. If he wanted me to ask what was going on, he could have just told me. They wanted to make sure I knew the question before they gave the answer, so it must be that I need to find the question on my own. My head spun.

“All right,” I said, “when we find something new about Comstock, I’ll call the FBI agents and start getting answers.”

“Am I going to have to be Sarah from the bank again?” Amy asked.

“No,” I said, “we’re going to have to do some old-fashioned recon.”

“You don’t have a car,” she said. “Or do you? Did your dad have a car?”

“Yeah, but it’s still at his work. In Quantico. We never bothered to go get it.”

“I don’t think my dad will let me borrow his car to let us go get it.”

“No, that’s all right. I’ll still need a new car, I don’t want to be the seventeen-year-old driving a Cadillac around.”

“So... what? You want to kick off this crime spree and go steal a car?”

“Don’t you remember?” I said. “I told you I could afford it.”

CHAPTER 21

Monday, the next day, I didn't even consider waking up for school. I was a free man, as far as I cared. I woke up in my own bed, took a shower for the first time since my milk shower on Saturday, and finally put on some clothes that advertised trendy teen clothing stores instead of a gasoline company. I felt free, born anew. A new day, a new week. Seven new days with infinite possibilities and opportunities to be attacked by killers and hounded by federal agencies.

Amy maintained that she needed to attend her morning classes, so that gave me a few hours before she'd be available for mischief. I only had one thing on my agenda today: get a car.

I'd lately been noticing a certain car with a "For Sale" sign on the windshield parked on the lawn of a house a few neighborhoods over. After I ate whatever I could find in the kitchen that didn't require milk, I went back up to my room and researched a few car-buying tips online. I wasn't sure the year of the car I'd seen, or the mileage, so I memorized the private party sale value of three different yearly models and with three different landmarks for mileage. I called my bank and asked what the fee was for certified checks; \$1.75. I figured I could manage that.

I checked local auto sale listings online to make sure I wasn't missing out on a much better. I didn't find anything that suited my youthful charm as much as this one.

All that done, I spun my desk chair around and flipped on the small TV in my room and realized how long it'd been since I'd watched any television. Surprisingly, there was no explosive coverage of anything I'd done that weekend on the 24-hour news channels. Nothing about the rampaging teen who trashed a grocery store hunting for milk like Popeye after spinach. Nothing about the dead cop or a dead fake cop. Nothing about the FBI, or the kid who picks up a gun for the first time in his life and is already an expert with them. Maybe I missed that coverage on Sunday and by now it was old news. Or maybe the impact of my life's events don't weigh as much on the global consciousness as most teenagers expect theirs should.

I called Amy and asked her to meet me at the house with the car for sale, and then I started walking. For all the walking I'd been doing lately, I thought maybe I didn't even need a car; I could be like the people in ancient times that walked everywhere, before horses or combustion engines were all the rage.

Amy was already there when I arrived, sitting in her dad's car parked on the street. She got out when I came up, and we both took a good look over the car for sale parked on the lawn.

It was a white 1998 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am. A two-door sports car, it had a long angled hood with curves and lines that made it look like an angry beast. Over in the driveway was an older-looking gray Trans Am, probably mid-1970s. Perhaps the owner traded up for an older model. It had an emblem on the back for the Firebird & Trans Am Club of America.

"It looks fast," Amy said, looking at the white car.

"Should be, it's a V-8," I said, returning to read the list of features printed on a sheet of paper taped to the driver's window. She stepped over to read it as well.

"If I ever get in any more low-speed chases, this would be good for it," I said to nobody in particular.

"How do you know it's a '98?" she asked. "It doesn't say the year on here anywhere. Do they expect you to know by sight?"

“Probably,” I said, reading about the factory CD system and engine improvements. “I can tell from the VIN number.”

She squinted her eyes. “You what?” She bent down and looked at the tiny digits pressed into a metal plate at the base of the windshield.

“It doesn’t say the year in there,” she said.

I leaned in again, “Yes it does, right there,” I said, pointing at the long series of digits. “The tenth character, ‘W’, that means it’s a 1998.”

“How in the world does that mean 1998?”

“It just does, I thought everybody knew that.”

“That W, in the tenth letter of a big long number that nobody pays attention to at all, ever, means 1998?”

“Yes.”

“Well they don’t.”

I shrugged.

The front door of the house opened slowly. It was a one-story house, dark brown bricks. An older guy stepped out of the door a few feet and asked out loud, “You interested in it?”

I looked over the car at him and hollered, “Yeah, you still selling it?”

The man tucked his hands in his pockets and nodded slowly, “Yep, my son is, anyway.” He looked around at the trees for a moment, then wandered over toward us.

“It’s a nice car,” he said.

“Sure looks it,” I said, making a show of looking it over. There were slight signs of a dent on the rear bumper, but nothing drastic. It had a solid T-top, two glass sections of the roof could be removed and stowed in the trunk if you wanted the wind in your hair, and didn’t mind the fact that there’d still be a metal beam through the opening.

“This mileage is right?” I asked, pointing at the sheet in the window that boasted just over 28,000 miles.

“It was when he printed that up last month. Might be a few more by now, but not by much,” the man said.

“And what’s the asking price?” I asked.

The man looked at me, hesitating and letting worn gears grind in his mind. “Ehh,” he started, “you mind if I ask how old you are?”

“Me? I’m 19,” I lied. I turned to Amy, “This is my sister, she’s 16. We just moved in here last month from Detroit and I’ve been having a heck of a time finding something that’s not a Mitsubishi or a Hyundai or anything.”

He nodded, clearly a patron of American muscle.

“Well,” he started, “he’s asking ninety-six for it. He’s starting school up at Brown and he wants something better for the climate and for drives up and back and such, and his payments for this are through the roof, still. Book money, he says.”

Uh huh. Whatever.

“And if I can pay cash, today – no loans or liens to deal with – how about eighty-nine? That’s all I could get for my old GTO.”

Amy looked at me, then rolled her eyes and shook her head slowly.

“I guess he could live with that,” the man said after a few scratches on his chin. “He’ll just be excited to sell it. Not much market for American-mades around here anymore, as you said.”

“Great,” I said, “how about this, we can take it on a test drive over to my bank just up the road, and so long as the engine doesn’t fall out on the way there, I’ll have the teller cut you a certified check. You have the title signed?”

He stuck his hands back in his pockets and said, “Yep, he left the title and signed it, I can fetch it when we get back.”

And off we went. Amy stayed at the house, as collateral I suppose, and I drove the Trans Am with Mr. Whoever to the closest branch of my bank, making small talk about how I liked living in Detroit and other lies. The car drove pretty smooth, I could feel the power of the engine transferring through the pedal. At red lights I toyed around with the seat controls and radio to make sure everything worked fine enough. The seats were leather and a bit worn, but not too badly. All around it was a nice improvement from the Civic, even when it wasn’t smashed into a police car.

We got to the bank, and we both went in. I asked the teller to issue a certified check for \$8,900 made out to the old guy, whose name I had to ask for awkwardly right there. I had to fill out a withdrawal slip to certify the check, and I could feel the heft of the money as it was sucked from my account. This was the most I'd ever spent on anything, and despite the fact that after the interest I'd earn on my full balance it'd still be greater than it was before this, it still hurt. I sucked it up and handed the check over to the smiling man, and we drove back to his house where he went inside and brought out a manila envelope with the title to the car, signed by the owner to initiate private transfer. All I'd have to do is sign it myself and take it to the DMV and they'd register the car to me and re-issue the title to me. Too bad I probably wouldn't do that. At least not until the possibility that I might have to crash the car into a person and abandon it in the woods has decreased.

We shook hands, and then Amy and I left in our own cars. She in her dad's Oldsmobile, me in a car I'd just bought without any parental assistance. The man was standing in the doorway looking at the check in his hands as I pulled away.

Amy dropped her car off at home, and then hopped in mine, and we drove off with no destination. For a moment, I almost felt like a kid again.

"It's nice," Amy said, rubbing the instrument panel.

"Glad you like it," I said.

"What was with all that junk about being your sister and living in Detroit and having a GTO?"

"I dunno, really," I said, squeezing the steering wheel and trying to get a feel for the car's handling, "he's obviously into Pontiacs, so he's probably into American cars so I gave him a story he'd like so he'd feel more comfortable selling a car to a 17-year-old who has car-buying money to throw around."

"You should be in sales."

"Maybe when this is all over," I said.

We drove past a Dairy Queen; they were just opening for the first time now that the cold season was ending. "You want an ice cream?" Amy asked.

“I’ve been having trouble with dairy, lately,” I said, feeling my stomach climb up. She laughed, figuring I was joking.

“Well we should do something. When you do something big like a buy a car, you’re supposed to go get ice cream or something self-rewarding like that.”

I thought for a second, “Chinese food?”

“That’s pretty rewarding.”

She began looking around the car again, especially at the strip of probably illegal tinting on the windshield to match the probably illegal tinting on the windows, at the center console and in the glove box, then turned around. “Not much of a back seat,” she said, “doubt two people could fit back there.”

I kept driving, trying not to infer anything from that statement.

CHAPTER 22

The first Chinese restaurant we found was a little place in a shopping plaza, tucked between a drug store and a Greek café. There was, of course, a big aquarium filled with tropical fish right by the door and across from the counter. A dozen booths filled the rest of the room. I picked one where my back wouldn't be exposed and I could see the front entrance.

A paper place mat explained the Chinese zodiac. Tiger, Ox, Monkey, all that nonsense.

It was early March and the weather was beginning to warm, the rest of the restaurant patrons wore light jackets. Birds began to chirp outside. My birthday was in a month, I realized. I wondered if my life would be settled by then, or if I'd still be choosing restaurant seats based on what my back is against and whether I can see the door. The thought made me feel tired and depressed.

A young Chinese woman with limited English came over and brought menus and took drink orders. I looked the menu over, trying to find the sweet and sour chicken, found it, and set the menu down. Amy's menu was still on the table.

“No point looking?” I asked.

“Everybody has beef and broccoli.”

“They might have something new and innovative that would blow your mind.”

“Then what are you getting?”

“Sweet and sour chicken,” I said, smirking.

“Maybe they use a new kind of sour that’ll blow your mind.”

Drinks were brought, orders taken, menus removed.

“How was school?” I asked to fill the silence.

“Usual,” she said. “How was truancy?”

“Usual.” I nodded. “Bought a car today.”

She feigned amazement, “Really? A gun, a knife, and a V-8. You’re like a walking action movie now.”

“I’m not carrying the gun with me, thank you very much.”

I sipped hot tea from a tiny cup. It tasted like ginger; the tea, not the cup. The cup tasted like china; the porcelain, not the country.

“What. Is. Up. With your dad and those knives?” I asked, reflecting on the butterfly box full of sharp, pointy death.

“They’re Emersons, man,” she started, craning her head back, “they’re all he ever talks about. Delta Force, SEALs, SAS, everybody goes nuts for them. They’re supposed to stand up to a lot of abuse.”

“So that’s why you were looking at this one in the store,” I said, looking down at the metal and epoxy clipped to my right pocket.

“Yeah, I was just seeing if I remembered any of the ones he let me look at.”

“So these are the best in the business, I guess. I thought \$180 seemed like a lot for a pocketknife.”

“Oh, you can spend a lot more. I guess people pay thousands of dollars for customized knives with wooden handles or whatever they want. Why was my dad showing you ‘the collection’ anyway?”

“I don’t know, he saw that I had the knife in my pocket when I showed up and he asked about it, like ‘Why is this kid showing up for my

daughter packing edged weapons?’ I said the word Emerson and he turned into a museum curator.”

She smiled. “Well, when you left he grilled me for answers. ‘Who was that boy?’ ‘How do you know him?’ ‘Where does he live?’ I think he likes you. Most he’s said to me in a while.”

The food came, hot and steamy. I love the smell of fresh white rice when it’s nice and sticky.

Before I started eating, I asked, “You said military guys use those knives. Do you think your dad used them when he was in the Corps or something?”

“It’s possible,” she said, “but there’s no way I could know. I’m not entirely sure what he was doing in the Marines. When I was little he would take long trips all the time, when we lived on-base. He could have been some kind of black ops commando, or he could have taught recruits how to zip their pants up. He certainly doesn’t talk about it now, either way.”

She started eating her food, so I did the same. The sweet and sour was more sour than sweet, which was surprisingly all right with me. I thought about Amy’s parents; she said her mom left because of something her dad did. Maybe he *was* some black ops unit member and always had to rush out last-minute to go to some foreign country we’re not supposed to be in to kill some guy we’re not supposed to have killed.

I’d never heard of the Marine Corps having Special Forces, though. Army had Green Berets and Delta, Navy had SEALs and Team Six, the Air Force had the mostly-useless SOC, but the Marines... everybody talks about the Marines like they’re *all* special forces. Maybe Amy’s mom was sick of him having a secret life, or found out what he did, and left. When they lived on-base. Wait a minute.

“Wait a minute,” I said, sticking my fork in a tender chunk of chicken, “On-base. You lived in Quantico?”

She finished chewing and nodded. “Yeah, in on-base housing.”

“*In* Quantico.”

“Yeah...”

“Agh!”

“What?” She didn’t realize what she was missing.

“Why didn’t I know that?”

“Why... is that such a big deal?”

“My dad worked in Quantico my whole life and I’ve never been in there. It’s supposed to be like a fortress town or something. Whenever I asked if I could visit, he said security was too tight.”

“I remember it being like that,” she said, trying to turn her eyes backwards and see into her memory. “We lived there until I was about eight or nine. I had to carry a security pass and all kinds of papers in case I got lost or something. When we’d leave and come back, like for shopping or anything, we went through a checkpoint gate thing and my mom had to show a card and ID. There was a special sticker we had to put on our car too.”

“But you know the layout, how to get in?”

“Layout? It’s not like it’s a warehouse or something, it’s a whole town. The parts I saw were mostly housing and offices and the PX. I never went inside the actual base. We went through the east end a few times, by the river and the academies.”

“East end?”

She took another bite, and then explained the general organization of the town. On the far west was base housing and administrative buildings. In the middle was the base itself, spanning miles and miles of wooded terrain with airfields on the far east end. There was a whole fleet of helicopters, including Marine One, the President’s helicopter. East of that, right on the Potomac, were the DEA and FBI Academies, the Marine Corps University where my dad worked, and a few more buildings she never found out about. Near the river were some small parks and fields where officers would jog or sprawl out and watch the river roar.

“If you wanted to go to where you dad worked, you’d use the southeast entrance, it’s right by the University. There’s a checkpoint there, too.”

“I guess there’s another thing for my agenda,” I said.

“What’s your fixation with the place? It’s got nothing to do with any of this. The FBI isn’t headquartered there or anything, just an academy for them.”

“Oh, it’s nothing like that,” I said, “I just want to see the place at least once. My dad lived and died there, under a shroud of secrecy. I want to see where he worked, at least, maybe talk to some people he worked with and try to get some sort of explanation for why he died, or at least what he spent his life working on. Was he building nukes? Designing biological weapons? Calculating the optimum paint color for an oversea barracks? I know nothing; absolutely nothing about what he did and barely anything about who he was.”

I felt my voice begin to quiver so I stopped talking. Amy’s eyes were deep, and searching mine again. I slid a piece of pineapple around a pool of sauce with my fork, thinking of Paul Bunyan and his giant flapjacks for some reason.

“All right,” she said eventually, “I can try to get you there if you want. I mean, I don’t have the credentials to get us *in* there anymore.”

“My dad’s car should still be there,” I said, “someone called the house about it a week or so ago. I can use that as an ‘in.’”

She nodded. “That might work, but I wouldn’t call them about it first. They’ll tell you they’ll move it outside the gate for you to pick it up, or they’ll have someone drop it off. Just show up at the gate and explain to the guy why you’re there. If you have your dad’s ID it might help. That way everyone might be confused and you might get in. If you called and asked they’d just say no, but if you show up... who knows? Bonus points if you look completely destroyed.

“There’s still the other thing, though,” Amy continued. “Comstock. The FBI wants you to ask them something about him, so you/I/we have to figure out what the story is with him.”

“Yeah,” I sighed, “the whole thing sucks. I want answers, but I can’t exactly admit to the FBI or police about what I did Saturday night. And they know that, so it’s like we’re dancing on some stupid tightrope of innuendo and code words. It seems like they want to help me, but first I have to help them.”

“Maybe Comstock is selling drugs or something. Using students to filter the product down to the street level,” Amy said thoughtfully.

“DEA would be dealing with that.”

“Selling government secrets?”

“CIA. No, wait, NSA.”

“Running stolen guns through Africa?”

“ATF.”

“Playing professional basketball?”

“NBA.”

“Then I’m out of ideas.”

“And I’m out of acronyms,” I said.

“So what exactly does the FBI deal with, then?”

“Everything else, I guess. They’re like a federal version of a police force. Anything that the police would usually deal with, but it crosses state lines. Mafia stuff, movie piracy, I think some anti-terrorism stuff if it’s domestic.”

“So, maybe Comstock is breaking some law, some big law, or he’s working for people who are. Fine, he seems stupid enough that we could just tail him and wait for him to do something suspicious.”

“Yeah,” I said. “We can keep an eye on him. When you’re at school, try to hang around near him and watch what he does. Don’t write anything down or be obvious. I’ll try to find out where he lives so I can check around his house.”

She nodded slowly, then shook her head. “Doesn’t this seem, like, extremely stupid? We have no idea what’s going on, and the FBI’s giving you secret clues like Yoda or something. We’re just kids, practically; what do we know about this stuff?”

I looked over at the fish tank. A large, striped fish chased a smaller orange fish around the tank. The smaller one suddenly turned and charged toward the bigger fish, which stopped short and swam away to go play around the fake coral.

“Extremely stupid,” I said.

CHAPTER 23

I got home in the late afternoon, setting my new keys on the kitchen counter and looking the place over. I'd been home alone only since Friday but somehow I'd let the place get quite a mess. The empty pot still sat on the stove, empty soup can on the counter. Documents, bags, and boxes scattered the kitchen table. I took a while getting the kitchen cleaned up, then moved on to the living room.

This house had been built before wide-open rooms were common. The kitchen is separated from the living room with a wall, the dining room in the corner has its own walls, and the stairway upstairs was down a hall with even more walls. It takes far too many steps to get from one room to another, and you can rarely see any room except the one you're in. All the walls made for a lot of echoes. I grew up in this house, so I'm accustomed to it and a bit attached, but now am beginning to notice its problems more and more often.

I arranged the pillows on the couch in the living room and tried to organize the remote controls on the coffee table and picked up more clutter. I gathered the trash I'd collected, added it to the kitchen trashcan, then took the garbage bag from it and brought it out to the garage and

dumped it in the big trash bin. The garage was empty, save for the few gas cans, rags, and garden tools that can be found in every garage on Earth. I could have parked my car inside, I realized, but I didn't have a clicker for the garage door. My mom had one in her car, and the other would be in my dad's car, and I didn't feel like having to use the wall button each time I came or went.

I realized I hadn't gotten the mail yet, so I unlocked the side door in the garage and went outside, around the garage, and emptied the mailbox. If my mom had gotten the mail on Friday this would be Saturday's and today's, otherwise it'd be three days worth. Either way, it seemed like a lot, but nothing looked interesting. A few bills and other automated correspondence were still coming addressed to Daniel Baker, which was more annoying than disheartening.

I brought the mail in the front door and set the items that obviously weren't junk on the counter by my keys and threw the junk away, then moved my housekeeping patrol upstairs.

At the top of the stairs you have to turn either left or right down a hall. To the left is my parents' room, to the right is mine. In the middle was a guest room, spare bathroom, and assorted closets. My room was bigger than some I'd seen, smaller than Amy's. I have just a small desk on one wall for my old computer, a twin bed parked against the far wall. I'd had twin beds since I was tiny and had wanted something bigger for a while; if for nothing else but to feel like more of a grownup. Also I sometimes rolled out of this bed at night. I had to stop keeping a nightstand by the bed because I smashed my face into it one time.

Next to my bedroom door is a small walk-in closet that remains a perpetual disaster zone. It has shelves on all three walls, lined with boxes of crap I could never catalog without looking through them. I gathered as much of the clothes strewn on the floor and around my room as my arms could hold and dumped them in a hamper, stuffing them down with a huff. I could either do some laundry, I decided, or throw all of this stuff away and go buy a whole new wardrobe from those expensive teen stores. Not the ones that use pseudo-porn as advertising, but the ones you only find in upscale malls that charge \$100 for a pair of jeans. I always hated people who got their clothes from there, but now that I could somewhat afford it I wouldn't mind checking it out. Laundry would come first, though.

I crossed my room and opened my curtains. My room has huge windows that would usually be a luxury were it not for the view. Like a few houses on my street, this one was practically built into the side of a hill, so at the back of the second floor you're basically at ground level.

Content that I'd done as much cleaning as I was willing to do, I sat down at my computer and started at my real work.

Teachers and principals rarely have their addresses and phone numbers listed, hoping to make their personal lives invisible to any students who may want to look them up. I gave it a shot anyway, and found no listing anywhere online for Nathan Comstock anywhere in Virginia that'd be close enough to commute to my school. I mulled that over for a while, looking at some web comics to pass the time. After I had completely zoned out and found myself staring at the wall, I had an idea.

I picked up the landline phone in my room, pressed *67 to block caller ID, then dialed the number to my school's main office. I glanced at the clock on my computer screen, it was just after 5 PM and the school office officially closes at that time. I listened to the rings in my ear, hoping that someone happened to work late or was slow to gather their things to leave. After seven rings I gave up, and had the phone in mid-arc to hang up when I heard the handset click and heard "East Fredericksburg High School."

I brought the phone back to my face, tried to compose myself and said, "Hello, this is Mark from Routing at the local FedEx distribution center. We have a package for an 'N. Comstock' at this address and phone number, that was meant to be delivered today, but unfortunately there was a routing error and the package was unexpectedly delayed. Because it was our fault and the package was sent Overnight Priority, we'd like to get it delivered today. Is Mr. or Mrs. Comstock there now to accept the package?"

The ease in which I'd put all that together amazed me. I hadn't stopped beforehand to script this or even come up with a fake name.

There was a pause on the other end of the line, then a woman said, "Mr. Comstock is not here right now, and our office is actually closed as of a few minutes ago." She sounded rather displeased; she

probably wanted to get home and watch whatever big shows are on Mondays.

“I see,” I said. “Well is there another address, perhaps a home address, we could re-route to so we can get it there tonight? As I said, someone paid for Overnight Priority on this parcel and we’re obligated to have it delivered today.”

A pause, then a sigh. “I can get the home address from the directory, just a second.”

Time dragged on, the seconds pulsing in my ear. Some paper shuffling and drawer-opening noises filtered over the phone line.

“Okay,” she said, “here’s his home address. I don’t know if he’ll be home, so I’ll give you his phone number so you can call and check.”

“That’d be great,” I said as passively as I could.

CHAPTER 24

I had an address and a phone number, more than enough to mount a practical snooping exercise. I looked up the address online and found out it was on the other side of the city, but not too far. I ran a search for the phone number to see if it had been posted on any websites for some reason, and found nothing. I thought about heading over there right now for a look, but decided it would be better to do during the school day when he wouldn't be home. Skulking around someone's house at night is entirely too suspicious.

I remembered that you can get satellite aerial views of any address these days, and looked it up. It looked like a nicer neighborhood, trees between each house; but who can ever be certain with these satellite things?

I turned off the computer monitor and began idly milling about my house, trying to think of a plan. The working assumption was that Nate Comstock, my school administrator, was doing something illegal, something illegal enough to catch the FBI's attention and make me so vital that they'd keep me immune from consequence for killing someone who was trying to kill me. *Someone tried to kill me*, I kept repeating in my

head – but the words had no weight. I couldn't get myself to react to them, the same way my father's death didn't seem to faze me. I must be one big fat sack of denial, I figured.

If I want answers, I need to ask question – according to the FBI – and none of my currently existing questions seem to be doing the trick. I have to find *something* out about Comstock, and then ask Special Agents Bremer or Rubino about it. It's the only thing I could decipher from that conversation.

So, what's so special about Comstock, then? Besides the fact that his principal job accounts for less than half of his income, the only standout fact is that he was shady about not reporting my fight. It was a tiring circle of questions, before I could make any progress on one mystery it would loop back to a previous one. Something was universally amiss with Comstock, and I had to find out what it was, while the FBI may, or may not, know about it. I sighed, and sat in the first chair I could find. I was in my kitchen now, sitting at the counter in the same seat Special Agent Bremer sat in.

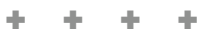
I was hungry again. Chinese food does that. I hoped some food would help clear my head, so I got up and went around to the refrigerator to see what I could find.

Nothing. I couldn't find anything to eat, not even a frozen pizza or other last-ditch resort. I was tired of going out to eat, so I decided to make a quick trip to the grocery store. Perhaps I could see how the trunk of my new car would handle groceries.

The store was less than a mile from my house, just at the end of the subdivision. I didn't want to be there long, so I grabbed some bread sliced turkey, and ham for some sandwiches. Then I found some juice and sodas to drink as well as some chips. I even decided I could be civilized and cook an honest meal, so I picked out some chicken breast and backtracked to find some rice. They'd just come out with these plastic bags of rice that you could cook in the microwave. I reflected on how awesome that was for a while, and grabbed a few bags of white and wild rice. I doubted there was such a thing as wild rice. Rice farming was a pretty deliberate activity. I didn't think they would bother if you could stroll through a meadow and find wild rice.

I turned a corner to head toward the checkout when I found myself in the dairy section. I stopped in front of the milk case and tried to get myself to look at it. Rows and rows of clear bottles filled to the brim with watery-white liquid. My mind made it curdle and seep out, crawl across the floor and chase me. I frowned, looking again at the innocent jugs. I used to love milk; it would be a shame to be sickened by it forever. Two days ago I ran my car *through* a person, and it's the milk I couldn't take now. I didn't need a trauma counselor after having my dad die and nearly getting killed myself, I need help getting over my phobia of *milk*. I amended my mental long-term agenda to include getting back on the milk train, then headed to the checkout and paid for my food.

I rolled my cart outside to the parking lot and toward my car when I glanced at a security camera perched on one of the light poles aimed at the store's front door. It was an innocent concept, but it gave me the seed of an idea.



The next day Amy didn't call or write; I hoped she'd remember to start watching Mr. Comstock's behavior. I left the house after ten and drove to his house. It was indeed a nice neighborhood, but nothing amazing. His house wasn't very big but had a clean look to it. The house was on a small round cul-de-sac with three other houses at the end of a road. The middle of the cul-de-sac, rather than being just an empty circle of pavement, had a small round grassy median that had a wooden park bench, two street lamps, and three small pine trees. It was probably just decoration. I can't imagine someone getting out of his or her house to go sit on a bench on an island in the middle of the road, but it looked nice either way.

Comstock's house was clearly visible from the street, which was good for what I had planned. From the "island" in the middle of the road, there are five houses within 500 feet of me; also good for the plan.

I got back in my car and drove around until I found a store that sold computers. The first thing I found was an Office Depot, and right in front by the registers they had an open box laptop computer with a decent spec sheet for \$800. It was probably a returned Christmas present,

and these stores' liberal return policies mean they have to take back a computer like this for full price and sell it for whatever they can. I made sure it had wireless networking, and then stood around waiting for someone to help me.

While I waited, I tried to give the cost some attention in my head. Since Saturday I'd bought a gun, a knife, and a car. If I kept this up, I'd be broke by June. I had to keep my spending in check, though I had to give myself points for being this frugal. The gun I'd sort of haggled down, the car I bought used and definitely haggled. I could have gotten a platinum-finished gun with my name engraved in diamonds, and I could have bought a Lamborghini with upholstery made from bald eagle scalps. I could buy a five-ounce Sony laptop that could render the surface area of the entire planet in real time and burn a DVD at the same time, but I wasn't. I had to guess that was something. I wasn't being foolhardy. Besides, it's not like I'm going to need another car or computer for a while.

I started to think that maybe my dad got that insane life insurance policy as some kind of apology. He didn't spend enough time with me when he was alive, so when he died he'd leave me a small fortune. It seemed morbid, and a store associate had come over before I could give it any more thought. I bought the used computer and a power inverter so I could power the computer from inside my car, then drove back to the cul-de-sac.

If my plan didn't work, I wouldn't really need the computer. But unlike a gun, I actually could use a new computer. My desktop at home is on its downward slope. Plus, it's not a laptop. I pulled over on the side of the street and powered up the computer and spent a few minutes getting a feel for it. It had a fifteen-inch screen and felt light. The store hadn't bothered to re-install Windows, so it was already set up for "Wendy," the previous owner. Wendy seemed to like puppies, as the only change she made to the computer was installing a puppy desktop image.

The idea was to find an open wireless network in the area and have the laptop connect to it and broadcast a webcam feed of Comstock's house. I would have to plug the computer in somehow, and then hide it so I could then view the camera feed from home or any other computer without having to sit in my car. The key to surveillance is to watch someone long enough so you can learn their routines: know

when they leave the house and when they come back, who comes to visit and when, whether they use the front door or the side, etc. Wireless networks were all the rage, but network security wasn't; many were left wide open for anybody to use without a password. I hoped that one of the five houses within range would be broadcasting an open network signal.

I had to walk around with the laptop awkwardly balanced on my arm and clicking the "refresh" button with the other, but I found a network called "default" that was unsecured. I could connect to it and get on the internet without a problem, and could get a decent signal from the island where the bench was. That was a load off my mind; I hadn't just wasted my money on a final sale computer.

The light poles in the median had outdoor power outlets at the base, perhaps for Christmas lighting. I figured I could wrap the computer in plastic or something to protect it, hide it under one of the pine trees and keep a webcam running and pointed at the house. I packed the computer up and got back in my car and returned to the store to get a webcam, then I needed to find a hardware store to find plastic sheeting.

Back at the Office Depot, I looked at the webcams and found something that would work even better. There was a camera that would connect to a wireless network by itself, and you could then log into remotely to view or record the video. It even had mounts on the back so you could attach it to a wall with screws. This would mean I could set the camera up and have the laptop for myself. Three cheers for technological innovation.

I bought the camera, found a nearby hardware store, and got a hammer and an assortment of nails, then returned to the cul-de-sac. In my car, I set up the camera with my new computer, telling it what network to connect to and at what quality to capture video. There was even an option in the settings for the camera to e-mail me every time its IP address changed so I'd always know how to connect to it. Then I went back to the median, sat on the bench and plugged the camera's power cable into the outlet at the base of the nearest lamppost and waited for the status lights to cycle.

The green light eventually came on to indicate that the camera had connected to the open wireless network; I started looking for where to mount it. If I mounted the camera on the back of the bench, it'd have

a clear view of Comstock's house, but it would be obvious. I decided instead to affix it to the trunk a pine tree and move the branches so there'd be a decent view. The tree served to hide the camera from casual observation, and if anybody did spot it they hopefully wouldn't be too concerned because it was a consumer-model camera and didn't look threatening. I thought about putting a sign on it saying it was for bird watching it, but decided that would be silly.

Back in my car, I connected to the camera's interface and looked at its video feed. Some pine needles and branches invaded the frame, but there was nonetheless a fine view of the street, the garage, and the front door.

Content with my improvised digital surveillance, I got started on some analogue surveillance. I walked around Comstock's house, casually looking through the windows to see if I could spot anything. Most of the blinds were closed, couldn't see anything interesting through the windows. There were no mountains of heroin or bomb-making equipment as far as I could tell. No child slaves handcuffed to radiators or stockpiles of smuggled Russian assault weapons. Whatever he was doing, it was probably white-collar and somehow peripherally involved hitmen. If that guy *was* a hitman. Still, he could have just been trying to kidnap me to extort money from me.

The doors were locked. I didn't doubt that I could get in anyway, but saw no need to get myself in that deep yet. There was no mail in his mailbox, so, out of ideas, I returned home.

My cell phone beeped in my jacket pocket as I traveled on the freeway. I tried not to kill myself digging it out, and looked at the screen. New text message. It wasn't time for Amy to be out of school yet, unless she was skipping more classes than usual now. I pressed the button to read the message. It said "big thing. im comingover." I dropped the phone on the passenger seat and got to, at last, find out what this car could do.

CHAPTER 25

Amy wasn't at my place yet when I got home. I double-checked my phone to see if she'd called, then brought my stuff inside and set up my new laptop on the kitchen table. I went upstairs and picked up some software CDs from my room to make this computer my own. I cracked open a can of Coke from the fridge and sat back down at the computer. After I'd set it up with my home's (secured) network, I went online and checked the remote camera I'd set up just minutes before.

The feed was laggy, coming now remotely over the internet rather than on a local connection, but it worked. The tree branches were annoying still, but there was a clear view of both entrances to the house. I sat for a few minutes, staring at the small video window and wondering what I was looking for.

Amy came through the front door without knocking, and threw her messenger bag on the couch as she walked toward the kitchen. It was about 1 PM.

"What's the big thing?" I asked as she tumbled into the chair opposite me at the table. She looked both frazzled and distant, resting her chin on her open palm and tapping at her teeth with her fingernail.

“I was keeping an eye on Comstock, like you said,” she began. “Between every class I was looking for him or trying to follow him. I went into the admin office three times pretending I needed forms and made a copy of a blank piece of paper just to see if he was back in his office.”

“Okay...”

“The last time, during lunch, Comstock was just leaving his office and saw me in the front, over where the forms are and he started talking to me.”

“Talking to you about what?” I was watching the wind blow the branches of a tree on a street in a neighborhood twelve miles away.

“About you,” she said.

I looked up from the computer. “About me?”

“Yes, you. He said that you hadn’t been in school lately and asked if I’d talked to you. I told him I didn’t know you that well and only saw you a few times during the day, but that I thought it might be something about your dad dying.”

“Why would he talk to you? He’s got no reason to think we even know each other.”

“I don’t know. He started mentioning our fourth hour study hall, he knows we have that together, but as soon as he brought it up he clammed up and walked away.”

“Okay. That’s weird.”

“Is that a new laptop?” she asked, now noticing the thing I’ve been looking at this whole time.

“It’s... a laptop, and is new to me,” I said.

“You trying to see how fast you can spend all your money?”

“Hey, I got it *used*. And I bought it for remote spying on Comstock’s house.”

“What do you mean?”

I showed her the video feed and explained about the wireless camera I’d attached to a tree, and how you could connect to from any computer and watch it remotely.

“*Any* computer?” she asked.

“Any computer with internet access,” I said.

“So *why* did you have to buy a laptop?”

I sighed.

Amy got up and went around the counter and looked in the fridge. “Haven’t gotten any food yet?” she said, her body blocked by the open door.

“I went to the store last night, got some sandwich stuff,” I said.

She opened the deli food drawer and said, “Ah hah.” She brought out the bag of sliced turkey and the head of lettuce, and started looking, I guessed, for mayo.

“Didn’t you eat at school?” I asked.

“No, I was in the office during lunch and after Comstock talked to me I left.”

She began untwisting the tie from the bag of bread on the counter.

On the computer screen, in the feed from the webcam, I saw a white mail truck go around the cul-de-sac and out of view.

Amy had two pieces of bread on a paper plate and forcefully opened the jar of mayo.

“Put those away,” I said, standing up. “We’re going out.”

She frowned and tossed the slices of bread back in the bag and returned everything else to the fridge.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“To break some more laws,” I said, putting on my jacket.

“Bringing the gun then, are we?” She was joking.

I looked at the gun sitting there on the kitchen table next to the salt shaker. I told myself I needed to find a place to put it. For now, I set it on top of the box it came in and covered them both with a kitchen towel.

“Perfect,” Amy said over my shoulder. “Nobody ever looks beneath the tea towel.”



We got in my car and I drove back to Nathan Comstock's neighborhood, parking on the street again where I had before. I got out and casually walked to the mailbox in front of Comstock's house and flipped through the envelopes. Amy got out and went over to the median in the middle of the street loop and tried to find the camera I told her about. I saw her spot the plug, then follow the wire to the tree, then move some branches until she saw the camera. It took her about 15 seconds total, but she was looking for it. I hoped it would be harder to otherwise detect.

I took the one item from the mailbox that looked promising and went back to my car. Amy returned a few moments later.

"What'd you get?" she asked.

"I was hoping for a bank statement, or a membership card from the Criminal Suspect Discount Club. All I got was this." I held up an envelope from Dell Financial Services.

"Computer bill?"

"Better than nothing, I guess." I opened the envelope. Inside was a statement from a Dell credit account. The balance was only a few hundred dollars, not enough to buy a network of supercomputers for cracking missile codes. As far as stereotypical super villain behavior to look for, I was running on empty.

The statement listed his contact information at the bottom. The address I knew, the phone number was the one I already had, but it did list his e-mail address. That, I did not have. It was a free Hotmail address not one from the school. If I could get access to his personal e-mail, I'd know what he was buying, who he was talking to, what websites he was registering for, and more. The possibilities were endless. But how to get in?

I pulled my laptop from the bag in the back seat and connected to the "default" wireless network. I tried logging into Hotmail with his address and a few obvious passwords. The password wasn't "password" or "Comstock," the two most obvious options.

I know people con their way into e-mail accounts all the time, but I didn't have the resources for that. I'd need help, but I didn't want to bring someone else into this. I tried to think of a way to do so without explaining the whole situation, but realized I shouldn't be just sitting in my car when I've probably maxed out my suspicious behavior quota for the day. Besides, I promised Amy food.

We stopped at a sandwich shop about ten minutes away that advertised free wireless internet. Inside we sat in wooden chairs and ate subs at a table with a red-checkered picnic-style tablecloth. I tried to keep the crumbs away from the computer while I attempted to look up the address of the only person I could think of from school who could help me with my e-mail problem. We waited out the time until school was formally released in the restaurant, trying to talk about anything but myself and taking turns checking our own e-mail accounts.

"How are you going to convince him to help us get into a principal's personal e-mail account?" Amy asked, after we'd worn out all other topics.

"I don't know. He's not exactly Mister School Spirit, he might do it just for the fun of it," I said, closing the computer's lid to spare its battery.

"Yeah, but it'd be weird to just show up and say, 'Hey, I had a cool idea for a prank. How about you help me get into Mr. Comstock's e-mail, even though he probably isn't even your assigned principal and I cant really give any good reason to in the first place? And don't ask me any more questions.' Doesn't seem like that'd float."

I nodded and said, "True. A prank, though, maybe that's a viable angle. Say we're planning a senior prank."

"What senior prank would require access to his e-mail? That kind of prank is supposed to be some kind of social rebellion, not targeted at one person. They fill the swimming pool with Jell-O or let a bunch of chickens loose in the hallways. They don't spy on principals."

I started tracing the pattern of the tablecloth with my finger in silence. It was weird, trying to figure a way to get a "normal" person to help us. Just another kid my age, a loner dork with too much free time; a person I was exactly like just a few weeks ago before people started trying to kill me. If I were going to help someone break laws back then, it

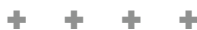
would have been because I got some kind of benefit from it. I can't offer to pay him without seeming more suspicious. I had to make it so having this kid help me access someone's e-mail was good for him and me. Like if it would get him access to privileged information. Social outcasts love to feel included in anything, a clique of friends, a small bit of gossip, anything to make them feel connected, superior.

Just then I had an idea, and with the thought of it a smile spread across my face.

"What?" Amy asked, "You think of something?"

"Possibly," I responded wryly, "but it would require you to have a very limited sense of personal shame."

"Done," she said.



Dale Carpenter's house was in a neighborhood of smaller houses that made up the original, historic area of Fredericksburg before it was absorbed into the cruel system of suburban sprawl, Starbucks, and attached condominiums. The area was charming, though a bit depressing at the same time, like a Renaissance Faire attendee decked out in a period-authentic tunic, leggings, and a pair of silver-and-blue Nikes.

I tried to present this analogy to Amy, but she didn't get it. It's entirely possible that I'm a crazy person, to be fair.

The two of us stood at the front door, me wearing my backpack with the laptop, Amy with her messenger bag. I hung my thumbs from the hoops on my bag's straps, trying to look like a kid who still went to school. Amy rang the doorbell.

A woman came to the door and answered it. She was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt advertising a store that I believed wasn't in business anymore. I smiled like an idiot, and Amy spoke, "Hi, we're here to work on a project with Dale?" She said it as a question like how I noticed a lot of annoying girls spoke most sentences at school, and I mentally patted her on the back for her acting.

Dale's mom stepped back and pointed down a hallway toward his room. I said thanks and we both walked down the hall and through the open door to his room and immediately felt a gust of heat.

Dale was the hardest-core geek I knew. He was in every computer class I took and frequently engaged in inside jokes with teachers. While most of the classes were a way for me to learn new things about computer hardware or programming, for him they were an exercise in repeating that which he already knew. Dale usually ended up sitting near me in classes, so I spoke to him a bit, as one does to those near him, but that was the extent of our relationship.

His room was small, but practically filled with computers. Four or five were lined up under his desk, most with their cases open and insides exposed. At the other side of the room there were two computer cases on their sides, cases also open. IDE and Molex power cables spewed from inside the two metal cases like entrails protruding from a grenade victim. Only one computer had the distinction of sitting *on* the desk; it had a silver case and blue neon light spilled from the clear window cut into the side of its metal chassis. All the computers and their fans made it dry, hot, and loud.

"Baker? What are you doing here?" Dale was sitting at the computer desk in a high-topped, leather rolling chair, the kind a Staples catalog might refer to as a "Executive's Chair." The big CRT monitor on his desk was about the size of my old car's engine, and judging by the crawling progress bar beneath a cartoon penguin on the screen, the computer was just now booting up.

"Hey Carpenter," I said, moving to let Amy through the door. "This is Amy."

Dale turned his chair a degree to look at her, and then said, "What? Girlfriend?"

Amy raised her eyebrows at him and grinned.

"That's kind of why we're here," I said.

"I thought you might want the homework from the last week or so of Network+ class you've skipped," Dale said, still sitting. "Everyone thinks you split your wig about your dad or something."

“Hey,” I said, “When they say ‘take as much time off as you want,’ I’m taking as much time off as I want.”

Dale smiled, looked at Amy, then back to me. “So. What?”

“We’ve got a bit of a problem,” I said, gesturing to Amy with my elbow. She was looking at a series of books on a shelf just by the door.

“Okay...?” Dale said.

“About a week ago,” I started, “Amy and I skipped out of our classes and met up in one of the empty classrooms down in the ‘dungeon’ to engage in some... *activities*. Well, someone saw us sneak in there and busted in and snapped a picture with his cell phone—”

“Wait,” Dale cut in. He looked at Amy, “You—” then back at me, “— and *you*?”

I just looked at him flatly, he took the hint. “Humans,” he said to himself; then he shook his head and laughed.

“Anyway,” I continued, “someone took a picture of us in ‘the act.’ I didn’t know about it, but he just showed me today and had a good laugh. He says he might send the photo to Mr. Comstock just to be a dick.”

“Who is it?” Dale asked, clearly amused.

I tried to think of someone idiotic enough to do something like that, and gave him the name.

“He should,” Dale said.

Amy looked up, surprised, and said, “He what?”

“He should send them. You guys are both under 18, right?”

I nodded slowly, realizing a slight flaw in my lie.

“Then he’s got child pornography,” Dale said in a laugh, “he sends that out and he’s screwed, could probably get Comstock in trouble, too. Cops don’t know what’s what. Sending, receiving, they don’t know the difference.”

“All the same,” I said after a second, “I want to get into Comstock’s e-mail so that if he does send it, I can delete it before Comstock gets it. I have his address, it’s a Hotmail account, but I don’t have his password.”

Dale leaned back in his chair, clearly enjoying his position of power.

“He could pay you, if that’s what you want,” Amy said. I looked at her.

“Nah,” Dale said. “If I do it for the fun of it, it’s a prank. If I take money for it, it’s like a crime or something.”

“Yeah,” I said, looking again at Amy, “a prank.”

CHAPTER 26

“If I do this, I want to see that picture,” Dale said with a smirk cut through his thin lips.

“Don’t be gross,” I said.

Dale shrugged, and spun his chair around and faced his computer screen. Amy walked over to the bed and sat down on the end of it, straightening the green, denim-looking bedspread around her with one hand. She bounced slightly on the mattress a few times then said, “Maybe we could just give him a private show.”

Dale looked sideways at her, and then craned his neck to look over his shoulder at me. “I like her, Chris,” he said. I just grinned weakly.

Amy seemed to be enjoying her new role, I hadn’t seen her this happy to be someone else since she was Sarah from Fraud Prevention at Comstock’s bank. Maybe she could be an actress, I thought. Most of them come from broken homes; perhaps there’s a reason for that. Me, on the other hand, when I thought up this ruse I overlooked the fact that it would also require *me* to have no sense of personal shame. This bucked against my typical, “reserved” mindset.

“Reserved” means “prude.”

“What’s the e-mail address?” Dale asked, staring at his computer monitor. I walked forward and stood over his shoulder, then repeated the e-mail address from memory.

“All right, let’s try the obvious route,” he said. At the Hotmail homepage, he clicked “Forgot your password?” and entered the address I gave him. To restore access to your account, the website asks you to verify your state and zip code, and then asks you a custom question that you set up when you open the account. Dale explained that most people, thinking they’ll never forget their password, make the question something easy like “What’s your name?” not knowing that *anybody* who can answer that question can get your password.

After telling him Mr. Comstock’s zip code, the security question came up.

“Damn it,” Dale whispered. The question on the screen was “What city were you born in?” I definitely didn’t know that. If he were a famous person I could find that in a biography or a Wikipedia article. It would be in his birth certificate, but I didn’t know how I’d be able to get a hold of that. We tried Fredericksburg and a few other nearby towns to no avail.

“He could have been born anywhere,” I said.

“Don’t fret, young Padawan,” Dale said, reading my frustration. “That was just the obvious route. There are still more routes.”

“Like what?” Amy asked, still sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Like...phishing,” Dale said, “though I don’t think it’s technically phishing if you’re only targeting one person. Then it’s phish in a barrel.” He laughed.

“Fishing?” I asked, deciding my character wouldn’t know what he was talking about.

“Phishing. With a ‘ph.’ Where you pretend to be someone official to get a mark to reveal personal or secure information.”

“Huh. Stuff like that actually works?” Amy asked. She was grinning at me.

Dale ignored her. “I can make a fake web form,” he said toward me, “make it look like it’s a Hotmail page. Then send him an e-mail, make it look like it’s from Hotmail, saying he needs to go to this page to verify his password or something. When he ‘verifies’ his password, it sends it to me. Or you.”

I scratched at the back of my neck. The idea was pretty much the same thing I’d been doing over the phone, but the web page would do the lying instead of Amy or me.

“Why would he have to verify his password? When would that occur in real life?” I asked.

Dale thought for a moment, and then said, “If his account was going to expire. Or it could say he won some stupid contest, and he just needs to log in to claim his prize.”

“Would anybody buy that?”

“Probably not,” Dale said with a frown.

“It should be something that would get his attention, something that would scare him or make him think it was *urgent* that he type his password—” I trailed off for a while, then had an idea. “What if he didn’t have to *verify* his password, but change it? Like, the e-mail could say that someone tried to access his account, tried to hack it, so he should change his password. That would take him to a form where he’d enter his ‘old’ password then pick a new one. We’d get both, then we could change the password ourselves so he’d never realize anything had happened.”

Dale made a circle with his eyeballs, thinking. “That’s good,” he said.

“And you can make the e-mail look like a notice *from* Hotmail itself?”

“I could make it look like it’s from Shirley Temple.”

“Okay,” I said, “how fast can you do that and make the form?”

“The form I can do right now, just copy something from Hotmail’s site and change it so the form submits to me instead of to Hotmail. The e-mail I can send as soon as I can find a mail server that’s still open. The longest part will be writing the e-mail and the page text.”

“I can write that while you do the rest,” I said, pulling the laptop from my backpack and taking a seat next to Amy on the bed.

“Is that new?” Dale asked, looking at the computer as I opened the lid.

“No,” I said, hesitating. “It was my dad’s.”

He didn’t say anything, just turned back to his screen and started copying source code from Hotmail pages.

I began to type an e-mail that explained that some nasty person had tried to force his way into this account, and that as a security precaution he should click here to change his password to something more secure. I then began to write body text for a web page that would explain pretty much the same thing. Amy said something about being the only one without a computer to stroke, then got up and started picking through the bookshelf again.

After a half hour we had a fake form and a fake e-mail ready to send from a fake e-mail address. Dale put a tracking image inside the e-mail so that when it was opened, the time and IP address would be recorded on a server. Then, when/if something was submitted on the form, it would be saved on the server. He gave me the URL of a page I could view to check the status of the form and the tracking image, then went to send the e-mail.

“Wait,” I said, “won’t he notice that the form he goes to isn’t on hotmail.com if he looks at the address bar?”

Dale scoffed. “People are stupid. Most people don’t even know that the address bar is there. They just type whatever they want in the first box they see, which is usually the search bar on MSN or AOL or whatever their homepage is. There are people who think ‘go to whatever-dot-com’ means type ‘whatever.com’ into a search box and click the first thing that comes up.”

“Not *everybody* is that dumb,” I said.

“True, which is why I changed the window settings in the HTML so the address bar and toolbar will be hidden. As long as he uses Internet Explorer, at least, and he probably does.”

“All right,” I said.

He tested the form one more time for foolproofing, then sent the e-mail. He refreshed the status page a few times, hoping to see it updated with Comstock's password. It was silly to hope for any results this soon, but it was worth a shot. After five minutes and no dice, Dale said, "It might take a few days, most people don't sit around their computers all day auto-checking for new messages every 60 seconds."

"All right," I said, making sure I'd saved the URL for the status page on my own computer. "We'll go, then. Thanks for the help."

"What about my private show?" Dale asked, standing for the first time since we'd got there.

"We're leaving!" I said, as Amy walked out the door and down the hall.

As I slipped the laptop into my backpack and stood to leave, Dale checked the doorway and asked, "Where'd you find an exhibitionist-minx-nymphet like that?" He had a grin from ear to ear.

"Oh, you know," I said, backing toward the door, "just gotta keep your eyes open."

I unlocked my car and Amy hopped in. I set my bag in the back seat, and then got into the car slowly. I sat in silence for a moment, trying to let the "character" slip off of me. In the past few days, it seemed like I hadn't said an honest word to anybody. Anybody but Amy, at least. I thought all the lies would be weighing more on my mind, but really the only problem was keeping the lines of deception straight. If it weren't for the fact that I could be mostly honest with Amy, my brain would probably be about to pop. I thought about how lucky I was to know her, to have her. I looked over at her; the colored highlights had mostly washed out of her hair, leaving it all dirty blond with a few dashes of red at the tips.

God, was she pretty.

She looked back at me with soft eyes, curious. "What?" she asked.

I thought about it, but the talk from yesterday crept back into my head. About Quantico, about my dad's work, about how Amy grew up in a town I was always locked out of.

"Do you have anything to do today?" I asked.

Amy looked down, then out the front windshield. “No, I don’t think so,” she said.

“Feel like visiting your old town?”

She looked back at me, stifled a low chuckle, and said, “Sure.”

“I need to get something first, wait here a few minutes.” I handed Amy the keys then got out of my car and went back inside Dale Carpenter’s house.

Fifteen minutes later, and fifty dollars lighter, I came back outside. Tucked in my pocket was an innocent-looking device that, hopefully, would allow me to commit several counts of high treason, probably punishable by years in prison if not execution.

“All right,” I said, pulling the car into gear, “let’s go see Daddy’s office.”

CHAPTER 27

I drove back to my house just so I could get some kind of credentials to at least insinuate that I had some kind of business being in Quantico. My dad always had an identification card he clipped on the front of his shirt, but I hadn't seen it since he died. Since he was at work when he died, it is obviously still there. I wasn't exactly sure what kind of security there would be to get into the city. It wasn't like I was trying to sneak into the Corps base and take pictures of their command center; I just wanted to go visit the university where my dad worked. Most universities *enjoy* visitors.

Regardless, I grabbed an expired driver's license and his death certificate from the top drawer of the desk in my parent's bedroom. If I had to, I could at least attempt to prove that my dad was my dad.

The Trans Am took well to the open road. Highway driving with my old car was occasionally a bit of a negotiation, but in this car I could actually feel the engine pulling me. Amy agreed.

Quantico was half an hour north on 95, or halfway to Lorton, the town where I bought a gun and killed a man. I hoped today's road trip

would be less eventful, but I supposed that would be up to the United States Marine Corps.

I couldn't imagine how my dad made this drive twice each day, it's so very boring. Trees on both sides, a lot of the road unlit; maybe it would have been relaxing to someone in another mindset. Me, I was a bit nervous, and the monotony of the travel allowed the anxiety to reverberate inside my body.

Amy directed me off the highway and onto Russell Road. For a while it looked like I was cutting through uncharted wilderness, then on my left I passed a giant foreboding building that I couldn't read the sign for, then more trees, then a giant parking lot, then more trees, then a giant foreboding building with a giant parking lot, then more trees, then I came upon a guard station. Both lanes of the road were blocked and between them was a small booth manned by two Corpsmen. They were both dressed in olive pants and khaki shirts with soft garrison caps. In the other lane was a stopped car, one of the guardsmen spoke through the car's window. The other man motioned for me to stop at the gate, walked around the back of my car (probably looking for clearance stickers) then around to my window. He seemed surprised at my age when he saw me, though not unusually so.

"Good afternoon, sir," he said in a quick tenor, "may I ask your business here?" He looked to be 25 years old, had a flat face. The tag on his chest said his name was Meyers.

"I'm wanted at the Marine Corps University," I said. "My father's car is parked and I'm to remove it."

He looked at me, then at Amy. I expected pepper spray any minute. "Do you have a visitor request on file with the OCS?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so," I said. "We were called at home to pick the car up, I came to pick it up."

"Something should have been set up in advance," the guard said. "Visitors aren't allowed on-site without pre-approval. I can call the office of where the car is parked and ask that the car be brought here if you'd like."

That wouldn't work for me. I tried to think of something else to say. I pulled the two driver's licenses from my pocket and said, "There are also some personal effects I am to collect. I believe I was supposed to

be granted a visitor's clearance to the University; I didn't realize it had to be set up first. I thought my name would just be put on a list." I handed him the licenses. "This one is me," I said pointing at the top one, "The other is my father. Could you check his clearance and contact whoever his superior is and ask if I may be allowed in?"

The guard made a face and said he would contact the security office, and then stepped away.

"I don't think this will work," Amy said. "Security seems to be ramped up since 9/11. I don't even remember there being a guard station here."

"Well I don't know what else to do," I said, more to myself. "I believe they make military bases so that you can't talk your way onto them."

The guard had been inside the booth for a few minutes; I could see him talking into a phone through the glass. He eventually hung up, and stepped out carrying something small and orange in his hand. This time, he walked around the front.

"All right Mr. Baker, you're clear for entry to the base. You can pull forward through the gate and turn into the parking lot just to the left. A private will come around to transport you to the MC University. At that time, the young lady may leave in this car or she may wait in the parking lot for you to return, but she or this vehicle aren't permitted past the parking area."

I looked at Amy. She shrugged. "Okay," I said.

The guard gave me the items in his hand, an orange laminated visitor's pass with a metal clip to affix it to my shirt and the two driver's licenses. He stepped back into the booth and the gate before my car lifted. It seemed I was in.

I pulled into a small parking area as instructed and shut off my engine. I asked Amy if she wanted to wait here or just take my car home. She said she'd wait and make sure I wasn't taken into a basement and set on fire.

Five minutes later, a small green Jeep pulled in and idled next to my car. I got out and asked the driver, "This for me?"

“I’m to take you to the MC University,” he said, as if saying anything more would get him court marshaled. I nodded then hopped into the passenger seat, I started to look for the seat belt but the vehicle lurched forward before I could bother. It took a few minutes of driving through the woods before it seemed like we were actually in a city. Old, New England style buildings were all around. If I didn’t know better I’d have thought I was in Cambridge, not a city dedicated to training young men and women to kill. The driver said nothing, so I sat in silence as well, idly fidgeting with the USB drive in my pocket.

At school, I once heard Dale Carpenter talking about his fool-proof idea for getting anything he wanted off of somebody’s computer without touching the keyboard and using only a USB memory stick, the small portable hard drives that most people use for moving documents or files between computers. He said something about making the USB drive trick the computer into copying files from the computer to the memory stick, but I didn’t really pay attention at the time because I assumed he was just talking to hear his own voice. While I was at his house, though, when I went back a second time, I asked him about it.

“This genius plan you have for taking files from a computer with a USB drive, what was it?” I asked, returning unexpectedly to his room.

He smiled proudly, and said, “It’s simple. I can partition a USB stick and format it to CDFS, so when you plug it into a computer, Windows thinks it’s a CD, not a memory stick. If Auto-run is enabled, which it always is because people are idiots, it will run whatever program on the USB drive I want. I can put a shell script on there that will run in the background and search the computer’s hard drive for files matching any keywords I set, and then copy them onto the USB drive. Other than that ‘do-dun’ file the computer makes when you stick the drive in, someone using the computer would have no idea what was going on. You just plug in the drive, the drive finds the files you want and copies them, and then you take the drive out and walk away.”

I nodded and tried to process the words I understood.

“So you first program the type of files to look for?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, “just edit a text file with the keywords you want, then when it runs on someone’s computer it searches for any files matching your keywords.”

“You’re sure this works?”

“Yes it works,” he said, defensively, “I’ve tried it a few times. Thought about making it search for .doc files so I could get teachers’ tests or answer keys by sticking the drive in a school computer while the teacher is logged in, but I realized they’re all so lazy they never make the tests until the night before.”

“So you have one... that works?”

“Yeah, a one gigabyte stick. Why? You want one?”

“I’ll buy that one,” I said.

“If you just bring me whatever memory stick you want I’ll set it up for you.”

“I need it today. I’ll give you however much it costs to buy a new one for yourself. One gig, those are like fifty bucks now, right?”

“Was seventy when I bought it, but they’ve gone down.”

I pulled the rest of the cash from my wallet. *I need to go to the bank again*, I thought. He dug through desk drawers until he found a small, silver USB memory stick about the length of half a stick of gum. He looked it over, and then plugged it into a free USB port on the front of his computer’s tower.

“Yeah,” he said, “this is it.”

I stepped forward and looked at the screen; there were a few files on the drive. He opened one called kw.txt and said, “This is the keyword file you set. You enter whatever you want the filenames to match and anything on the computer that matches will be copied.”

“What if you take the drive out before it’s done copying?” I asked.

“Then only whatever there was time for will be copied,” he said, “and if it’s in the middle of copying a single file when you remove it, only part of the file will be copied.”

I leaned in to type my keyword. “It uses wildcards?” I asked.

“Yeah, asterisk.”

So on the first line, I typed `*baker*.*`. That would match any file with baker in the name, no matter what type of file it was. I saved that, and pulled the drive out.

“This isn’t about dirty pictures, is it?” Dale asked as I walked away.

My plan was to use this USB drive on a computer where my dad worked. I hoped someone would be nice enough to give me a tour of where he worked, and I could plug it into the workstation of someone nearby. He must have co-workers, people doing the same stuff as him or working on the same projects. If they were logged in, I could stick this thing in any USB port and hopefully get a copy of anything with his name on it.

I was dropped off in front of a long, narrow building. A half dozen other buildings of equal size were scattered throughout the area. When the driver put the Jeep into park, he said, “Someone will meet you inside.”

I got out, looked at the building before me. “This is the Marine Corps University?” I asked.

The driver silently looked at the identical buildings all around, smiled at me, then pulled the Jeep away.

This is it, I told myself. This is what I wanted for so long, this was the place I was never allowed to see. How terribly disappointing.

I walked through the entrance of the building and found myself in a large lobby. I stopped to take it all in, but was interrupted by my name.

“Chris,” called a man who was leaning against a long desk parked along the right wall. He stood up straight and walked toward me. He was old, older than my father was, anyway; maybe early sixties. He was in full officer’s uniform, with a series of multicolored ribbons decorating his chest. When he got to me, he extended his right hand.

“Lieutenant Colonel Schumer,” he said as I shook his hand. “I worked with your dad.”

“Really?” I said, a bit shocked. “My dad was a researcher; I didn’t think he’d be working with a Lt. Colonel.”

Schumer chuckled and released my hand. “It’s a Marine city and a Marine base,” he said. “Everything’s run by some kind of officer. The cafeteria’s run by a Mess General, even.”

I forced a laugh, then stood in silence.

“Come on,” he said, “I have your dad’s keys and his personal items in my office.” He walked to the end of the lobby and turned left into a long, narrow hallway. It seemed like an office building more than a school.

“Is this where he worked?” I asked, trying to read the names on the doors as I passed them.

“Your father worked downstairs,” he said, opening a door and stepping inside.

Lt. Colonel Schumer’s office was small and cramped. The books lining the back wall and drab shades covering the windows made it feel even smaller. Besides a few filing cabinets and a wide oak desk positioned in the middle of the room, there was little appointment or decoration to the room. I sat down on a wooden chair with leather lining opposite the desk while Schumer sat behind the desk. On top of the desk was a healthy scatter of papers, a small wooden clock, and a beige computer sitting horizontally on the desk with a small monitor perched on top of it. The back of the computer was exposed, only a few feet from me. I could see an open USB port among the mess of keyboard, mouse, monitor, power, and speaker cables. The computer was turned off.

Schumer slid a thick yellow envelope across the desk to me. Inside was a set of keys to my dad’s car, a wrist watch, and a few mildly expensive looking pens. “These are the things your father left here,” he said.

“There isn’t more? Books or pictures? Journals? Anything?”

Schumer folded his hands on the desk. “These are the sort of things one keeps at a desk, but your dad didn’t really have a desk. He did lab work, mostly, and he used various workstations. People here tend to keep personal effects to a minimum because they never know where they’re going to be moving next.”

I took another look inside the envelope, then closed it and set it down on the floor.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” Schumer asked.

“Can you tell me anything about what he did here? How he died?”

He looked down at his hands, and said, “As I said, mostly lab work. He had the heart attack while he was working. He’d said he wasn’t feeling well earlier in the day, if I remember correctly.”

“Lab work. Okay, but that’s the weird thing,” I said, “As far as anybody knows, this place is just a school for teaching about military history and Marine Corps fundamentals. The web site makes this place sound like the most boring place on Earth. I don’t understand why, then, there would be any lab work going on.”

Schumer’s jaw tightened, then he sighed and his body loosened.

“Obviously, Chris,” he started, “you know that the work we do here— not just here, but all over Washington and in any military base — requires a certain element of secrecy. You should know from the fact that your father never talked about what he did here, that he *couldn’t* talk about it. From a strategic and conventional perspective, some doors we have to keep shut.”

I frowned. “So you can’t tell me anything?”

“I told you he did lab work, which is more than some people would have me say. A more uptight person might have said he was a janitor or an unimportant paper-pusher. My advice is to take what you have, hold on to it, and don’t worry about what you don’t have. He was a good person doing good things. That’s the best I can do.”

The paper bag over my head wasn’t getting any lighter. I was still scratching at something I couldn’t see or feel. All this secrecy was driving me nuts, when my dad was probably just doing menial work that he never knew the scope of.

“Tell me something,” I said. “If my dad was actually bringing US-made weapons to Uzbekistan to support anti-communist rebels, and he was killed by a stinger missile fired by the man who actually killed JFK, how would you tell me and my family that he died?”

Schumer half-smirked, then leaned back in his chair. “I’d probably say that he died here at the office. I’d probably make up an innocuous cause of death like a heart attack or a stroke. I’d say that he

was a good man and was doing good things for the country but I couldn't say what they were."

I folded my arms and said, "So you can see the position this puts me in."

"Clearly," he said. "But this is something many people in this town have to deal with. You might feel cheated or used, but you can't let the unknown take over. It won't bring him back, and it'll only bring you down."

"It's hard to accept that your dad had a heart attack, I'm sure, just like it's hard to accept that he died at all. But he had a heart attack; I was in the ambulance with him when they pulled out the paddles; I was there at the hospital when a doctor declared him dead. People have heart attacks, people die."

He looked at his watch, and then compared it to the clock on his desk. "I had to interrupt an appointment to see to your unexpected visit," he said, "and let me tell you, most people who show up at the front gate unexpected don't get the same treatment you've gotten, but Daniel truly was appreciated around here and will be missed. I want you to understand that."

I nodded; he looked again at his watch then pushed the power button on the front of his computer. A quick beep came from inside, then the soft hum of fans spinning.

"And just to demonstrate that, I want you to come back here and see me if you have any new concerns or questions since I had to cut this short," he said, looking at the computer screen and watching it boot up.

"I'll give you a conditional entrance pass and add your name to a clearance list, so you'll be able to get through the gate and be escorted back here if you need me."

The computer was up and running, he typed in a password to log in. I slowly pulled the USB drive from my pocket and held it under my palm. The Lt. Colonel clicked the mouse a few times, then typed a few keys, and said, "There, you're on security's list. If you come to the gate and show them this – where are those passes?" He turned around to the filing cabinet behind him and opened a drawer.

This was my chance. I leaned in toward the desk, and with my right hand I unplugged the green speaker cable from the back of the computer and plugged the USB drive into the open USB port. My heart stopped beating for a moment, I prayed that the computer had Auto-run enabled and that a big message hadn't jumped on screen saying, "Hey, someone stuck a USB memory stick into the computer and is probably trying to steal files." After a few seconds, I could hear the hard drive inside the computer begin spinning and clicking as files were being accessed.

Schumer pulled a plastic folder from the drawer and pulled out a laminated card that looked like my visitor's pass but was white instead of orange, and explained that the bearer was granted conditional entrance by Lt. Colonel Schumer. There was also a magnetic strip, a bar code, and a few series of digits. "Right," he said. "Show them that at the gate, then your photo ID and they'll look you up and let you in here."

"Thanks," I said, though I couldn't really figure out why he was giving me this. If there was nothing he could tell me, why bother letting me come back whenever I want?

Schumer stood up and walked around the desk. I stood up to block his view of the computer's rear. The USB drive had only been plugged in a few seconds, it would need more time to copy any files. Schumer opened the door and held it open for me, repeating that he had an appointment to get to. To buy time, I pretended to look over the desk for where I'd put that envelope, and then eventually "found" it there on the floor. I backed up to the computer and pulled the USB drive out behind my back, then bent down to grab the envelope.

"His car is in the back of the lot just outside," he said as I went out the office door. "Can you find your way back to the gate or do you need someone to lead you?"

It was a single road, no turns, so I told him I could make it. In the hall outside his office, a man wearing civilian clothes walked by and looked at me like I had a badger clinging to my face. It was probably the youngest person he'd ever seen in this den of secrets. Schumer walked me back to the front door of the building, said goodbye, and then walked back to the hall toward where his office was.

I found my dad's Cadillac in the rear of the parking lot like he'd said. The car was about five years old and dark green. I'd driven it twice that I could remember, and wasn't too impressed with it. I unlocked the door with the remote on the keychain, got in, and dropped the envelope in the passenger seat. I hadn't learned nearly as much as I'd hoped to. I hadn't seen exactly where my dad worked, and I'd only met one person he worked with. The USB drive had been plugged in for no more than 30 seconds, so I wasn't sure if I was going to find anything useful on there either. I guessed I'd have to come up with some other reason to come back, and use my suspicious clearance to get back in.

I made my way back to the small parking lot just inside the gate, honked at my own car, and Amy pulled it out and followed me. At the gate, the same guy was there to wave me through.

So this is Quantico. I wondered why I had always been so afraid of it.

CHAPTER 28

“You don’t think he should at least try?”

“He doesn’t like baseball, he doesn’t like any sports.”

My mom was upset, I remember. I was up in my room, writing a book report for school; something about some teenagers who go exploring a gold mine and have some sort of adventures. My door was open, and I heard them downstairs arguing in the kitchen, so I crept out of my room and listened from the stairwell. I was twelve.

“Because he’s never tried them. He could like it, he could be good. Take him to a batting cage, he could like it,” my mom said.

“Hon, he just isn’t into sports,” my dad said, “I know what that’s like, being the one kid on Earth who doesn’t care about sports.”

“You were all-state in high school!” My mom wasn’t yelling, just excited.

“Yes, but I didn’t like it. I played baseball because my parents forced me to. I don’t want to force him.”

“You don’t have to force him, just ask him if he wants to try out. It says here, ‘beginners are welcome.’”

“If I ask him, he’ll think I’m pressuring him. And they put that there just so they have someone to reject. It’s a school team, not a community league. They want good players.”

“He might *be* good!”

“He could get hurt.”

“Are you kidding me?”

I can’t remember how I felt. I can’t remember if I wanted to try baseball. I probably didn’t; I wouldn’t now.

A few years later, my freshman year of high school, I came home from school one day and collapsed on the couch with a groan.

“Tough day?” It was my dad.

I pulled myself up to see over the couch to find the voice; he was sitting at the kitchen table reading the newspaper. “What are you doing home?” I asked.

“I made it an early day,” he said.

“Tough day?” I asked, dropping again and laid flat.

“Not for me,” my dad said, “Why for you?”

“Valentine’s Day,” I mumbled.

“What? Nobody wanted to be your Valentine?”

I sighed in teenage disgust, “It doesn’t work like that. Nobody says ‘Be my valentine.’ It’s not the fifties anymore.”

My dad paused, and then said thoughtfully, “I don’t think it ever worked like that, come to think of it. So what’s the problem, then?”

“It just drives me crazy,” I said, “all the guys and girls pairing up and trying to be romantic or clever, when all they’re doing is falling into stereotypes.”

I heard the newspaper being folded and set down. “What do you mean?” my dad asked.

“I don’t know,” I started, “it’s just, ‘ooh, you gave some girl some red crap today so she’s your true love, you’re real original.’ In every high school in every city in the country, every brainless idiot is doing the same thing for some girl. How can people like that? How is it romantic to do

the same thing everybody does? Why do people get so excited about doing something a fake holiday tells them to?”

My dad stood up and walked into the TV room, he sat in the sofa opposite mine. “This frustrates you?”

I scoffed. “You’re not a psychologist.” I rolled around so I was facing him and not the back of the couch.

“No, but what I do gives me a few unique insights into this field,” he said, crossing his legs.

I tried to put how I was feeling into words. “It’s just,” I started, “what am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to ask a girl out, or flirt, or whatever when I know I’m just playing a role? A guy asks a girl out, it’s clear what his intentions are. But he can’t say them; he has to say the right thing, when everybody knows he’s just saying what she wants to hear. It’s all just a routine set up so young people can try to slam their body parts together. How can I ever join that world when I know it’s not real?”

“You know, despite what people like to think, humans aren’t terribly clever or original creatures,” my dad said. “Everything we do or think is wired either by our psychology or our genetics. The only thing that adds any variance to human behavior is personality.”

I didn’t say anything, so he went on.

“Like you said, any male is motivated by the need to pass on his genes, whether he knows it or not. Our whole culture is based on males’ need to have sex, but the entire motivation is based solely on our genes. As a species, we need to create offspring and repopulate the planet so our species can keep winning.”

I spent a while trying to get over the fact that my dad had said the word “sex” and I again said nothing.

“While guys are wired to just want to perform ‘the act,’ girls are programmed to actually want babies and to be selective. A guy can impregnate a different woman every fifteen minutes if he were up to it, but a woman can only be pregnant once at a time, and about once per year; so, she has to be choosy. Whether people realize it or not, the entire female side of attraction is based on paternal candidacy, and the male side is all based on fertility.”

“Gross. What?”

“What do guys like? Mostly thin girls with good color, round butt, big breasts. Those are all things that tell our brains that she’s prime for baby-making and raising. What do girls like? Physically, it varies, but most of it is based on whether or not they have specific muscles used for the – um, you know. But attraction for females is more based on traits than looks. They want someone that can protect them and provide for them. They want someone who isn’t going to ‘fertilize’ them and run off. For them, it’s all about someone who will give them a healthy baby and will be able to provide for it.”

“Are you sure this subject matter is appropriate for a 14-year-old?” I asked.

He laughed, and then said, “You’re the one who brought it up, I’m just giving a definition to the discovery you’ve already made. Anyway, the guy just wants to do it, the girl wants a healthy baby. So, for the guy to have any chance, he has to do the right things and say the right things so the girl will think he’s suitable. Some psychologists I talk to say that it’s speculated that ‘love’ is just a euphoric type of ignorance that makes us overlook any fertility flaws based on overpowering positive features. This is the problem you mentioned. The species is hardwired to keep making babies, but male-female dynamics require all kinds of rituals and routines of saying things when everybody knows you mean something else. So, these routines become part of our culture, and most people don’t even recognize them. Understand?”

I nodded, or did the closest thing I could to a nod while lying sideways on a couch.

“This system works perfectly *because* people don’t recognize it,” my dad continued. “For people whose jobs it is to examine these subjects, like psychologists and geneticists – and for people like you who are just perceptive enough to recognize them on your own – life sucks. It’s like Descartes or *The Matrix*: Can you live in an artificial system if you know it’s artificial?”

“So what’s the answer? How do people, who know that dating and mating are just tricks of the brain, deal with it?”

“The answer is a particularly interesting recent discovery in genetics,” he said. “That no matter how intelligent we may be in

recognizing our genetic programming, our genetic programming is always more powerful.”

“Huh?”

“Our brains say, ‘Hey, genes. You can’t trick me into falling for a girl when I know it’s just your way of getting me to repopulate the planet,’ but your genes say, ‘Screw you, buddy. See that girl over there? You are absolutely in love with her.’ Your genes win.”

“Your genes are more in control of you than your brain?” I asked, shocked.

An epic battle between mind and body.

“Well, I shouldn’t be using the word ‘brain’ really, it’s more your consciousness, because your genes use your brain via your subconscious. So it’s your subconscious telling you to procreate and your conscious realizing that it’s all a system. This is where psychology and genetics really meet.”

“So what you’re saying is, even though we realize that it’s all a bunch of silly routines and stereotypical behaviors, our genes overpower that realization and will eventually make us fall in love or want to mate?”

“Yes,” he said plainly. “Love conquers all.”

“This is your fatherly advice?” I asked.

“No,” he said, “that was the preface. This is the part where I tell you about STDs and condoms.”

And then the awkwardness began.



The trees and pavement on the road from Quantico faded into a single dull background of reality as memories of my father strung back in unison like a reel of film. After he died, it seemed for a while that I’d completely forgotten he ever existed. Now, having seen the town of secrets where he spent his whole life working, the walls of self-protection seemed to crumble. I wrote my dad off as a secret himself when he died,

and somehow I was trying to find the answers that would make him real again.

Instead, I only found more secrets and more questions. My dad was dead, I finally realized with the appreciation of its full weight.

My dad was dead.

And I could finally cry for him.

CHAPTER 29

It was after dark when we got back to my place, me in my dad's car and Amy in mine. My dad's car had a garage door opener, so I parked it inside the garage and Amy parked my car behind it in the driveway.

The drive from Quantico gave me plenty of quiet time to pontificate. I realized that I hadn't stopped to think since any of this had started on Thursday, I just kept bouncing forward from situation to situation and reacting on-the-fly. Everything seems much more important in the heat of the moment, and the last six days had been like one long, heated moment for me. Now, with nobody to chase and nothing to run from, it all seemed pointless. I've collapsed someone's larynx, snooped inside bank records, illegally bought a gun while underage, been assaulted with pepper spray, nearly been shot by a guy who'd already killed a cop, and now I'd possibly made illegal copies of secret military files.

And for what? All I had was more unanswered questions. I was grasping at straws and driving myself crazy doing so. I had nothing more than what I started with. I was in the red.

At least it was interesting to Amy. She seemed to live a pretty hallow life, with a mother who's run off and a father who couldn't care less about anything Amy did. This must be a fantastic diversion for her.

I hadn't told Amy about the rigged USB memory stick or my plans to sneak files out of a Marine base. Maybe she didn't have to know. Maybe I could just put the USB drive in the microwave and fry it. They'd never be able to prove that I'd done anything, and if I didn't look at the files I'd have nothing to lie about. Nothing was going to bring my father back, and thrusting myself into dangerous situations was just going to make me end up dead too.

We entered my house and I emptied my pockets on the kitchen table like always. USB memory stick, pocketknife, wallet—all piled on the table a few feet from that gun. God, why did I own a gun? And why is it still sitting on the kitchen table? I grabbed the gun, its box, the ammo, and the spare magazines I'd bought and trucked them up to my room. I hadn't said a word out loud since I was in Quantico. The last thing I'd said to Amy was “honk.”

Up in my bedroom's smallish walk-in closet, I secured the gun and put it back in its Styrofoam package, then put the package on an upper shelf between two sweaters. I set most of the boxes of ammo on another shelf then sat down at my desk and begun slipping .45 cartridges into the metal gun magazines, one at a time, by the dim light spilling out of my closet. My hands weren't shaking this time.

I looked up to see Amy standing in my doorway. Her arms hung down as she toyed at the cuffs of her jacket with her fingers. It made her look even younger. She'd never been up to my room, I realized, but she wasn't looking around like most people do when they enter a new room. She was just looking at me. I looked back down at the bullets and magazines.

“What happened?” she asked.

I held my hands still, a single bullet pinched between my thumb and index finger. It was shiny and golden, smooth like a copper banister.

“He had a heart attack. It was unfortunate, and Daniel Baker was a good man doing good things for the good of the good country,” I said.

“You know that for certain now?” she said quietly.

I slid the bullet into the magazine, feeling the resistance of the spring pushing against me.

“No I don’t,” I said, grabbing another bullet and spinning it in my fingers like all the others. “I don’t know that. I don’t know much of anything, really. I don’t know where my old car is, I don’t know why the FBI is playing with me, I don’t know why I spin every bullet around in my fingers before I slide it in... I don’t even know why I’m loading these magazines. And I definitely don’t know why you’re still here, when you should be as far away from me as.”

She stood still a while longer then stepped in and sat down on my bed across the room. I set a filled magazine on my desk and grabbed an empty one, glancing at her as I reached.

“There’s a lot of things I don’t know either,” she said, her voice wandering. She looked at her hands cupped together in her lap. “We both grew up surrounded by secrets,” she went on. “I never knew what my dad did either, I never asked. All I know is that now he’s a drunk. My mom, I don’t know for sure if she’s even in the same state anymore. This is a fucked-up town.”

I don’t think I’d heard her swear before. It didn’t suit her; but she went on. “Everybody’s parents do something in secret, and the kids have to deal with it. But you can’t let the mystery pull you down. A few years ago, I just had enough of all the lies and unanswered questions. I started streaking my hair red or green or orange or whatever sounded good, laid on the eyeliner real thick, put on as many bracelets as I could, and went out with any guy who asked me knowing full well why they did. I didn’t care, they got what they wanted, and it made me feel good for a while at least. It never amounted to anything, though. It just put me deeper in the hole.”

She stopped talking again. I set another filled magazine down next to the first.

“So I’m not going to get sucked down a hole,” I said, spinning my chair to look at her over the desk. “I’m done with this, all of it. No more mysteries, no more spying, FBI, or pepper spray.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she said, “I don’t think you can just drop this. If you don’t do whatever those FBI guys want, they might let the cops come in and put you away for the thing in Lorton.”

“The FBI is just having a good time with me; they must know that the fake cop guy was trying to kill me. They wouldn’t let me hang for that, if the police even *have* any real evidence besides the fact that it was my car. I’m done, I’m out. I’m just a regular teenager now with a dead dad and too much bloody money.”

The left side of Amy’s mouth tightened to a frown. “So why are you loading your gun?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.

I sighed, and spun around again to face my desktop computer. I turned the monitor on and looked at the viewing window for the remote camera in front of Nathan Comstock’s house. The feed was still running, but it wasn’t much good with the night darkness. I stopped recording, and opened the video of the last few hours I’d had it recording. I sped through the video, the tree branches danced around and a few cars zoomed through the cul-de-sac at lightning speed, then Comstock’s car pulled into the garage, then the garage door closed, then nothing happened until it got too dark to see anything.

“There’s nothing,” I said, “no nuclear arsenal stored in the garage, nobody coming to the door to buy pirated DVDs. More dead ends.”

“But he’s home now?” Amy said, leaning over on the bed and crooking her neck to try and see the screen.

“Yeah, unless he snuck out the back door wearing black, I guess.”

“So maybe he did the e-mail thing,” she said, sounding a bit eager.

I really didn’t want to get sucked into more spy capers, but having full access to someone’s email did sound nice.

“My laptop’s in my car,” I said.

“No, it’s downstairs. I brought it in,” she said, getting up and disappearing out of my door.

She came up a few seconds later, dropping the bag on my bed. “You can deal with that madness, and I’ll try to cook that chicken you bought. We can compare our progress in 20 minutes.”

I went over to my bed, pulled the laptop and its cord out, found the wall outlet behind my bed, and turned the computer back on.

If I were still saying “bingo,” I would have done so right then. I opened the status page Dale had set up; it said that the phishing email had been opened a few hours ago, and that Comstock’s password (old and “new”) had been submitted a few minutes later. I used the password to try to log into the email account online, and I was instantly in. This stuff works far too well.

I spent a few minutes looking through the archive of e-mails in the inbox. Nothing stood out, a few innocuous receipts from online stores; kitchen appliances, mostly. I decided I’d take a closer look at these e-mails later, and I went to the settings to change the account’s password to the new one Comstock had submitted so the ruse would be complete. That taken care of, I logged out and back in with the new password just to make sure it had worked.

When I logged back in, there was one new e-mail message. It was from Expedia, an online travel booking service. It was a trip summary for reservations he had just booked, probably only seconds ago. I opened the email, and to my surprise I found an itinerary for a flight to Vienna, Austria leaving the next morning (Wednesday) from Dulles Airport. He also booked a regular room at the Ambassador Hotel in downtown Vienna through Friday, the day of his return flight. The last-minute booking cost a small fortune, and his KLM flight had a layover in Newark and Amsterdam for a total travel time of 13 hours.

It didn’t make any sense. Why go to Austria? Why go last-minute? He’d be missing a few days of work, it seemed. What could he have to do in Vienna that was so important? I thought about the question for a few minutes before I realized that I finally had a concrete question, not something vague like “Why is Nathan Comstock acting suspicious?” or “Why can I shoot guns so well?”

I went downstairs and grabbed my wallet from the kitchen table. Amy stood over a frying pan on the stove, I could hear sizzling and it smelled like pepper and olive oil. I smiled at her, and then returned upstairs with my wallet. I pulled the two FBI business cards from one of the pockets and looked them over. Special Agent Bremer, Special Agent Rubino. Each had a different cell phone number listed. I decided that Rubino seemed friendlier, and that because he was closer to my age he

might better understand my youthful colloquialisms, and dialed his number from my cell phone.

After three rings my ear was filled with “Rubino.” Jumbled background voices made it sound like he was still in the office.

“Why is Nathan Comstock flying to Vienna tomorrow morning?” I asked without introducing myself.

There was a pause on the other end of the phone, and then Rubino said, “Chris?”

“Yeah,” I said, a bit disappointed that I wasn’t the only person in his life.

“I gotta say, that’s not exactly the sort of thing I had in mind, but it’s a good question still. I’ll look into it and call you back in half an hour,” then he hung up.

I went downstairs to find Amy plating up the two pieces of chicken breast with some of the microwave rice. We ate at the counter, and she indeed had used olive oil and pepper. She asked if I had any luck with the emails, and I told her I found one lead but I was waiting to hear more about it. She asked what I meant right as my cell phone rang. The caller ID listed the same number I’d dialed before.

“Yeah?”

“So, I looked into it, and it turns out that Comstock cleared out all of his bank accounts this afternoon,” Rubino said.

That was odd, “You mean the two accounts at New England Federated?”

“How did you—”

“I have superpowers,” I said, cutting him off.

“Right, well he has more accounts than those two. All of them pretty much emptied as of this afternoon, right before three when transaction posting is cut off.”

“So he’s taking all of his money to Austria? Or he’s making a very large purchase and then fleeing to Austria?” Amy looked up at me from the sink, giving me a curious glare.

“The interesting thing is,” Rubino continued, “he withdrew all of the money in a series of certified checks, each for \$7,500. That’s a lot of checks, the tellers must have been pretty annoyed.”

“\$7,500? Why would he do that? Some kind of payroll?”

“Well, it occurs to me... by today’s rate, \$7,500 is just under 6,000 euros.”

“So, what does that mean?” I asked.

Rubino sighed into his phone, and said, “In Austria, €6,000 is the maximum deposit without reporting the transaction to the government. Like how any deposit over \$10,000 in the US gets reported to the IRS.”

“So people deposit \$5,000 twice,” I said.

“Yeah, or \$9,500 and \$500. Or anything as long as each deposit is below the line.”

“But why Austria?” I asked. “Isn’t Switzerland the place to launder or hide your money?”

“It is in the movies,” Rubino said, “but these days Europe’s anti-laundering laws are so tight that anonymous bank accounts are impossible to open. Austria’s banking system is actually older than the Swiss, and has a lot more loopholes for getting around the laws. The only reason Swiss banking is so well-known is because it was all started with Nazi gold. Austria’s banking industry began first.”

“Huh. Do you think Comstock already has accounts in Austria?” I asked.

“If he did, it would be specifically so we couldn’t find out. So, I don’t know.”

“So what now?”

“What now? Well, we can’t freeze his passport without a damn good reason, and our jurisdiction ends at the border unless we’re invited into a foreign country, so... – *what’s that?* – oh,” he chuckled, “Bremer says to use your imagination.” He hung up.

I flipped my phone closed and set it on the counter, zoning out for a minute. Amy looked at me from the other side of the counter.

“So... what’s going on?” she asked.

I pulled myself down to Earth and told her, “I’m going to Vienna tomorrow.”

“Which one?” she asked. There’s a Vienna in Virginia and one in Maryland, within an hour of each other.

“The one in Austria,” I said. “It’s the capital.”

She looked at me flatly for half a minute, then said, “Oh, well see if you can bring me back some chocolates,” before she walked out of the kitchen.

CHAPTER 30

I booked a flight to Vienna leaving early the next morning. The flight departed later than Comstock’s flight, but arrived earlier. In his rush to get “the first flight out,” he overlooked the possibility that a later flight with no connections or layovers would get there sooner.

I tried to not let the enormity of the fact that I was going to Austria seep into my mind. I’d never been out of the country before; in fact, the only reason I already had a passport is because a few years ago the family planned a trip to Italy during my summer break. I was stoked about the vacation, had everything planned and had applied for my passport, but at the last minute the trip was called off – my dad couldn’t take the time off work.

If Amy had a passport, I’d have gotten her a flight too. I thought for a moment I could be like one of those guys who flies to Europe just to go to a restaurant he likes, but this airfare would eat my money away in no time. I’d always wanted to fly someplace in first class, and I’d looked into it for my flight the next morning, but it was \$10,000 more than the coach seat. That seemed a bit much.

\$10,000 for an eight hour flight, that's \$1,250 per hour just for a wider seat and hot towels. And better food. And unlimited drinks. And larger blankets. And video screens. And stewardesses who call you by your name. No, not worth it, I convinced myself again, even though I could totally afford it.

The working theory was that Comstock was taking all of his money to Vienna (which is illegal if you don't claim the money at customs, the internet taught me) to put it away in an untraceable Austrian bank account. Why would someone do that? Surely interest rates would be better in the US; he must be doing it to hide the money, but why? The only reason I could think of was the same reason I'd considered moving my money to a Swiss bank account a few days earlier, when I thought people wanted to kill me for it.

Was Comstock afraid of something now? Amy said he acted nervous in school earlier today; that he asked about me and then suddenly clammed up. I thought back to when this whole thing was started, when I had overheard a phone call and thought that he was talking to somebody about me. "It might be expensive," he said, right after saying he wasn't sure if he could "make it float" and right before doling out no punishment for putting a few kids in the hospital and nearly punching a police officer. Whoever he was talking to on the phone, he was talking about me. Could they now be angry with him?

And who was he talking to? Was he talking to the John Doe with the pepper spray? Were they arranging some plot to get to my money? Have they been doing this for years, finding students or parents with lots of money and stealing it? Could he now be nervous because I ran a car into his partner-in-crime? Or could they just be pawns, working for someone else; someone from whom Comstock slyly asked for more money by saying "it might be expensive"? If that were the case, maybe that little act of rebellion made them unhappy. Maybe they wanted to know why I was now crashing cars into their guys and making scenes in grocery stores. Maybe Nathan Comstock is afraid for his life, so he's getting himself and his money out of the country.

This is why everybody around here says Don't Ask Questions.

It was late, and Amy left for home so I could pack and get some sleep before I had to be in D.C. by 6 AM. I told her I'd write when I got there, if they had the internet yet in Austria.

I would only be there for two nights, until Friday, so I didn't need many clothes, but I had to pack a lot to make the knife in the suitcase stand out less.

Once I had everything set to go, I had a hard time sleeping. After an hour of rolling around my bed, I gave up and decided I'd sleep on the plane instead, which would help pass the time and might prevent the jet lag associated with an eight hour flight into a time zone six hours ahead of mine. I spent the night in bed, with the laptop positioned awkwardly across my stomach, reading anything I could about Austria or international travel tips. Nothing interesting.

And then it was time. The sun wasn't even up, but I was out the door. I wore the most comfortable clothes I owned, had a small suitcase in one hand and my backpack (with laptop inside) in my other.

Dulles Airport was an hour's drive, which seems like much longer when you're pathetically tired and the sky is a dreary dark blue. I kept running all of my possessions through my mind, trying to think of whether I needed it and, if I did, did I bring it. It was a short trip. I could have made it with the clothes on my back and just bought the things I happened to need while over there, but I still wanted to be prepared.

The roads were dead, but when I got to the airport there was a flurry of activity. I parked my car in an \$8-per-day lot and was bussed to the terminal. I retrieved my ticket and checked my luggage at the counter without any problems. After a half-hour in the security checkpoint line, I was through. Somehow, it seemed like I should have been faced with more obstacles. It was rather fortunate that I wasn't, because I was so tired that my brain was working on backup power and it felt like I was wading through a thick soup with every step.

There was an hour before I had to be on the plane, so I wandered around the terminal for a while. I got some overpriced breakfast from the food court; a little wrapped-up egg thing that I knew would probably throw a pretty rowdy party in my stomach. I browsed through a condensed Borders bookstore and got a small textbook on foreign banking, and after much deliberation settled on a novel that looked interesting enough. On my way to the gate, I found an ATM that seemed to have no withdrawal limit so I took out a thousand dollars in cash from my savings account and walked it over to a currency exchange and turned it into euros. A few years ago, advice would say to stick with

American dollars overseas, but the euro seemed to have changed that from what I'd read.

I'm just a dude with €700 in his pocket. Nothing unusual about that.

But there was something unusual, I knew. I was flying to Austria on a whim to try and find out what sordid business my school principal was conducting. I had a knife and seedy plans for how to get him to talk. This wasn't normal. I began to wonder if this was my life now, if everything would be following shaky leads, snooping into bank and e-mail accounts, buying cars and crashing them into hitmen. God, the fact that I'd driven my car into a person had still not seeped through my skull into the reality center of my brain. Here I was again, moving without thinking, going from impulse to impulse, and reacting on-the-fly. This had to stop, I knew, and I hoped it would stop in Austria.

After the tedious process of gate-waiting and boarding, I sat in an uncomfortable seat somewhere in the middle of an Austrian Air jet plane. My tiredness was useful to keep me from freaking out about how cool-yet-unusual this all was. The flight crew ran through the safety demonstration in English, then German, but it all sounded muffled and distant to me. I closed my eyes and tried to let myself sink into slumber.

I woke up to the feel of G-forces tugging on my skin, hoped we were landing, but knew we were only taking off.

If you ever have the opportunity to sit in the same place for eight hours straight, I suggest you decline. I tried to tell myself it was just like school, but at school I at least could walk from class to class and utilize some motor function. Just sitting there, reading or trying to watch a DVD on the laptop, it felt like some kind of reasonably humane torture.

I started with the international banking book for research, but my immune system seemed to reject it as foreign, so I switched to the novel, which was pretty good; it was about a professional bodyguard and, if novels can be cited as sources, my suspicion a million years ago that bodyguards charge about a thousand bucks per day was confirmed.

Flight attendants came around once in a while, bringing drinks and pitiful sandwiches. I went to the bathroom twice, just to feel my legs work.

When the gods of time passage saw fit to declare that my eight hours were up, I waited in line to get off the plane, waited in line for baggage claim, waited for my baggage, waited in line to get into the customs line, then waited in the customs line, all doing so while being bombarded with foreign languages and odd-looking things that poked at all my senses from all directions. I had been worried about customs, so I'd prepared a whole long story to explain why I was seventeen and flying to Austria alone.

My dad was a charter pilot for a wealthy businessman, I'd say, and he had a long stay in Vienna while his client had business, and my dad knew I'd always wanted to see Austria, so he paid for a ticket for me to fly out and stay here with him for a few days until he had to fly his client on to London. I figured that story had just the right amount of rich-people-suck, families-are-great, Austria-is-wonderful, and travel shop talk to keep any customs officer entertained but not too curious.

It didn't matter, though, as all I had to do was say "pleasure" and have my passport stamped. They didn't even look through my suitcase, so I didn't have to explain that the pocketknife was my dad's but he never used it anymore because it was dull, and I wanted to surprise him with it because I'd had it professionally sharpened.

A few minutes later, I was finally able to walk through some doors and be outside for the first time in over nine hours. I was in Vienna. Vienna, Austria. The air smelled different, the people looked different, cars were different, but I felt the same: tired and grouchy.

It was after 9 PM local time. By my count, Comstock wouldn't be landing until around midnight. That meant I had probably four hours until he would be trying to check into his hotel room, which would give me a few hours to enjoy the city before I had to start breaking any laws.

CHAPTER 31

They drive on the right side of the road in Austria. And by right, I mean not left. I thought it was inversed in Europe.

Riding in a cab to my hotel, I wondered what the border crossings were like between two countries that drove on different sides of the road. There'd have to be a sign, but in what language? The language of both sides of the border? Some countries have two languages. Maybe this is why everybody takes a train.

Your mind goes weird places when you're tired.

My vacation package included two nights at the Vienna Marriott which, once inside, looked like every other Marriott on earth. I checked into my room, a surprisingly large affair for a non-suite. I dumped my bags on the bed and spent a few minutes getting my computer set up and connected to the internet. It was harder finding local stores and businesses I wanted than it would have been in the states, as all the map and directory websites I knew of were America-specific. I eventually got some addresses, particularly the one for the Ambassador Hotel, and then changed into my tourist teenager costume.

Since I was a teenager already and not far removed from an actual tourist, it wasn't a very long road to transformation. I put on a denim jacket and flipped the collar up, and put on a Yankees cap. I only needed to partially obscure my face, and this was as good as I'd get, fake beards and mustaches being out of the question. I then took most of the clothes from my suitcase so it'd be lighter, zipped it up, and took it out of the room and out of the hotel.

Outside, waiting for a taxi, I spotted what looked like a drug store across the street that was still open. I crossed the street and went in, struggled to get over how everything was slightly different than it should be, and eventually found the reading glasses. I tried a few pairs on, checking myself out in a small mirror affixed to the top of the shelf through obscured vision. I bought the only pair that didn't look like grandpa glasses and a bottle of Coke, and then grabbed a cab over to the Ambassador Hotel.

If I got the timing right, I'd arrive about 20 minutes before Comstock would. I couldn't be sure how long it would take him to go through customs or to leave the airport, but I figured the variable only spanned about 40 minutes either way. He likely had more than 25 certified checks on his body somewhere, knowing that if they were in his baggage and were found by customs he'd be in trouble. He'd be nervous and a bit jumpy, probably wanting to get out of the airport as soon as possible, not stopping at the Duty Free to get some low-price vodka or waxy chocolates. Amy wanted chocolates, where was I going to find good ones?

Was she even serious? Seems like if I'm in Austria I should come back with *something*, though. I shouldn't get a giant "I was in Austria" poster in case I decide not to tell my mother about this. Last time I talked to my mom on the phone, she said she'd probably be home on Saturday. That gave me tonight, Thursday, and Friday to sort all this out and have everything back to normal.

When I was dropped off at the hotel, I slipped on my new glasses, made sure my collar was correct (and by correct I mean wrong), and got out of the car playing the part. I looked around through the near-midnight darkness at the shadows of buildings in a stupid bewilderment. After I got over my pretend awe, I rolled my suitcase into the hotel lobby and thought to myself how much nicer this seemed than the Marriott.

The floors were black marble and gold-appointed columns supported a 30-foot high ceiling. There was a regal-looking bar at one end, a few sauced-up patrons enjoying overpriced liquor. I was quick-checking my sight lines, making sure Comstock, the one person in this whole continent who would recognize me, wasn't here. Confident that he wasn't around, I made my way to the check-in desk where a singular young blond woman manned the station.

I knew she'd speak English, but I asked her anyway.

"Yes," she said in a lightly absurd accent, "welcome to the Ambassador, how may I help you?"

I bent my knees slightly so I'd look shorter, widened my eyes and tried to retract my cheekbones to look younger. This lady had to empathize with me or this would all fail miserably.

"Um, yeah," I said, keeping my vocal cords relaxed to raise the pitch of my voice, "is my step dad here yet? We took separate cabs from the airport and I don't think our cell phones work here so I can't get a hold of him, so can you see if he checked in or whatever?"

The woman pursed her lips for a moment, and then asked if the room was in his name and what the name was.

"Comstock," I said, "Nathan Comstock."

Her fingers danced across a keyboard while her eyes scanned the computer monitor sunken into her side of the desk.

"I'm sorry, no," she said, "he hasn't checked in yet."

"Oh," I said, sadly. "They were asking him some questions at customs; I guess it's taking longer than I thought. Can I go up to the room and wait there?"

"Not until the person the room is reserved for is here to check in and confirm payment details, I'm afraid."

I tried to look passively annoyed, and said, "Oh, I guess I'll wait for him here, then."

I crossed the lobby and sat down in a marigold sofa, making sure I was visible to the woman at the desk and that I could see the entrance. I sat, visibly impatient for half an hour. On a table next to the seat was an emptied highball glass on a cocktail napkin, a stirring straw lying beside it,

and a discarded plastic card room key. I swallowed hard, not believing my luck, then discretely slid the card from the table and pocketed it. For a few more minutes I sat in boredom, poked through my pockets and played a Snake game on my cell phone until I saw him.

Nathan Comstock, my school principal, walked through the front door of the hotel. He looked defeated and dead tired. After twelve hours and two layovers in two continents, he probably wasn't in a good mood. He had on a gray suit and a long overcoat and dragged his small, carry-on size suitcase toward the desk.

When I saw him, I made a face that said "finally," which the woman at the desk saw, then followed my eyes to Comstock.

Comstock went to the desk and began checking in. I slowly got up and, making sure there was never a direct line of sight between him and my face, stood slightly to his right a few feet behind him and watched him go through the routines.

My heart pounded like a jackhammer. I stood three feet from the only man for a thousand miles who knew who I was. If he saw me, no amount of lies could account for my presence, but I had to stand right there, though, so the lady at the desk would buy that I was this guy's son. I drew my hat lower and bent the brim slightly to hide my eyes, but if he turned and looked at me outright, there'd be no disguising myself.

He'd just gotten his credit card back and the woman at the desk slid him a pair of room keys in a paper folder. I heard her say "elevator" and "fourth floor," then as he turned right to head toward the hallway with the elevators I walked past him on his left. I made a stupid grin at the woman at the desk, and then fell into step behind Comstock once he was a few feet ahead. He turned into a hallway and stopped at a bank of elevators and hit a button, I walked past him on down the hall, stopping after the hallway turned again. I felt Comstock glance at me as I passed behind him, but he didn't seem to think anything of it. Around the corner I heard the elevator chime, doors open, then close. I waited two minutes, then left my suitcase there in the hall and walked back to the lobby, past the elevators, and pulled the useless room key from my pocket and held it in my hand as I brought it up to the same woman at the front desk.

"This one doesn't work," I said.

The woman frowned slightly and took the card, set it aside on the desk and drew a new blank card from a stack near the keyboard. She swiped it through a small device and punched four numbers on a keypad atop the device. She did it so fast I couldn't track her fingers. She handed me the fresh card and said, "Sorry about that, sir. This one should work."

"Thanks," I said, taking a step back, then forward again. "What was it...?" I said, visibly trying to summon something from my memory, "Forty-twenty...?"

"Forty-seventeen" she said with a glance at her screen.

"Ah, I was thinking twenty-seven," I said with a chuckle and shaking my head in disapproval of my brain's capacity.

I said thanks and goodbye and went back to the hallway, past the elevators, around the corner, and grabbed my bag. I found a side exit near a closed restaurant and hailed another cab, and returned to my own hotel, pinching between my thumb and right index finger a working key to Comstock's room. Room 4017.

I slipped the glasses off and let my eyes adjust to being able to see things clearly again, and rubbed the bridge of my nose just as I had noticed Comstock doing almost a week ago. I smiled in satisfaction, reflecting that I'd now managed to con my way into Comstock's bank account, home address, e-mail account, and now hotel room. I'd done it all with minimal planning, coming up with most of it – save for the e-mail thing – as I was doing it. I suppose we all have our aptitudes.

CHAPTER 32

The narrow point of the cold, black blade pressed firmly against the mound of flesh sagging between his chin and throat. It was an awkward position for me, standing behind him, arm crooked around his neck at an odd angle just so I could hold the knife this way, but I wanted him to see it; he had to know I was serious or this might not work. He tugged his wrists against the zip-ties binding his hands together through the back of the solid oak desk chair, but a quick elbow to the base of his neck stopped that. His breathing was sharp and stuttered; through the glove on my left hand I could feel his skin getting hotter. Once again he asked who I was, what I wanted. I pulled the voice recorder from my left pocket, made sure the playback was set to slow, pressed *play*, and heard a deepened, ominous version of my own voice come from the silver device. It all comes down to this.

The night before, I had no problem sleeping.

It might have been the 24-plus hours I'd been awake, or the boring flight and the mental strain of pretending to be someone else for the benefit of someone who can get you the things you need. It might also have been that I made sure not to think about what I'd probably

have to do in the morning. Either way, almost as soon as my body was horizontal I was knocked out.

The idea came to me as naturally as anything else, I just asked myself how I would do it, find out what Comstock was doing here in Vienna, and the answer came. Doing it, that would be the hard part.

I had to wake up earlier than I wanted to, but I needed to be up at least two hours before him. He'd had a longer day than I, leaving the Washington D.C. airport around 6 AM and not arriving here until after midnight. His room was booked for another night, and as far as I could tell, all he had to do here was drop some checks off at a bank. If I were him, I'd be sleeping in today, and that's what I bet on.

First I needed supplies. A ski mask, plastic zip-ties, a digital voice recorder with speed control, and leather gloves; these would be the difficult things to find in a strange city. If they had K-Marts in downtown Vienna, I'd be set. Unfortunately, I knew it would take at least two different stores. The rest – rubber bands, paper clips, and a thumbtack – those I knew I could get from my hotel's business center.

I walked the rest of the way to the Ambassador Hotel once my shopping spree was over. I walked with my purchases in a plastic bag, then when I was near the hotel I went into a small café where morning patrons sipped orange juice and coffees and spoke rapid-fire German to each other, and found a lone bathroom in the rear where I put on the new gloves, removed the voice recorder from its packaging, inserted the batteries and began recording my questions. It would be doing the talking, not me.

Comstock's door lock turned a happy green when I slid my card key into the slot. I prayed he was still sleeping, but as I opened the door a crack I could hear a shower running inside the room. Slight change of plans. Awake, he was unpredictable. He could have made arrangements to be somewhere, ordered room service, or requested maid service. I gingerly pulled the door closed and retreated back to the elevator area at the end of the hall. I picked up the small phone resting near a pad of paper and a set of pens on a long, ornate wooden table and dialed for the front desk. I explained that I was Nathan Comstock from room 4017, that I hadn't gotten much sleep last night so I'll be sleeping through the morning, so please make sure there are no phone calls or housekeeping visits.

“And what of your breakfast order set for 8:30? Would you still like that brought up?” the voice asked.

“Cancel it,” I said before hanging up.

The security bar, the evolved version of the security chain, was closed on Comstock’s door. Any idiot knows to shut it, so it was an expected obstacle. I opened the door as far as I could, listening for any noises but only heard the showerhead running and variable splashes of water against the shower floor. When the door stopped against the security bar, I took one of the rubber bands from my right pocket and looped it tightly around the top of the bar, then stretched it to reach the wall inside the room, just near the doorframe. It reached, just barely, so I stuck it to the wall with a thumbtack. The principle of these security bars, just like security chains, is that they can only be unlocked when the door is closed. When the door is opened as much as the bar allows, the small knob on the door blocks the bar from unlocking.

Thus, the rubber band. As I slid the door shut again the band pulled the bar away from the door on its own. Another swipe of the key and a turn of the handle, and the door was free to be opened. This is why these doors also have deadbolts, though many people don’t bother to lock that.

The room was rather dark with the drapes shut, but from what I could see it was a lushly decorated room with royal blue accents against off-white walls. A sliver of light spilled from beneath the bathroom door at the end of the room and the shower was still running. I slipped the black ski mask I’d bought over my head, adjusted the holes so I could see, and began to look around. One of the beds wasn’t made. There was a heavy oak desk at the other end of the room, on it was a soft leather laptop bag, and strewn across that was a fabric belt with large, clear plastic pockets meant to be worn under your pants to hide your valuables from pickpockets. I unzipped one of the pockets and pulled out a white letter-size envelope, inside it were at least 30 certified bank checks, from four different banks. I wasn’t sure if I should take them or not. The FBI might want them as evidence, though I doubt they’d be admissible if I stole them.

I waited about eight minutes for Nathan Comstock to come out of the bathroom. When the shower stopped, I darted to the wall and ducked behind the untouched bed. Then the sink ran for a bit, the toilet

flushed, and the door finally opened. Comstock came out of the bathroom wearing a white bathrobe; he swaggered over to the small couch near the window where his suitcase laid open and stood over it for a moment, looking at his clothes by the light of the open bathroom door.

Good a chance as any.

I got up and crept around the beds and stopped behind him as he stood next to the draped window and fished through his suitcase and picked up two white cotton socks. I felt a quick pang of guilt in my mind, but blocked it out just as quickly. This was going to hurt.

I grabbed his neck and slammed his head against the window. A muted thud, then a quick shriek that I ended by covering his mouth with a fistful of drapery, and then I kned him in the back sharply. He knew I was there, now to scare him.

I pulled his body away from the window by the front of his neck and his left wrist and pushed him across the room and over the edge of the bed. I pulled my knife from my pocket, flipped it open. With my other hand I rolled Comstock's head sideways and covered his mouth just before I plunged the blade of my knife into the mattress a few inches from his bulging eyes. I took the ball of white cotton socks from his hand and stuffed it into his mouth. He was scared, now to make him feel vulnerable.

Nudity is about the most vulnerable a person can be, so I sliced the pathetic terrycloth belt from the robe with the knife and pulled the robe off of him by grabbing the neck and yanking downwards; his arms bent backwards wildly as they slid from the sleeves. I kept my other hand pressed firmly downward on his neck just below his wet black hair, pinning him onto the bed as he lay there wet, pink, and exposed. He probably thought he was about to be violated in an entirely different way from what was coming next.

I brought the knife to his neck, lifted him up and backed him over to the desk chair and sat him down in it, then brought his arms around behind him and tightened them inside the makeshift handcuffs I'd already fashioned from zip-ties. I was pretty sure he hadn't seen me yet. He kept panting through his nose and making low groaning noises in his throat.

My deepened, slowed voice came from the recorder held a few inches from his ear.

“I’ve been given clearance to kill you if I want, but it isn’t entirely necessary, so if you’re a good little boy – don’t make a fuss, and answer all my questions – this might not be the last room you ever see. Understand?” I paused the recording.

Comstock groaned again, and then let out a low sob. The socks still in his mouth, mucous began bubbling from his nostrils with each breath. He nodded slowly.

The recording continued, *“I think you know who I work for,”* Comstock nodded, *“Our mutual employer has some concerns regarding recent behavior on your part. Particularly, why you’ve withdrawn all of your money and fled here. Speak.”* I paused it again.

I pulled the socks from his mouth. He coughed and flexed his jaw, panted a few times, and then found his voice.

“They,” he said between breaths, “or you, were already coming down on me. I thought you wanted me dead, or to punish me, so... so, I wanted to get the money somewhere where they couldn’t get to it.” He kept panting and sobbing.

I had to be tricky with the questions. I couldn’t exactly say, “Who do you work for?” when I was supposed to be working for them. He had to think they’d sent a hitter after him, one of their own. At the end of the series of questions I’d recorded, I included a few generic questions and remembered the timestamps for each. Since he wasn’t exactly following the script, I had to fast forward and watch the time on the small LCD display of the recorder.

“Why?”

“Why what? Why did I think they were coming after me?”

Silence.

“It was pretty obvious they were trying to screw with me,” he said, still panting but sobbing less. “First my debit card number gets stolen, then they trash my car, and then I get an e-mail someone’s trying to break into my e-mail account. It was clear someone was trying to get to me. I took the hint, man. I know I fucked this all up, I just wanted to get the money someplace safe before they tried to take it back or use it against me.”

Uh oh.

His employer didn't do those things, I did.

My mind was racing now, back to the beginning; the first thing I did was have Amy call and say his debit card was stolen so I could get into his bank account, I broke his windshield as a distraction to get him out of his office. That all happened the day after I was in the fight, the day after he said those words. "It might be expensive." After that, all the things I did to try to figure out who he worked for, *he* thought it *was* who he worked for. He thinks his little clever request for a pay raise had set them off, just as I suspected. He *was* scared, but for no good reason.

Because I was playing spy.

The recorder was silent for a few moments, obviously making Comstock nervous.

"And... and there was the thing with Dingan," he said in a huff, "I tried to have him bring the kid in and he screwed it all up, now he hasn't showed up for a few days and that's pissing them off."

He started sobbing again, "I fucked everything up, and now they sent you to kill me. God, I shouldn't have used Dingan, that idiot. Killed a cop. That idiot."

Dingan? Was that the guy in Lorton who pepper-sprayed me then tried to kill me? He tried to "bring the kid in"? He tried to blind me then kill me!

He didn't spray me until I tried to fight back when he grabbed me, though, and he didn't try to shoot me until I fled and made him crash his car into a tree, probably pissed him off something mighty. If he wanted to kill me, he could have sprayed me in the face with bullets instead of pepper spray. Was he just trying to "bring me in"? God, that cop could have been alive in the trunk before the car crashed into a tree.

What had I done? My heart began thumping harder and harder. Comstock was panicked because of *my* snooping, that guy Dingan and a police officer were dead because *I* had to make a big deal out of it and fight back. What had I done? This whole mess was my fault. I felt sick.

I have a guy, my principal, naked and tied up with a knife to his throat in a hotel room in Austria. All because I'd freaked him out with my ridiculous spying. How could I have done all this?

I still had no idea who was at the root of this. Who was paying Comstock to watch over me? Who was so bad that he would think they'd want to *kill* him because he seemingly made a mistake? The questions I'd prepared were now useless; I didn't expect the interrogation to go in this direction at all. The only thing that would be any help was part of a question I'd recorded, about why he'd asked for more money. I didn't know the timestamp, and the first half of the question wouldn't make sense, so I rewound and fast forwarded until I was somewhere that seemed right, and pressed play.

“-elieve the phrase you used was, ‘it might be expensive.’”

Comstock laughed weakly through his sobs, “Is *that* what this is about? For God’s sakes, I wasn’t even really serious. But come on, the kid went violent in the middle of school and I’m supposed to let someone get away with a four-man brawl without so much as a call home? I could have been fired from the school for that, and that would have *really* messed things up for them. A little hazard pay shouldn’t have been out of the question.” He chuckled again.

So that *was* it. I got off for the fight because Comstock’s employer told him to. A suspicion was confirmed, but I still was no closer to finding out who he worked for. The rest of my questions were now worthless. I figured it was time to get out of here now, so I was about to cut at the zip-tie handcuffs to make them weak enough for him to eventually pull free, when Comstock spoke again through his eerie laughter.

“I mean, come on. I figured the Marine Corps would be good for it.”

CHAPTER 33

I cut a small slit into one of the zip-ties holding Comstock's hands together so that they could be pulled apart with a bit of effort, long after I was gone.

I took the stairs down to the ground level, went out the side exit and dropped the ski mask, the recorder, and the gloves into separate trashcans as I passed them on the street. The mask went first, then I rewound the digital voice recorder and recorded myself blowing into the microphone until I'd reached the end, then took the batteries out and threw all the pieces away separately, then finally I got rid of the gloves. I knew I'd be clean, and I also knew there was no way Comstock would call the police. I walked around the Venetian streets in circles for half an hour, not looking at or seeing anything, and then finally made it back to my own hotel and up to my room; where I pulled off my jacket and shirt and collapsed onto the bed, then screamed into the pillows.

I don't know what I expected. I sort of always hoped I was imagining everything, giving minor events an artificial significance to make myself seem more interesting than I am. If anything I hoped that this all had to do with Mr. Comstock and had nothing to do with me. I'd

hoped he was selling government secrets and I was just somehow caught in the periphery. Instead, I was right in the middle of it. There was so much information, too much to process at one time. That guy, Dingan, was only supposed to bring me in and I more-or-less “accidentally” killed him in self-defense. And where was he supposed to bring me into? To Comstock? He could see me any day at school. What did this have to do with the Marines? Comstock works for them? That’s where he gets his money? And why is he talking to them about me? Do they think *I* did something illegal?

Trying to picture the Marine Corps was for me like trying to picture the wind. It was all around me, intertwined in every aspect of my life. My dad worked and died for them, most of the people I know are related to a Marine of some sort, even Amy’s dad was somehow involved with the Corps. It wouldn’t make sense that this would be the entire Marine Corps that Comstock was dealing with. If they wanted me for something, they could just come get me, they wouldn’t have to involve school administrators, and they could have had me when I was right on the central Marine Corps base. They ran my name through the computer at the security gate, if I was really in their crosshairs, they could have had me long ago.

No, this would most likely be some small element inside the Corps. Maybe someone that knew my dad, or some rogue faction. Maybe I could ask Amy’s dad, or that Schumer guy I talked to the day before in Quantico. Maybe they could help me.

Whoever I was dealing with, Comstock feared them and legitimately thought they would kill him. That was bad news for me. He also thought they might try to take his money. That was also bad news for me. If it *is* the government that’s so interested in me, they’d have the resources to access and screw around with my bank account, and they’d definitely know about my money. I supposed that if Comstock thought it prudent to move all of his money to some kind of ultra-private Austrian account, perhaps I should do likewise.

Looking up Austrian banks helped take my mind off of everything else. I found what looked like a prominent bank, Erste Bank, which had a branch right on the river and not far from me. I somehow knew that Erste means First, so if they really are the First Bank of

Austria, they'd have to be old and rife with financial loopholes and rich customers who don't want their fortunes advertised to governments.

I took a cab to the bank, expecting to find a giant stone-columned fortress with three levels of underground vaults. It was just a small little bank branch, like the sort of thing you'd see in the US between a donut store and another bank. Nevertheless, I went inside and asked for the bank manager. The teller at the main window picked up a phone and spoke to someone, then hung up and said in poor English that someone would be there in a moment. Sure enough, someone came from a row of offices just off the lobby area and walked me back to the furthest office. Inside was an old, meager man with thin hair and an expensive-looking suit. He stood up and offered his hand over his oak desk.

I sat down in a plush leather chair across from him, made sure he spoke English, and went on with it.

I explained in great detail how I was an American actor, how I had a few decent roles in Hollywood pictures but had just signed a contract to star in a three-part film series based on some popular children's books, that I'd be coming into a great deal of money, but was very concerned about my emancipated parents trying to get a hold of it in the courts because I was still a legal minor. I wanted to put it somewhere secure that couldn't be tracked down by investigators and the like, and I'd been suggested to try an Austrian account so I got on a plane, flew to Austria, and went to the closest bank to my hotel. It seemed more believable than, "The Marine Corps may or may not want me dead, and either way, they may want to use my money to make me dead."

The bank manager took all this in, seeming to follow my words perfectly, yet not reacting to any of my embellishments about how the movie series was going to be rubbish but was just being made to compete with the Harry Potter movies and because the studio would lose the license to the books if they didn't use it by the end of the year.

"The problem you'll run into here is the same one you will find in America," he told me, "you must be 18 years old to open a single-party account. You say your birthday is next month. We could start the processing now for an account and finalize it through the mail once you turn 18."

I frowned. “I’ve heard about these savings accounts with no identity associated with them. Just a number and a passcode. Couldn’t I just open one of those?” I asked.

Now the bank manager frowned. “You mean a Sparbuch, eh... passbook account? Recent banking laws have required us to slightly modify how we process those, though there was a time when you could open such an anonymous account where whoever holds the passbook and knows the password is the legal owner of the account; no names, no mailed statements, highly transferable – but because they made it rather easy to launder funds for illegal purposes, it’s impossible to open a new account like this. Even then, you had to be an Austrian citizen to do this.”

“You still have the Sparbuch accounts, though?”

“Yes,” he said, hesitant, “we offer anonymous and named Sparbuch-type accounts, but they must be opened like any other account, with a name and proof of identity and such. If one chooses to make the account anonymous, the name is held securely in our records and statements and transactions will just refer to the account number and not the name. And, as before, one must be 18 years old for this.”

It sounded like Rubino was right, modern anti-laundering laws made fully anonymous banking a thing of the past.

“You said you can’t open any new totally anonymous Sparbuch accounts, but there are still existing ones?” I said.

“Yes, we honor all accounts and could never close such an account because there’s no way to contact the account holder.”

“And you said those accounts are highly transferable?”

“Well, yes. Whoever has the ‘passbook,’ which is now a secure bank card, and knows the account’s security code is considered the account holder.”

“So...” I started, “would there perhaps be any of those cards lying around that someone might know the code for?”

The manager looked nervous and rapped his fingers against the desk for a second, then said, “I know what you mean, but this is not something we or any bank can do. There are services that broker in pre-existing Sparbuch accounts, or some people will just sell them outright

through advertisements and such, but this can be dangerous as some are scams.”

“Do you know of any services that definitely aren’t scams?”

The manager darted his eyes back and forth once, then looked around the room as if making sure that nobody had snuck in, then he opened a lower desk drawer and pulled out a folded newspaper that looked a few weeks old judging by the coloring. He drew a circle around a block of text with a pen then slid the paper across the desk, saying, “I’m sure I have no idea.”

Circled was a classified ad that first said, “E.B. Sparbuch Accounts. Guaranteed balances,” and had a phone number listed. Below that was seemingly the same text only in German. The bank manager probably had a relationship of some sort with whoever sold these, probably supplying the accounts or getting a cut of each referral, or both. I took the paper and set it on my lap.

“One more thing,” I said. “If I had such an account, could I wire money to it from a US bank? And how do withdrawals and deposits work?”

“The account would come with a routing number and account number that could be used like any checking account for electronic transfers in either direction. Deposits and withdrawals can be made in person at any branch, or from any of our 24 hour ATM kiosks throughout the country.”

I thanked the man and left the bank. As I waited for a cab, I slipped the newspaper page into my inner jacket pocket and as I looked around I saw a man across the street leaning against a car and looking at me. The man was early-thirties, had long black hair and a brown leather coat. At first he just glanced at me once, then again, then he squinted at me as if trying to recognize my face, then he turned to look in all directions, and then looked back at me as I tried to dodge his gaze by pretending to read a road sign. Across the street, the man got in the driver seat of his car and pulled a cell phone to his face, glancing at me one more time.

I reflected upon the last time somebody sat in a car and spoke on a cell phone while looking at me, and started walking. I thought I could feel my eyes start to burn.

CHAPTER 34

Nobody chased me. Nobody tailed me. Nobody gave me a second glance.

I'm going to drive myself nuts, I told myself. It was rather confusing though; the whole time I thought people were after me, I was just being paranoid. But people *were* after me, just different people. Is it still paranoia if there really are people out to get you?

I shrugged it off again. I had to stop thinking about it. I kept walking down the narrow Vienna streets, my hands tucked in my jacket pockets to keep warm. An hour later I was back in my hotel room, constantly checking my email and reading the news headlines at Digg.com. All the things I should have been thinking about kept banging on the walls of my mind, but I kept pushing it back. This made it hard to relax but kept me from thinking myself into a fit. Being cooped up in the hotel room started to make me feel a bit bonkers, and time just dragged on. I had to keep myself busy, I decided, so I picked up the phone and dialed the number on the newspaper ad offering Austrian sparbuch accounts.

After two rings, someone answered speaking in German. I asked if the man spoke English, he said yes.

“I’m interested in a sparbuch account,” I said.

“Yes,” he said in the thickest accent I’d heard since I got here, “we have available.”

“And they’re with Erste Bank?”

“Yes, we have them from many banks but Erste is the best common.”

“They come with balances already?”

“Ehh... balance, yes. They have 100 euro balance in account.”

“How much for the account?”

“They are 400 euro, but have the 100 in bank already so 300 actually price.”

“And the accounts, they’re completely anonymous?”

“Yes. Private account, no name or addresses. Best kinds. You want through mail or pick up?”

“Are you downtown? I could meet you somewhere.”

“I have someone downtown, where are you now?”

I gave him the crossroads nearest the hotel, and he told me of a café a few blocks away and said someone would meet me in two hours. I didn’t have anything to do besides sitting and stewing over the complicated nature of my life, so I grabbed the novel I hadn’t finished and walked to the café.

Starbucks it wasn’t. Most people were drinking espresso from tiny cups, something so pretentious that even Americans couldn’t stand. The café itself was small, very old looking but decorated nicely with a long singular wooden bench wrapping around the right wall to the back, stuffed with pillows and cushions and tables tucked up against them every few feet. At the counter I tried to cut through the language barrier and get myself a café latte (realizing that simply ordering a “latte” would get me a cup of milk), I ended up with something that seemed like the lattes I was used to but was more bitter than I expected. I settled in at a table in the back and started to read my book.

About an hour later a man came in that looked like what the man on the phone had described, young, dark hair, dark coat. On the phone he'd warned me that the guy meeting me didn't speak English. I waved at the man and he walked over. He had a manila envelope in his hand, which he held up and said, "Euros?"

I pulled the money from my pocket and set it on the table. He sat down and started counting after handing me the envelope. In it was a small folding booklet that reminded me of a passport, but it had the same dimensions as a credit card and a muted yellow color. The back cover of the booklet had a magnetic strip across the edge, which meant that you probably stuck the whole thing into an ATM just like a debit card; which meant that it was probably the sparbuch itself. Inside the booklet were a few pages that looked like rules or laws, written in German, and the account number was printed at the bottom. After that were a few blank pages that looked to be meant to use as a ledger. Also in the envelope was a small piece of paper that said "SECURE CODE" and a six-digit number. Finally there was a full-page document, an official-looking account summary printed and sealed by the Erste Bank. It listed the account number – the same number printed inside the Sparbuch – and showed a few random transactions dated over ten years prior, then finally a recent deposit that brought the balance to €100 exactly. I looked the page over; it was printed by a laser printer on heavy stock paper with a watermark of the bank's logo. If it was a fake, it was worth the price just for the authenticity.

He said something that might pass as "All good?" I nodded; he smiled politely and left with the money.

I put the sparbuch and the sheet with the code number in my jacket pocket, folded the rest and sat it on the bench next to me, then got back to my book. I finally finished it, and had gone through three coffees and was now on to juice as I sat in silent contemplation as the sun went down.

I noticed someone standing outside the café door, and it took a moment for me to recognize his face. It was the guy from outside the bank earlier in the day. He was standing there watching the door, not looking at me. It was illegal to carry a knife over three inches in Europe so I didn't have mine on me, though I didn't why know my mind went right to that. A few minutes later he was joined by another man similarly

dressed. He looked through the window around the café until his eyes landed on me. He appeared to take in a long breath, and then turned back around. I kept telling myself not to be nervous, that I was probably overreacting again, but I *had* done all kinds of unlawful things today, crimes both white-collar and otherwise.

I downed the last of my bottle of orange juice and watched the both of them as they stood outside, watching cars pass on the street.

Eventually they both sauntered inside the café, the first guy hanging around the door and the second walking straight toward me. My legs uncrossed and I pressed both feet against the floor, and the back of my mind focused on the fact that I didn't have a weapon on me. No silverware within reach, and the ceramic coffee cups I'd had were gone. The table wasn't bolted down; I bet I could throw it.

As the man walked closer, I could see that he was a bit older than the first guy. He was in his forties but still fit, and wearing a short leather jacket. The panic poking at my chest eased a small amount, but the man was indeed coming for me. He had a kind of coy smile on his face, like a man playing hide-and-seek with a child and obviously knowing where the kid was hiding. He sat down across from me at my table, turned the chair at an angle and leaned back in sloppy posture. I didn't say anything.

"You speak English, don't you?" he said with the same grin. His accent was very light, and definitely not German. French, maybe?

I nodded. He seemed pleased.

"I thought so," he said, "My name is Thomas Pratt." He pronounced it "Toe-mahs".

I swallowed, and thought for a second about what to say. "Chris," I decided on.

His grin pulled taught for a moment, and then he continued, "I'm a lead investigator with Interpol. I've been waiting to meet you for a long time, Mr. Baker."

CHAPTER 35

I knew one thing for sure: this guy wasn't going to give me a straight answer about anything. Everybody I've run into in the past week has been some kind of expert in half-answers and question-dodging.

Thomas Pratt, as he called himself, was sitting across from me at an old, wooden table in an old, cozy café in old, historic Vienna. As my brain rushed to put together the few pieces of information I had at the moment, I couldn't presently back-track my actions to remember how I'd gotten here.

He knew my name; that was enough to freak me out. Either he actually knew who I was, or he got my name from my hotel, which would mean that time I was sure I wasn't being followed, I was.

Interpol? I tried to remember what they do. Oversight and cross-communications between African and European police organizations. Drug enforcement, probably anti-terrorism stuff, bank fraud. Oh great, bank fraud! The whole thing at the bank, with the newspaper ad for magical untraceable Austrian bank accounts was all a setup – a sting. Wait for silly Americans to come wondering in asking for bank accounts

practically invented for money laundering, then tell him the only way to do so is illegally.

Wait, that doesn't make sense. For one thing, that's entrapment. Besides that, it still doesn't make sense.

And how long have I been sitting here in confused silence?

"You're trying to think of how you might know me?" Pratt finally said. I nodded, and then glanced around the place; there were three other occupied tables and three people behind the counter.

"Don't worry," he continued, "you probably don't."

"So what is this?" I asked, choosing my words carefully.

"This," he said with that stupid coy grin, "is the justification of the last two years of my career."

I didn't say anything. He opened his leather jacket and pulled a thick file folder from inside and set it down in front of him with a slight dramatic slam. He opened the top cover gently, flipped through a few pages I couldn't see, then pulled out an 8"x10" photograph and slid it over to me. I bent over to look at it; it was a portrait of a man in a strong navy-blue suit. The man was old, maybe fifties with silver hair and a powerful brow. He didn't look American. Pratt watched my face carefully as I looked at the photograph.

"Who's this?" I asked.

"You don't know?"

I looked down at the picture again, and shook my head.

"That is Jens Nesimi, an Austrian political figurehead and former military commander. You're sure you've never seen him?"

"If he was ever in a US newspaper or on the news, I may have seen his face before, but I don't recognize him at all. I don't usually follow Austrian politics."

"Don't *usually*?" he asked.

"Don't **ever**." This was beginning to sound like an interrogation; where the investigators will try to use your words against you. I began to feel uncomfortable.

Pratt slid the photo back onto the stack of documents and flipped forward a few pages, producing another photograph (this one smaller) and sliding it over. The shot was less formal. It was of an ornate bedroom shot from eye-level. A large, king sized bed was center frame, draped in lush-looking green sheets and a thick comforter, slightly disrupted by a man's body hanging awkwardly off the edge of the mattress. The body was dressed in blue pajamas, the face pressed against the wood floor, its torso hanging over the edge, and the legs were under the sheets. It looked as if the man was trying to slide onto the floor but his legs were tangled by tightly tucked sheets. I recognized the photo now as a crime scene photograph. The careless use of over-powered flash gave it away.

When I looked up from the photo, Pratt slid another over. It was the same room, the same man, but taken from another angle to show the man's face. It was the guy from the first photo, Nesimi. He was certainly dead, with a pale look of hopeless consternation on the part of his face that wasn't pressed against the floor. I frowned slightly.

"What's this about?" I asked, pushing both pictures away.

"Nesimi died in his home two years ago, apparently in his sleep; apparently he had a heart attack, tried to get up, but died almost instantly while his wife lay beside him. Because of the high profile, I was brought on by the local police to assist in the investigation."

"Investigation? I thought it was a heart attack," I said, forgoing the utter irrelevancy of any of this to me.

"That's how it seemed, but there were things that didn't match. He was a military man, in perfect health, except for HIV."

"He had AIDS?" This went from feeling like an interrogation to feeling like gossip.

"No, not AIDS, just HIV." Pratt looked annoyed that I didn't know the distinction. "He kept it a secret, fearing that if word got out his reputation would be destroyed. The official record is that there was some blood cross-contamination during his military career, but who knows, eh? The point of all that is, he was seeing a private physician in secret every month. After Nesimi turned 40, the doctor began running blood tests and heart EKG tests every month because of the risk of heart disease. Nobody knew about this doctor or his exams except for Nesimi and his

wife. The thing that made people question the heart attack theory is that Nesimi had been to his doctor that very same day, and given a clean bill of health.”

“Even his heart?” I asked.

“Especially his heart. According to this doctor, Nesimi was so paranoid about having heart problems that he made him run a full workup every month. The type of tests that aren’t even necessary every year.”

“So the doctor said his heart was fine just a few hours before he had a heart attack. Could the doctor have been faking the test results since he thought they were pointless?” This now really was beginning to sound like gossip.

“I thought of that, but I checked it out. No malpractice. Though, it wasn’t likely to begin with. The reason I was brought onto the investigation was that the security system at Nesimi’s home had an abnormality. He lived in a large estate inside the city with fences, security cameras, door alarms, motion sensors. When the local police happened to take a look at the camera footage, they found that the cameras had all gone down for three minutes, two minutes before the coroner estimated Nesimi’s death. They checked the system logs and the gate, door, and motion alarms had all shut down at the same time too.”

“So...”

“So, someone may have disabled the alarms, snuck in, and somehow poisoned Nesimi with something that mimics a heart attack.”

I didn’t know there were drugs that could mimic a heart attack. I thought of my father, of his supposed heart attack.

“Someone did all that in three minutes?”

“Sure.”

“And what does this have to do with me?” I was getting a bit antsy. The coffee and juice had gone through me and I needed to find and use a bathroom.

“I’m getting to that,” Pratt said. He was still leaning back, calm and comfortable.

He continued, “When I was brought on, the first thing I did was have a second autopsy done. This is how they found the abacavir... HIV medication in his system, which is what lead me to the secret doctor and the fact that he’d had all the heart tests that very day, confirming my suspicion.”

This was getting interesting, like some police/medical drama.

“The autopsy didn’t show any signs of poisoning?” I asked.

“Well, we first thought the HIV treatments were the poison, but when we found out they were prescribed, we had to do another autopsy.”

“A third?”

“Yes. There was nothing in his stomach or intestines that looked like a poison, so it must have been an injection. There were no visible needle marks on the skin, so I had the body flayed to look for any fine needle injection marks—”

“Wait, *flayed*?”

“Yes. The skin is removed from the muscle tissue over the whole body. Skin is elastic and will hide a needle mark if the needle is thin enough and injected into a muscle, not a vein, but the muscle tissue itself is disrupted by the injection, so the only way to find an injection point is to look at the muscle, not the skin.”

“That is very gross.”

“Nesimi’s family agreed. They’d already asked for no autopsies after the first, and I’d done two more against their wishes. They had the last one stopped when they heard about it. They’d wanted an open-casket funeral, which would be impossible with the skin removed from the body.”

I nodded, feeling slightly sick.

“But they found it anyway, the needle point. In the neck, just above the shoulder. He’d been injected with something that didn’t show up in the blood work. This meant whatever it was had crossed the blood-brain barrier or was an exotic drug not part of the usual toxicology screenings, and the examiner told me the only way to find the poison would be to wring out the cranial fluid or the fluid inside the eyeballs.”

Now I was feeling very sick.

“But we couldn’t proceed, because the family had the body removed and buried. I knew the man had been murdered, injected with something that caused or mimicked a heart attack, at night while the security system was disabled. It was like a shadow assassin, the thought plagued me for weeks. I’d gone through all of Nesimi’s contacts, friends, enemies, employees, and family members, and found nothing. There were no leads, and the case was closed. The family was furious at me for letting word get out about his HIV, and then having his body cut up. My career was put on hold, promotions lost, my life pretty-much ruined by this shadow. I had to redeem myself, and answer this riddle that was driving me mad. I finally began recalling all security camera footage from any home or business within three blocks of Nesimi’s home, but found nothing.

“Nothing, except one frame from the street security camera of a bank across the road from Nesimi’s estate. It was a reflection off of the windshield of a car parked on the street outside the fence at Nesimi’s home,” Pratt trailed off and pulled another photo from the folder. It was an 8”x10” again, but flimsy as if printed with a desktop printer on glossy paper.

The shot was dark, and obviously had been digitally enlarged. I could see a road, and a row of cars parked against it. Beyond the cars was a tall iron-looking fence with brick columns every 10-or-so feet. At the far right of the frame, on the windshield of the car closest to the camera, was a slight reflection provided by a street lamp. The reflection was of somebody leaning against one of the brick columns somewhere outside the frame. The person was wearing black, as far as I could tell, and looking to the side, giving a slight profile of the face in the reflection. I brought the photo closer to my eyes and squinted to look at the face. It was a male, but he looked young and the reflection distorted everything. I shook my head.

Pratt handed me another flimsy photo, an enlargement of a single quadrant of the previous. The photo showed just the section of the car windshield with the reflection. I could see the guy leaning against the column, could now see that he was looking down at a wristwatch, and could see the face clearer.

It was my face.

Well, it sort of looked like my face. It was blurry, digitally enlarged, warped by the reflection, and very dark, but it looked a lot like me two years ago. It was silly, and preposterous, but still shocked me. My eyes widened and my heart picked up its pace.

“That photo was the only lead I’d developed after a 2 month investigation. A blurry reflection of a teenager’s face. When I showed it to superiors and the detectives at the police department, they laughed at me. A shot of a teenager outside a man’s house in the middle of the night hardly proved anything. They said it could be anybody, just some neighborhood kid walking around. But I knew it was the shadow. I’d interviewed everybody who lived or worked within walking distance from the estate. And that posture, leaning against the gate and looking at a watch. That shot was taken about thirty seconds before the house’s security system shut down. He’s waiting for something, for word that the system was offline or waiting for whatever he’d done to disable it to be activated.

“That photograph haunted me. I put it up on my office wall, then on the side of my desk after I’d been demoted out of my own office. I looked at it every day, knowing whoever that was had destroyed my career, but somehow I respected him. He’d performed an almost untraceable hit. I’ve dealt with assassinations, but never one so clean. Everybody I know and work with knows about that picture, they see it every time they come to my desk. So when Markus, a former partner of mine happened to see you walking from that bank today, he thought he’d give me a call.” He gestured to the guy he was with, the man I’d seen at the bank.

“I checked the bank, and called the hotel that Markus had followed you to. Christopher Baker. An American. I knew the shadow had to be a foreigner; all the good assassins come from Russia or the Americas. Then I saw you for myself when you came out of the hotel, saw your face, I knew it was you. But how could I rationalize someone your age, who would have been fifteen at the time, being such a skilled killer? I can’t, but here you are buying a sparbuch account, probably to hold funds for another hit. Why else would someone like you need one?”

Okay, this guy was loopy in the head. “You think *I* killed your politician guy? That’s insane.”

He nodded. "I know it's insane, and this is why it works so well. I don't know how I'll prove it, but I will. I don't know how someone your age can do what you did, but you did it."

This was all too unbelievable. I shook my head and chuckled. I thought that I'd been caught for my visit with Comstock this morning, or worse, but this crazy guy just thinks I look like a kid who was outside someone's house two years ago the night someone died? You can't make this stuff up.

"Are you kidding me? There are billions of kids on the planet, yet you know that 'shadow' of yours is me because I kind of look like a sideways reflection taken off a camera in the dark two years ago? Do you go around to all the high schools in the country and interrogate any brown-haired kid with this nose and subtle cheekbones?"

Pratt slid the two photos back into the folder and closed it, folded his hands, and finally leaned into the table. "Do not mistake me for a crazed idiot, Chris, I know that face. I know your face. You come from America, you pay for hotel rooms and plane tickets with your own money, and you buy untraceable bank accounts used throughout history to launder money and to collect payment for illegal jobs. You're a minor and you're visiting Europe by yourself on a three-day trip yet you've done no sightseeing as I can tell. I wouldn't make a mistake like this."

I sighed, feeling like I was going to be kidnapped by a lunatic obsessed with teenage boys. "You've got nothing to go on, though," I said. "They said that the photo of that kid wasn't enough to continue the case, so just finding someone who looks like him isn't going to change anything."

"True, but if I suspect you of terrorism I can hold you for at least 24 hours without charges. That will give me time enough to run your fingerprints and photograph through every Interpol database, put a hold on your passport, and track down your relatives or employers. It might even keep you from performing another of your miraculous hits if that's what you're here to do."

Suddenly this had all lost its gleeful air of ridiculousness.

Pratt stood up, motioning his friend Markus to come over. "As we suspect you of terrorist activities," Pratt began, "we're taking you into custody for questioning and examination." He pulled a set of silver

handcuffs from his belt, and Markus stepped over and pulled me up by my arm.

All this, and I still really had to pee.

CHAPTER 36

Metal handcuffs were ratcheted onto my bare wrists behind my back, a spectacle that both intrigued the people in the café and somehow amused me to no end. As I was walked outside the place and lead down the street to where I assumed a car was waiting, Pratt said something aloud to me but it didn't register. The absurdity of being taken into custody in Austria for a murder I didn't commit two years ago were monopolizing the attention capacity of my brain.

It was all very inconvenient.

Tonight was Thursday; my flight home leaves early Friday, my mom is supposed to get home late Saturday or early Sunday. If this loony Interpol guy wants to keep me for the 24 hours he's allowed to, that will royally screw up my plans. Not to mention, if this guy is touched in the head enough to decide that I was a fifteen-year-old super assassin based on a blurry photo and a glance at me from across the street, maybe he could find some "evidence" to connect me to the death of Princess Diana or the crash of the Hindenburg. His hand around my arm, I continued walking down the street lined on both sides with cars. The other guy Pratt was with seemed to have disappeared. Pratt was still

talking, probably going on about having captured his mega super secret killer man, but I wasn't listening. I was too busy thinking.

We turned down an unlit side street and eventually stopped at a small black car, a model that I didn't recognize. Pratt pulled a back door open and kind of slid me into the backseat and slammed the door shut. The car wasn't meant to be used for police work, or at least prisoner transport. The front seat was open to the back seat with no divider. Stupid.

I couldn't take my chances with being "brought in" again. The thought of having my name, face, and fingerprints listed in Interpol databases seemed a bit disgusting at the time, and I had a plane to catch. No time for any of this garbage.

Now I just had to figure out how to get out of this without driving any cars through someone.

Pratt got into the driver's seat and turned to look out the side window as the second guy, Markus, approached the vehicle and got into the passenger seat. I guess he didn't feel safe riding alone with magical underage ninja hitmen. I suppose I wouldn't either. The two men spoke to each other in German for a second, and then Pratt started the engine. I toyed with the handcuffs on my wrists for a second. I thought of the events of the past few days, the fight on Thursday, and the principal's office on Friday, the shooting and pepper spray on Saturday, the FBI on Sunday, new cars and Chinese food on Monday, Quantico and e-mail hacking on Tuesday, planes and hotels on Wednesday, naked principals and Interpol agents on Thursday. It was all beginning to blur together, predicament to predicament, no explanation for anything. I wanted this all to go away, I wanted to be a regular teenager again; a guy who doesn't know the names of any FBI or Interpol agents and doesn't have a gun in his bedroom closet.

I was beginning to dislike cars; you feel so vulnerable in them. Someone could just walk up and blast you with pepper spray through the window, and all you can do is sit there. I thought of Amy sitting next to me for all that, me telling her about "up" and "down"; "up" meant to turn away and cover her face, in case the guy... *Dingan* used the pepper spray. "Down," that was for if he drew the gun and started shooting. She was supposed to drop the seat recline lever and drop backwards. That would have been bad, if he'd drawn the gun and not the pepper spray. I

leaned sideways to look at the driver's seat in front of me. Between the seat and the door, there was a long plastic lever, just like on my old car. Looking around, the car seemed older. I'd bet the seat reclined wildly in both directions just like my Civic's.

That gave me an idea.

Pratt pulled the car into reverse and slowly began to back out from the alleyway and waited for an opening to back onto the street. I turned my foot sideways and carefully slid it in the narrow space between his seat and the door. It was tight, and something was poking into my leg, but I could feel the plastic lever with the tip of my foot. Markus glanced back at me, and then looked away. I took in a long, deep breath.

I pushed my foot upward, but it slid off of the seat lever and kicked part of the door, sounding a short thud. Both men suddenly looked to the left and Pratt said something quickly in German. I brought my foot back down and kicked upwards again, not having to worry about stealth this time. I felt the resistance of the lever as I brought it nearly straight upwards. I felt the back of the seat in front of me lose tension and slip backwards, and I brought my right leg up and slammed the seat-back forward as hard as I could with my foot.

Pratt's torso heaved forward with the seatback. I heard his face smash into the steering wheel. His foot must have slipped from the brake, because the car began to creep backwards into the traffic of the main road. Markus, in the passenger seat, screamed something and turned back toward me, reaching his left arm into his jacket. I pulled my left leg free from between the seat and door, feeling something tear my pants leg, and pushed myself backwards enough for clearance enough to bring my left leg around in one short arc to connect with Markus' neck and bring it, and his head, into the window behind him. He stopped moving.

The car, however, didn't.

The inside door handles didn't work, probably disabled for "safety." The engine idled; the transmission in reverse, the car crept into the perpendicular street the car had pulled off of. Cars honked and swerved to avoid us. I was trapped in the back seat, watching headlights through the window as they drew closer and quicker, praying they would turn away quickly enough. My left ankle started to sting dully, it will

probably bruise and swell before morning. I tried crawling into the front seat to open those doors but it was too cramped and they were blocked by two disabled Interpol agents.

I sank back into the rear seat as the car continued its slow reversed crawl. More honking, more screeching brakes, more near-misses. I had to get out of this stupid little foreign car.

Well, I suppose it wasn't foreign to these people. Why was I thinking about *that*?

I tried hitting the window nearest me with my shoulder, then spun around and tried clanking the handcuffs against them, but that just dug them into my skin. I laid back across the bench seat and tried kicking at the window to no effect. I adjusted my position, put my back against the opposite door and pressed against it to counterbalance my kicks against the glass. I used both feet, felt a heat in my left ankle with each impact. Two more times I kicked both feet against the glass, the second time I felt it give away slightly. One last time I heaved all my strength through my feet and slammed them through the window. The glass broke into thousands of tiny fragments adhered to a sheet of clear plastic and folded forward slightly. Safety glass. I spun on my knees and used my elbows to push the glass and plastic away from the window frame.

I laid back down in the backseat and tried to curl up into a ball, wiggling myself off my back and onto my shoulders so I could shimmy my arms down my back then up and over my legs, returning my hands to my front. I reached my arms out and felt for the outside door handle, felt it, and pulled at it but accomplished nothing. The door must have been locked too. Rather than try to deal with that, I just used the handle to pull myself head-first through the rather small window. When my chest was out, I spun around and pushed against the roof of the car to drag myself out the rest of the way.

The car had moved through the two lanes on one side and was now into the opposing lanes. I cleared the window and fell flatly onto the street as cars were now heading straight for me, all honking and swerving much later than I would have appreciated. I pushed myself up to my feet, both hands pressed against pieces of glass scattered on the street. I turned and ran away from the street, passing the car I'd just escaped from as it gently brought itself to a stop by backing into a car parked against the sidewalk.

I heard glass break behind me as I awkwardly ran down the sidewalk in the direction of my hotel, slightly limping to keep weight off my left ankle and my arms swinging weirdly bound together. It was probably around 5 PM; traffic was getting heavy as people got off work and the sidewalks filled with pedestrians. I had to cut through a lot of people as I ran against the foot traffic to get away. I tried to hide my handcuffed wrists inside my jacket, when I felt something light and wiry in one of the inside jackets. I stuck a hand in the pocket to see what it was, and pulled out the pair of reading glasses I'd bought as part of a disguise.

Still limp-running, I gleefully bent one of the sides of the frame and tore it from the rims and dropped the rest on the street. Left with only a thin metal strip bent at one end to curve around the ear, I stuck the broken end into the keyhole of the cuff on my left wrist with my right hand and bent it sharply to the left, turned it around, then bent it to the right. This made the frame into kind of Z-shape at the end, which I stuck back into the keyhole and fiddled around, still running, until the ratchet of the cuffs came free. The cuff wouldn't come off, but it could get tighter. I spun the strip of metal around and fiddled in the opposite direction for a few seconds until the cuff came loose and slid off of my hand. I did the same thing with other cuff, deciding I must have seen this on TV somewhere, and dropped the cuffs onto the sidewalk once the other cuff came free.

Behind me, I heard a squeal of tires and a familiar slam of metal against metal and sheets of glass turning into a dancing rain of fragments against pavement. I stopped and turned around. I couldn't see the car anymore, but assumed someone had finally crashed into it. I hoped to myself that I hadn't just killed two more people. Presuming I didn't, I still needed to get back to my hotel and collect my things as fast as possible.

I packed my clothes together quickly and threw them into my small suitcase, then shut off my laptop and slid it into my backpack. I quickly circled the room that had been my home for the last 24 hours and made sure I had everything, then used the menu on the TV to check out, and was outside the building within two minutes. Pratt knew where I was staying, he knew my name, and he knew about my travel plans. I had to get to the airport and get outside of the country before he recovered enough to start hunting for me again. I realized that if he'd previously

assumed I was some kind of killer teenager, I'd just confirmed that for him. I hadn't killed him, though. At least, I really hoped I hadn't.

I got a cab and went to the airport.

My flight wasn't for more than 12 hours, but I didn't feel like sticking around that long. I'd assaulted two Interpol officers. If Pratt didn't have any concrete reason to hold me before, he at least had me for assault. For that, he could get the actual police on me. My passport would be flagged. I'd be a wanted fugitive. Why, oh why, did I not think about things before I started hurting people?

I was dropped off at the departures terminal of the Vienna airport and stood on the curb, checking out all angles. It was too soon for a search to be organized, but I felt like being cautious. If I hurried, I might be able to get on a plane before the wrong people knew my name. This could follow me back home, I realized. Interpol and the US government worked together all the time, I'd heard. I started to hope Pratt *was* dead.

I went into the airport and found an ATM, used it to withdraw a thousand euros, not knowing or caring how much that was in dollars. I'd need one heck of a story to justify a kid my age paying cash for a flight to America. I also needed to not be me.

There was a gift store before the security checkpoint. I went there and looked at postcards until I heard someone speaking English. Behind me, looking at shot glasses with "Austria" etched on them, were two Americans. One was about my age, maybe older; the other was in his twenties. They were joking about some stupid thing having to do with drinking. The one closest to my age was wearing an orange and blue backpack, and his blue US passport was tucked neatly in a pocket on the side. I stepped around them to get a look at his face, his hair was shorter than mine, and he was a bit pudgier than me, but he was close enough. I stepped back around, bumped into his backpack, and walked away without saying anything. I heard him call me an asshole under his breath as I walked away.

In the bathroom, I looked at Ryan Tambour's passport and compared it to my own. He was 18, according to his birthday, and was from North Carolina. His photograph wasn't exactly a striking resemblance to mine, but to someone who looked at thousands of

passports per day it might just work. Flipping through the visa pages in the back, it looked like he'd been to Germany, Switzerland, and France, and had just arrived in Vienna. It'd probably be over an hour until he'd need his passport again and find it missing.

I went back to the ticketing area and paid cash for a flight leaving in two hours for Reagan airport in D.C., not Dulles which I'd come from. I checked my bag as Ryan Tambour, passed through security as Ryan Tambour, sat around the gate as Ryan Tambour, and boarded the plane as Ryan Tambour. I took two of the sleeping pills I'd bought from a store as Ryan Tambour, and slept for most of the flight to Reagan. I went through US customs as Ryan Tambour, turned the rest of my euros into dollars, and took a cab from Reagan to Dulles to retrieve my car.

It was Friday afternoon by my best guess and according to the clock on my car's radio, when I got to my house and went straight to my bathroom and fell asleep in the shower.

CHAPTER 37

I found that when I slept, I didn't have to think about the many things I should have been thinking about. In my sleep, people don't seem to want to shoot me, blind me, or take me into custody, either. I'd slept through the whole flight from Vienna and I was still tired when I got home, after dozing off in the shower I zombie-marched to my room and tumbled into my bed. Either the sleeping pills I bought at the airport were made of magic, or my subconscious really needed to stretch its legs.

I woke up to the sound of my doorbell. In my tired daze, I couldn't decide if it would be the FBI or the police. The clock by my bed said it was just after 3 PM. I used the limited resources of my still-asleep brain to make sure I was wearing clothes – T-shirt and shorts, that should cover it – and walked down to the front door stiff-legged and still slightly wincing with each step on my left ankle.

Amy was at the door. Suddenly I felt better.

“You're here,” she said as I pulled the door open.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said with a dismissive wave.

I moved out of the way and Amy stepped in, her school bag dangling from one hand. It felt like I hadn't seen her in a month; I was expecting her hair to be longer or a different color. She walked quickly and gracefully, as if she weren't wanted in two countries, not a care in the world. I envied that.

I was still fuzzy from the sleep, trying to maintain a line of thought was like bobbing for apples in a vat of peanut butter. Apples and peanut butter sounded good. I pointed my feet toward the kitchen and willed myself to locomote.

From wherever Amy was, she said, "I drove by your place on the way home and I saw your car. I thought you flew in tonight."

"Yeah," I said, trying to locate some kind of caffeine delivery system in my cupboards. "Stuff happened. Had to catch an earlier flight."

"So how did the trip go?" she asked, now inside the kitchen.

I stared blankly at the small boxes in a cupboard for what felt like a long time, then turned around and looked at Amy. "Huh?"

Her brow furrowed and her lips sunk into an odd frown. "Your trip," she said again, "Austria. I believe you flew off to the Old Country to find out what was going on with our plucky principal."

"Right," I said, holding two small cardboard boxes in my hands. One talked of herbal infusion; the other went on about English breakfast.

"I forgot about that part," I said. "It turns out all the suspicious stuff he was doing was because of all the suspicious stuff *we* were doing so he thought I was going to kill him. Well, not me, but his boss guys." I was confident that all made sense.

Amy sat in a tall chair at the counter. She started to say something, blinked twice, then finally said, "*What?*"

I was trying to figure out how to get water hot.

Once I'd had two cups of hot tea and had moved to the couch in the living room, I told Amy about the trip. About the Marriott and the Ambassador, conning my way into the latter, then breaking my way in, the voice recorder, the bank, how the coffees tasted different than Starbucks. I didn't tell her about a dead guy named Jens Nesimi, or about what one might call my harrowing escape from a slow-moving vehicle.

“So you didn’t find out who Comstock is keeping an eye on you for?” she said.

“What?”

“You didn’t– what I just said.”

“I thought I told you,” I said, confused. “It was an integral part of the story.”

“You didn’t say anything.”

“Oh. Weird.”

“So...?”

“Marines.”

“What?”

“Marines.... Marines-comma-’the’.”

“What Marines? All of them?”

“I don’t know, all he said was, ‘I figured the Marine Corps could afford it’ or something. Or did he say ‘be good for it’ instead? I’m not sure; my brain was too busy exploding at the time.”

“So it could just be some Marine guy. It doesn’t have to be the whole Corps.”

“He didn’t say anything either way,” I said, “I think the larger issue is the fact that somebody affiliated with the Marines is or was paying Comstock to pretend to be a school administrator just so he could watch me and keep me out of trouble. Also, Comstock hired some guy named Dingan to ‘bring me in’ just because I stopped going to school for a day, and later I drove a car into Dingan.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Amy said.

“Put that to a tune and it could be the theme song for my life.”

“No, I mean... you had the fight on Thursday, right?”

“Last Thursday, yeah.”

“And Lorton was on Saturday. So you only missed school one day, on Friday, and he freaked out and hired a nutcase to bring you in?”

I leaned my head back and thought about it. “Friday was when I came in and we did the bank account thing, and I put a hammer through

his car window for a distraction. When you called and said his bank card was stolen, and then his car was vandalized, he thought it was his ‘boss’ people – some Marine guys – trying to get to him. He thought they were upset about him asking for more money, or for letting me even get in the fight.”

“Okay,” she said, “what are our working theories regarding why you’re so special that people are paying people to watch you and to pay other people to bring you in?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “my money? No, that’s stupid. My boyish good looks?”

“Well, boyish–”

“So, yeah. ‘I don’t know’ is my working theory. Is this something I should be asking the FBI guys about?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

I crossed my arms and said, “Well this all sucks. I’m sick of sitting around and waiting for somebody to attack me so I can acquire another hint at what’s going on here. Maybe my mom knows something about this.”

“When does she get home?”

“Tomorrow or Sunday,” I said. “It doesn’t seem like she would have anything to do with this, but I think I’m in too deep now to keep this a secret.”

“What about your dad?” Amy asked.

“Him?” I said, “I think he might be dead.”

Amy sighed. “I know *that*. I mean maybe this has something to do with him. He did work for the Marines, after all.”

“So did yours,” I said, “and nobody’s chasing, shooting at, or trying to arrest you.”

“You don’t think this could have anything to do with your dad or what he did?”

“Of course I do, but I don’t like to think about it,” I said. “I was a lot happier when I thought this was all grief or denial and I was making this up to get attention. If the Marines really are behind all of this, and it’s

connected to my dad and his work, then this is a lot bigger than I'd thought."

"This seems like a situation where one would ask people for information," Amy said, "You know two FBI agents. The 'I' stands for Information."

"No it doesn't."

"It—oh, right."

"Federal Bureau of Information?" I chuckled.

"Excuse me, then," she snipped back. "There's also that guy from your dad's work. Schumer?"

"Yeah, but I—" I suddenly remembered that there was a USB drive on my kitchen table potentially full of information copied from Schumer's computer. I'd forgotten all about it.

My answers could be on the USB drive. I stood up and dashed to the kitchen. There it was, on the table. I picked it up, the innocuous hunk of plastic. Looking at it, the fear came back. If this whole mystery is as big as I thought, maybe I don't want to find the answers. Maybe there are no answers, just more questions. I was afraid I might find out something about my father that I wouldn't like, or I'd find something out that could get me killed. This area's mantra kept repeating over and over in my head.

Don't ask questions.

Amy soon followed me into the kitchen and stood at my side. "What's on that?" she asked.

I closed the drive in my fist. "Nothing," I said, turning toward her. "Have you eaten yet?"



It was nearly dark when we came back from a locally owned bar & grill-type place. Besides needing to catch up on sleep, I also had a lot of eating to make up for. I couldn't remember eating a full meal during my stay in Vienna. I missed out on a lot of sausage. I'd put on pants before we'd

gone out, and the USB drive was tucked in my pocket. The same pocket as my knife, which I'd fished from my suitcase. I didn't know why, but it just felt good to have it on me. If I ever came across a letter that needed opening, or a Ugandan rebel that needed opening, I liked to know I'd be covered.

It had been nice to spend an hour not thinking or talking about the elephant in the room or the monkey on my back or whichever proximity-based animal analogy applies. When we got back to my place, though, they went right to my mind. I sighed, knowing that I'd eventually look at the files on this USB drive, if there were any, so I might as well get it over with. Maybe it had a nice, two-paragraph story that explained everything and pointed out that this was all one big misunderstanding.

I kicked my shoes off and went straight up to my room, Amy followed without a word. I sat down at my computer and plugged the USB drive into a port on the front of the PC tower. Amy set her purse on my desk, then crossed the room and sat down on my bed. I glanced over, again trying not to freak out about the girl-on-my-bed phenomenon. She didn't ask what I was doing; probably assuming I was going to check the webcam outside Comstock's house. She looked down at my open suitcase on the floor with my clothes spewed out.

"So," she said, "Did you get me anything?" She was playfully dangling her legs over the side of the bed.

Something sharp stuck into the side of my brain. Shoot. I was going to get her something but I never got around to it. Trying to think of something to say, I opened the USB drive's contents on my computer and clicked the first thing I saw, and then spun the chair sideways to look around the room.

"Umm," I started, grabbing my backpack and fishing through it. There were two passports, an envelope with anonymous Austrian bank account credentials inside, my computer, two books, and, well...

I tossed Amy a small paper book of matches. She caught it and turned it around in her hand. "The Marriott?"

I stood up and walked over to her. "The Marriott *Vienna*," I said, pointing at the word. "How often do you see matches from Western Europe?"

"Personally?" she asked, with a grin.

“All right,” I said, “I didn’t have time to get anything. I left in a bit of a hurry.”

“It’s fine,” she said, looking at the matches in her hand.

“No, really, I was going to get you something. Something amazing, I’m sure.”

She looked up, smiling. “No, really,” she said, “you didn’t have to. You weren’t there for sightseeing, I know.”

The silence was peppered with the sound of a truck driving down the road.

“You’re still supposed to buy stuff when you go to another country,” I said.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said softly, “we can pick something out when we go somewhere together.”

I noticed my heart was beating just a bit faster than normal. I sat down beside her on my bed, looking at the matches in her hand. “Like where?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes in a circle. “I don’t know,” she said, “I’ve always wanted to see Paris.”

Neither of us said anything for a few seconds. My guard lowered and voice low, I said, “You know there are drugs that can mimic a heart attack?”

Her eyes went from the matches to me. “Did Comstock say that?”

I looked down at my knees. “No, I... I read it somewhere.”

“Do you think that’s how your dad died? The heart attack wasn’t real?”

My eyes traced my legs down to the floor, then over to the wall, and up to the ceiling. I tried to look through it, through the sky, and into the heavens, where all my answers must be. “I don’t know,” I said. “Just something else to complicate my life, something I can rail against.”

I looked at her, she looked at me. It sounded like the truck on the street wasn’t moving, but that might have been my brain thumping in my ears.

There was a slight sadness in her eyes, like a painful memory that kept creeping up. The side of my hand on the bed was barely touching hers. Her other hand was holding the book of matches, spinning them around, her eyes following. She smiled, then stood up and walked over to my desk and put the matches in her purse. She glanced at my computer's monitor once, then twice. Her eyes widened a bit and her mouth opened slightly.

I thought I heard a car door opening.

"That's you," she said, still looking at the screen.

"What?" I asked, sliding off the bed and walking around the desk.

A soundless video file was playing in Media Player. It must have been the file on the USB drive I opened without paying attention. The video was black and white, taken from an awkward over-the-head angle. It showed an empty-looking room, and me sitting at a desk directly in the center of the frame. It was definitely me, wearing my clothes. I was looking at someone or something outside the frame, and occasionally looking down at a piece of paper in front of me on the desk.

I stepped closer to my computer and sat down in the chair, watching the video frame closely.

"When is this?" Amy asked, over my shoulder.

"I don't know," I said, "I don't remember it at all."

"Where is this from?" she asked.

"Schumer's computer," I said without taking my eyes from the screen, "from Quantico."

In the video, I continued to look back and forth from the paper to whoever was standing in front of me outside the camera frame. A few seconds later, I folded my hands on the desk, leaned my head forward, and appeared to go to sleep.

"What the hell is this?" I said.

Amy started to speak but I silenced her. A sound from downstairs grabbed my attention. A light clicking and the sliding of metal. I thought it sounded like a lock being picked.

I stood up and stuck my head outside my bedroom door. The noise was low but constant. I could still hear the sound of a truck idling outside, too.

Everything after that was a sharply focused blur.

I pulled back into my room and quietly shut my door. I turned off my computer monitor and opened my closet door. I found my handgun and the loaded magazines, slid one into the gun's grip, and pulled the slide back, chambering a round.

"What are you doing?" Amy asked, pulling me slightly from my focus. I looked at her, standing there. I glanced at the gun, then back at her. Decisions.

I pulled her with me into the wide closet and pushed her carefully into the corner, then handed her the gun and set the other loaded mags on the shelf closest to her.

"You know how to use this," I said, "it's just like the Beretta."

She looked at me with a stupefied gaze. I pulled clothes from shelves and hangers and dropped them into a pile on the floor. "You can hide under these if you need to," I said. I stepped backwards out of the closet and grabbed the doorknob.

"You'll hear my voice when I open this door," I said. "If you don't, start shooting."

I pulled my cell phone from one pocket, my knife from the other. I handed Amy the phone, she took it with her left hand, the gun still in her right. "Call the police," I said.

"What are you doing?" she asked again, eyes wider this time.

"I don't know," I said. Her eyes were pleading as I pulled the door closed, leaving her in the closet alone with my only gun.

I stood still, in silence. I heard the knob of the front door turn slowly downstairs, and the hinges whine as the door swung freely open. I flipped the blade of my knife open, spun the handle in my hand so the blade pointed downward, and held my breath.

CHAPTER 38

A moment of clarity. The jagged pieces of reality that make up my perception of the world suddenly snap from disarray and everything becomes clear for an instant. At this time, I don't do things because I want to or need to. I do them because they are the only things that could ever make sense. Afterwards I'm left in a daze and barely remember the moments just before, but while I experience them they are the temporary embodiment of a perfectly executed concept. The universe seems to be in chaos, then for a second the fog is lifted and I see the world and my life through disconnected and clairvoyant eyes. Just as quickly, the fog returns and I'm snapped back inside my head and the world continues just as before, only reeling from whatever I had just done.

Twice so far this had happened to me. The first was eight days ago, when the comfort of my existence was interrupted by a few punches to the gut and a fist driving toward my face. The second time was six days ago, another interruption of my stasis as a man began firing a silenced pistol through the darkness and through the windshield of my car. Both times, the violence sucked my attention from the typical malaise of my life and into that moment of clarity. Both times, I performed actions I would never have considered before. Both times, I

hurt people in ways I didn't know I would ever be capable of. Both times, I couldn't have cared less about the pain I caused.

The third time happened like this:

A solitary desk lamp fought away the night darkness in my bedroom as I stood in silence, listening to the steady thumps as my heart forced blood through my veins. Downstairs, the front door's lock was picked, the door opened. My legs and arms relaxed, then moved nimble and dedicated through my bedroom door, down the hallway, and partway down the stairs. My knees and ankles shared the tension and accepted my weight so I made no noise.

I ducked in the stairwell landing and peered from the darkness into the main floor, just as I had done years ago while my parents argued about baseball team tryouts. Through the wooden slatted banisters and down the main hallway I could see the front door, now open. One man walked through it, one other man behind him, another was already inside and turning into the kitchen. They crept like me, their knees crooked and steps silent. They wore uniform black body suits, black nylon harness vests around their chests, black domed helmets on their heads with tinted goggles covering their faces. They carried compact carbine submachine guns in their hands. When the sight of these people seemed in no way unusual or foreign to me, I realized that I was again operating on autopilot.

The second man came through the door as the first disappeared into the kitchen, and the third came in as the second turned to his right into the living room. The third came straight down the hallway towards the stairs.

It wasn't a SWAT team, I thought to myself. They weren't maneuvering in a stick formation and they were clearing rooms without cover. If it were a SWAT team, I would have just turned myself in right there. SWAT, a division of local police departments, has rules to follow. They subdue people and take them into custody; they don't shoot anyone unless they're a threat. They also bust through doors with rams and explosives, screaming "Police" and generally making their presence known.

They weren't SWAT.

That's all I needed to know.

When the third man turned toward the staircase, I sunk back into the darkness and went back up the stairs. To the left were empty bedrooms; to the right were my bathroom and my bedroom with soft yellow light seeping through the partly open door. The rest of the floor was pitch black, including my bathroom where I went, pressing myself against the back wall. I heard the soft jingle of gear dangling from a vest as the third man came up the first set of steps, turned across the landing, and started up the last set. I heard him stop at the top of the stairs, perhaps choosing a direction, and choosing right and heading toward the light of my room. I listened to my heart beat in pace with his steps, and I made sure I was breathing. My knife was still in my hand.

When the dark shape of the man passed the bathroom door, I sprang from the darkness in a single step and plunged the blade of my knife into the man's right shoulder through the back and brought my left hand around to cover the man's mouth just as he tried to scream from the pain. If I had been in a more rational place, I would have noted how the knife's Teflon coating and unique tanto-point design let the blade slide through cloth, bone, and muscle with little resistance.

With a quick tug I dragged the man backwards into the black of the bathroom. He dropped the gun from both hands and it dangled from the strap clipped to his harness and over his left shoulder. The knife still stuck into the meat of his shoulder, he wouldn't dare move his right arm, and his left was pinned by my own arm. He breathed hot and wet through his nose against my hand.

"Who are you with?" I asked as quietly and as menacingly as I could. I put a small amount of pressure on the knife, and slightly lifted my hand from his mouth.

After a few tedious groans and winces, he said, "I'm an American."

That was obvious.

"What's your objective?" I asked in the same voice.

Between groans and whimpers, he said, "Some guy. Whoever lives here."

"Extraction or hit?"

He mumbled something between groans, but I didn't understand. I asked again. Nothing.

I sighed. He wasn't going to be any help.

I covered his mouth with my hand so nobody would hear him scream when I pulled the knife from his shoulder. I felt him go limp from shock, but his head bobbed and the tension returned to his muscles. Guy just didn't know when to pass out.

I grabbed the nylon rifle strap from his shoulder and wrapped it around his neck and pulled sideways with my free hand, putting pressure on his carotid artery. After a few seconds of limited oxygen to the brain, his legs began to buckle and his whole body went limp. I let him drop to the tile floor.

A part of me, deep down, wondered if I'd screwed up and simply strangled him, but I pushed through the concern.

I rolled him over and unclipped the strap from his harness, then unwrapped it from his neck and picked up the gun. In the limited light I could barely make out the shape of the weapon but it seemed foreign, even for a submachine gun. I felt around the sides for a bolt, found one, and pulled it back. The guy hitting the floor had made more noise than I expected, the other two men downstairs probably heard it.

I started down the first set of stairs quietly, but I heard that jingling noise again. Around the corner, someone was coming up the bottom set of stairs. I stopped at the landing, waited for the jingling to stop, and swung the butt of the gun around the corner. I felt the metal frame of the rifle connect with a helmet or goggles, and heard what sounded like a few sacks of potatoes being dropped down the stairs. I turned the corner and followed the noise with my eyes down to where a man lay crumpled at the bottom of the staircase. I leveled the gun and raised it to look down the rail and took the a few steps down.

I found the other guy; he was in the hallway now heading toward the commotion. He looked at the man on the floor, then saw me and lifted his gun. Mine was already on him. I took a breath and started to pull the trigger when more movement caught my eye. Four more men, dressed the same as the others, poured through the front door. There were more than just the first three, it seemed; this changed things.

Three gunshots sent three bullets toward me. I fell backwards and edged around the wall dividing the staircase, heard more bullets impact the wall just behind me. I thought about dropping down again to try my luck shooting back, but the odds weren't in my favor. I instead just stuck the gun out and fired off a few rounds blindly, then ran back up the stairs to my room. I locked the door behind me, then tipped the nearby bookcase over to pin the door shut.

I called Amy's name, said it was me, and knocked on the closet door. She opened the door, the gun still in her white-knuckled fist. She looked a bit like a wet cat. "Icalledthepolice," she said as one long stuttered word.

"We have to get out of here," I said, setting the gun down on my desk chair. In the light now, my suspicions about the gun looking odd were confirmed. It had unusual curves and looked kind of like a gun from a futuristic space movie. "XM8" was printed in stylized letters on the side of the butt. It didn't mean anything to me. I shook my head and went into the closet, grabbed all of the loaded magazines for the USP and stuffed them in my pockets.

"What's going on?" Amy asked, standing in one place and turning at her hips to follow my movement.

"I don't know," I said. "Guys, guns, shooting. Just another Friday night."

I crossed the room and looked out my window at the back of the house. There was nobody out there. I opened the window with the metal crank as wide as it would go, then I turned and stripped the sheets from the bed and started pulling the twin mattress off the frame. Amy watched incredulously, until I asked her to help. Together we spun the mattress on its edge and slid it through my open window. It fell and landed in the grass on the ground about six feet below the window. *Not too bad*, I thought.

I took the pistol from Amy, switched the safety on, and somehow fit it in my pocket.

The door to my room shook, the knob wiggled. The lock didn't have a key; they'd have to bust it in. That's what they started to do. I grabbed my car keys from my desk, and threw Amy her purse, then went back to the window. It was a tiny jump, but I still hesitated.

“Land like I do,” I said over the banging on the door. I stepped up onto the windowsill, and then stepped downward onto nothing.

The landing came immediately. I hit the mattress with my feet, felt my ankle sting, and rolled sideways to disperse the energy. I stood up and looked up at Amy through the open window, and waved her down. She emulated my movement well enough, but made a slight huff when she landed. I realized that I left the submachine gun, the “XM8” in my room. Great.

I drew the pistol and we crossed the back of my house together, staying tight to the wall. The corner to the side of the house was clear, so we followed the wall to the side of the garage. The side garage door was still unlocked from when I took out the trash earlier in the week, so I opened it slowly and we went into the garage. Amy started to ask what I was doing, but stopped before finishing. I went around my dad’s car and into the corner of the garage where the grill, the gas generator, the cans of gasoline, and the miscellaneous car stuff was. There was an older, metal gas can mostly full of gasoline. I grabbed that by the rusted handle, opened the cap and stuffed a cloth rag down it, and grabbed one of the butane stick-lighters from next to the grill.

Lucky for me, the van these guys came in wasn’t blocking my car. It was a black panel van, unmarked, with the back doors open, parked on the street against the curb. Inside of it were bench seats on both sides. Two men, not dressed like the others, stood outside of it, looking at the house.

Crouching down, we crept from the side of the garage to the side of my car. I unlocked the passenger door manually with the key, and told Amy that I would open the door and jump in and she would follow as quickly and quietly as possible.

I lit the rag sticking from the mouth of the gas can, waited for it to start to burn, then stood up and hurled it sideways over the top of my car and toward the van. The can wobbled oddly in the air, a streak of orange light from the flame on the rag. It landed on the street just short of the van and rolled sideways beneath the van.

No explosion.

The rag had fallen from the mouth of the can as it rolled, but gasoline was now pouring freely from the hole. The two men heard the

metal can hitting the pavement and turned around to investigate. Gasoline flowed in all directions from the mouth of the can, eventually spreading to where the barely-lit rag lay on the ground.

The flowing gasoline soon turned to a flowing lake of fire spreading from all sides of the van. The two men yelled and ran away from the van. As much as I wanted to stick around and watch the show, I pulled my car door open and crawled over the passenger seat and settled into the driver's seat as Amy got in and closed the door. I started the engine and backed out of the driveway, turning wildly to clear the blaze on the street, then put all of my weight on the accelerator and drove off. Behind me I saw movement around the house. As I turned onto another street, I saw a quick flash of light and heard what sounded like the gas tank of a black panel van exploding.

I wasn't wearing any shoes, I noticed. That made me laugh.

CHAPTER 39

Clarity fades. Bare feet against a rubber pedal. My right hand grips the emergency brake for some reason. The growing realization that my life is an absolute mess creeps through my mind and echoes its mantra louder and louder. There's a girl sitting next to me, she asks what's going on. I have no answers. No answers, never any answers.

Don't ask questions.

My headlights reflect against a red stop sign, pulling my attention back to the world outside my head. I'd already run a few stop signs in the maze of neighborhoods and subdivisions I was navigating, but the hard-wired reaction to the sight of this one overpowered whatever force was controlling me up to this point. Nobody seemed to be following me, but I'd taken the most complicated route possible just to throw off possible pursuers. Eventually I ended up in front of Amy's house; I didn't know where else to go.

Amy snuck me into the house and then into her room like an expert. I could hear her dad downstairs watching TV. I thought maybe he'd like to hear my story about how I'd gotten to use my Emerson on

some guy, but I decided to save that for a time I wasn't inexplicably in his daughter's room after dark on a Friday night.

I sat down in her desk chair like I did the last time I was there, put my head in my hands, and wondered out loud what I was going to do. A familiar feeling came over me, the same feeling I'd had less than a week ago, the feeling I had as I abandoned my car in the woods up in Lorton, after I'd just killed someone and tried to get myself to feel bad about it. It was like trying to regret something that I wasn't sure I'd actually done, like apologizing for a dream. My shirt was wet then too.

Then it was milk, now it was blood. On my chest, my right, was a small red circle of it. I stood up in a panic, knocking Amy's chair over, and pulled the shirt from my skin and felt for a wound. There was none; it wasn't my blood. I groped at the fabric and pulled the shirt off and threw it in a corner. I was breathing heavily while Amy watched wordlessly from where the edge of her bed. I felt weak, tired, and sick. I started to pull the chair from the floor, but decided to sit on the floor next to it. I wanted to scream or cry, but I knew both would be as worthless as trying to talk about it.

"This is it," I said, looking at the carpet through the slits between my fingers sprawled across my face. "My life is over. Nothing is ever going to be normal again."

"Were those guys the police? Like, SWAT team?" Amy asked.

"No," I said. "Not SWAT. I distinctly remember deciding that earlier."

"Okay, so then the police should be at your house soon; since I called them. Maybe you should be there and they'll be able to tell you who they were."

"The cops will find this all very interesting after Lorton. The FBI won't be able to hold them off this time. That, by the way, is not a sentence a seventeen-year-old is supposed to say."

"Eighteen soon," she said, almost hopeful.

"In a month. Looking forward to a birthday isn't the consolation it used to be. I don't even know if I'll be alive in a month."

"Come on."

I looked up from the floor at her. “It’s been a week and I’ve had to fight for my life twice now, not counting the other two fights that weren’t for my life. Those were just for fun I guess. The cops, the FBI, the Marines, and whoever that was at my house all have files with my name on them now. In another two days I could be on the run from the Navy, Coast Guard, Ghost Busters, and MI6.”

“Maybe you should call the FBI guys,” Amy said, “they always seem to know what’s going on before you do.”

“Well, the I *does* stand for Information.”

Amy laughed slightly, then pulled my cell phone from her purse and tossed it to me. I tried Rubino’s number from the redial menu, got a recording. I found Bremer’s card in my wallet and tried his number, another recording. Worthless. I dropped the phone, stood up, picked up the chair, and turned on Amy’s computer.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“My own investigation,” I said.

I searched for “XM8”, the name of the gun those guys carried. I found out it was the Heckler & Koch (the same brand as my handgun) XM8. It was a prototype gun designed because the US Army wanted a futuristic, modular assault rifle to replace the aging M4 and M16 rifles. Every weapons maker competed for the contract by coming up with the most unique gun they could think of, adding futuristic and untested features such as computerized “smart” targeting and night-vision cameras for scopes.

The XM8 was designed to be modular. From the same body its barrel, hand guard, stock, and magazine could be removed and replaced to convert the weapon into a carbine, a compact submachine-style gun, a sharpshooter sniper rifle, or a stationary full-auto weapon with a bipod and 100-round drums of ammunition. It looked like a rather novel idea, being able to convert the same weapon to suit your application by swapping out a few parts, like some kind of Transformers toy. From what I read, it looked like the version the men brought into my house was the standard “baseline” version but without the optical sight.

I really wished I hadn’t left that gun in my bedroom. It seemed like the ultimate toy.

I kept reading and, according to some articles, the weapon's development was put on hold when the Army didn't give them the contract. The gun's development would probably be canceled because of the cost and more readily available alternatives.

That meant that the guns were rare, very rare. Prototypes of in-development weapons wouldn't just slip onto the black market like weapons made by the tens-of-thousands. Prototypes are numbered and sent to the military for testing and training on contract, the inventory tracked carefully. To carry them, then, you'd have to be either military or very friendly with the military.

That means it wasn't the Boy Scouts breaking into my house and possibly trying to kill me.

After some more searching, I read that outdated prototypes were being sold to the military wholesale. One article said that the Marine Corps had bought the largest share of them, because a lot of officers really liked them for training and specific tactical applications.

"Great," I said, "another big flashing arrow pointing at the Marines."

"Could those have been Marines in your house?"

"I don't know. They weren't wearing any markings."

"The military isn't allowed to operate within the US without a presidential order or something," Amy said. "The... Posse Coma-something Act. Ever since the Civil War."

Since I was in a web-searching mood, I looked up "posse civil war" to see what she was talking about.

The Posse Comitatus Act, I found, was passed in 1878 and indeed restricted the use of the federal military within the United States in effort to prevent the Army from being used as law enforcement. After the Civil War, people in Confederate states feared that the northern army would come in and generally "occupy" the South. Posse Comitatus meant policing had to be done by local law enforcement only. This means that the Army, Air Force, Marines, and National Guard aren't allowed to do things like breach homes and try to kill teenagers. Unless, that is, the President suspends Posse Comitatus for a specific action. I didn't even bother considering this went up that high.

Amy got up and stood over my shoulder, reading the screen along with me.

“God, what is this scar from?” she said suddenly.

“What scar?” I asked.

“On your shoulder, here.” She poked my shoulder blade quickly.

I tried to reach my arm around and feel it but I couldn’t reach. I stood up and went to her bathroom and tried to look at it in the reflection over my shoulder. It hurt my neck, but I could barely see a scar, maybe three inches long, on my back near my left shoulder blade. The skin was raised slightly, just a bit lighter in color than the rest.

“I’ve never seen it before,” I said, my head still craned sideways. I turned around and faced the mirror, looking at myself and trying to remember why I would have a scar like that on my back. “I can’t think of anything that would have caused it.”

Amy stood behind me, looking at it. “It looks old,” she said.

She held out a finger and lightly circled it. The touch was light, but it made my heart leap. I could feel the warmth of her body through my back. She ran her finger over the scar again. I couldn’t remember the last time someone had touched me, when I’d felt connected to another person. My breathing was slowing. In the wide bathroom mirror I watched her behind me, looking over the rest of my back. She placed her palm softly on my other shoulder, her heat spread across my body, my skin tightening. The muscles on my back went taut, along with my chest and abdomen. She pulled back on my shoulder slightly and I turned around and faced her, she went over my chest and stomach, as if looking for another scar or some other imperfection. She touched the middle of my chest, my sternum. There was still a slight discoloration from the bruise left by the seatbelt from when I crashed my own car into another.

“Things must be confusing for you,” she said. “Your life, I mean. All of it.”

I nodded, slightly.

She looked up at me in silence. She was only a few inches shorter than me but my eyes fell naturally to hers. The bathroom light was dim, casting shadows from her hair across her face. She stepped ever so

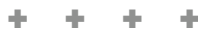
slightly toward me, her hand lingering still on my chest. Her eyes were deep, her mouth just barely open. She looked at me. I said nothing.

Nothing in my life made sense, but when I was with her it all seemed to have some glimmer of hope. She kept me grounded. All I'd ever done, though, is put her in danger. Here she was, sticking through the bullets and the fire, and all I can do is bring her more of each. I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to take in the warmth of her touch for as long as I could, and sighed. I opened my eyes again, looked at her again.

“When this is over...” I said.

She nodded, seeming to understand. She stepped closer and pressed her head against my shoulder. My right arm went around her waist, and I remembered the parking lot of the gun store in Lorton. When a stranger called out to me, I instinctively grabbed her waist and pivoted her behind me. I looked over at the mirror, at the both of us, then just at myself. It was getting harder to recognize myself. I kept looking. My face. My eyes. Something was different from how I remembered myself. I was changing.

Into what, I don't know.



I woke up the next morning in a bed that wasn't my own and quickly ran through a mental checklist that every guy must have hard-wired into his brain for these situations. I had pants on, and that told me enough. I sat up and waited for the rest of my brain to wake up, and looked around. Soon enough I remembered the night before. I'd offered to sleep on the floor but Amy's bed was huge so we decided it'd be fine for both of us. I was unsurprisingly exhausted and fell right asleep. I'd slept until noon the day after Lorton, and I slept through my flight after Vienna. It seemed that whenever Instinct Chris took over and got me out of dangerous situations, I slept like a rock that night. I ran a hand over my head, and willed myself to stand up.

Amy was sitting at her computer typing something I couldn't see. When she heard me she turned the chair around and watched me try to pull myself together.

"You talk in your sleep, you know?" she said. She was dressed already. I tried to find a clock, gave up, and looked at her with tired-squinty eyes.

"I do? What do I say?"

"I couldn't tell. Sounded like you were reading a grocery list or something, all monotonous and stuff."

I shrugged, and started walking but stopped when I realized I didn't know where I was going.

"I have some mannish T-shirts if you want," she said, pointing at her closet, "and I got some of my dad's sneakers from downstairs."

I nodded. "We or I should walk over to my house and see if anybody's there still. If it's clear, I can get some of my stuff and try calling Rubino or Bremer again."

She nodded. I found a concert T-shirt that fit me and put on a pair of Nike cross-trainers that looked reasonably new.

A few minutes later, we set off together towards my house. The spring air was crisp, but not too cold. It felt good in my lungs, like breathing new life. It smelled like someone was burning leaves. We cut through the lawns and climbed that small brick wall and slowly got closer to my house. Someone could have been there waiting, so I edged around a house across the street from my own so I wouldn't be seen. I heard trucks running; big, diesel engines like garbage trucks.

I stopped for a second to yawn and leaned against the wall of the house. I should have gotten some coffee, but it was enough work sneaking out of Amy's house without her dad seeing me. My brain still felt foggy.

Amy got tired of waiting and went the rest of the way around the house to the opening between it and its neighboring house. She stood in the clearing and looked across the street toward my house in silence.

I kept thinking about coffee. My brain is like mashed potatoes in the morning until I get some caffeine. I listened to the truck engines and

smelled the air again, and remembered just then that it's the fall when people burn leaves, not spring.

“Chris...” Amy said.

I walked to her in the clearing and said, “Hmm?”

She wasn't looking at me, though. I followed her eyes across the yard and across the street to my house. The mashed potatoes in my brain suddenly froze into a slush and pain shot from my skull. My house had burned down.

All of it. My house was gone. There were blackened walls and a charred lawn, and between them were mounds of black wood. Fire trucks lined the street, with firemen walking between them – a few rolling up hoses. Some men were climbing through the burnt remains and poking at the piles with long sticks. Amy said nothing.

I wasn't breathing. My house had burned down. I couldn't speak. I opened my mouth but nothing came out. My mind could not produce a valid thought. My house had burned down. My legs felt weak. I slumped backwards and sat down in the grass. Amy looked down at me, then back at the direction we'd come from. She grabbed my arm and tried to pull me up. She said something, but I couldn't hear her. The grass was wet. My butt was wet.

My house had burned down.

CHAPTER 40

I always loved fire. Even as a kid. If I'd been less responsible, I would have been what people call a "pyro." If I had one mutant power, it would be the ability to manifest fire. Think of the possibilities; you're eating some bananas and sipping cheap brandy and think, "If only I could put these together and light them afire," but you have no matches. Good thing you can shoot fire out of your hands. Instant Bananas Foster.

Fire is the only thing that isn't a *thing*. Fire is a reaction, not an object. It contains no matter, no atoms or elements. It's just the physical structure of some object breaking away from itself. Civilization would be impossible without it. Water has to boil, food has to be cooked, bodies have to stay warm. Empires have to burn, to make room for new ones. They say Chicago burning down was the best thing that ever happened to the city, gave the town a chance to start over fresh. Unheard-of rebirth and cultural expansion.

At the time, though, it probably sucked a lot and for a lot of people.

I was frozen, in a way. I couldn't move, my brain was too busy exploding to deliver muscle commands through my nervous system. My house, the only one I'd ever lived in, was gone. Some charred walls and a huge pile of ash. Gone was everything physical in my life that I could hold onto and say, "This is mine." All I had now was a bloody shirt, pants that probably had a grass stain on the back now, my wallet, a knife, and a gun. All my clothes, both of my computers, my TV, all my movies, my books, everything. Gone. I'd left that USB drive in there too. Fantastic.

Where my kitchen had been, I could see my refrigerator. Mangled, blackened, and on its side. A bathtub was on top of it. Quaint. Like a clock melting over the edge of a table. The summation of my life is now a Salvador Dalí exhibit.

Amy continued to pull on my arm and say something. Eventually the dull buzzing filling my head cleared enough to process her words. "Come on, we shouldn't be seen here."

I didn't know what she was talking about, but I stood up and let her tug me back behind a house and out of sight from the street. I leaned against the wall again, closed my eyes, and tried to take control of my breathing. My head ached still.

From where ever Amy was, she sighed and under her breath said, "Man, your house..."

I opened my eyes suddenly, seeing the world differently now. "I can afford it," I said before turning and walking back toward Amy's.

Outside her house, I leaned against my car and waited while she went inside and came back with my gun and my keys. When she asked what I wanted them for, I said nothing. I took the gun and the few loaded magazines and set them in the passenger seat of my car before starting the engine. The passenger door opened and Amy picked up the gun and ammo and set it in the back seat after sitting down.

"You're not coming," I said.

"The hell I'm not," she said.

I looked at her, then back at the steering wheel. If I'd had some kind of plan, I would have tried to consider it and how to not implicate her into it. I had nothing.

“Fine,” I said, “but don’t blame me if you get killed.”

“Deal.”



Amy stopped trying to ask where we were going once it was clear we were headed toward Quantico.

“Do you think it was the gas can?” she asked after a few minutes of silence.

“No,” I said plainly.

“Any reason?”

I said nothing.

I wasn’t in a mood for talking. I wasn’t really in a mood for anything. Going to sleep for a few weeks and not dreaming at all sounded like the ideal scenario just then. When I first saw that the house had burned down, I too had figured it was that gas can I lit and threw, or the van I threw it at. It couldn’t have been, though. The street was at least 100 feet from the house, so anything that could have gotten that far would have been small. It would have started a small fire and burned slowly until the cops arrived. They’d call the fire department, which would come out and put out the blaze while it was in the middle of tearing up the kitchen or ruining the carpet. The inside might have been destroyed, but the house would be standing. Houses don’t burn all the way down these days, even the old ones. Not unless one makes an effort of it. Someone had either placed small charges on the supporting walls downstairs and initiated a hurried, but controlled demolition; or someone had strategically set large fires on both levels knowing how they’d burn.

It would be a good way to get rid of the bullet holes in the walls. Rounds can be dug from walls, their angles and trajectories determined and the type of weapons tracked down. Burn the wall down, and all that’s left is a few small bits of lead in a mountain of debris. My house was burned down on purpose.

Yet another assault upon my life and everything in it. I was through with it. No more sitting around wondering whodunit or why. No

more sneaking around, no more bank or computer espionage. No more unanswered questions. Now, I was going to find the answers even if it killed me. I had nothing left but question marks. Not for long, I told myself.

I drove to Quantico as I had done before. Off the highway, onto Russell Road, and to the security gate. The same elaborate dance of vehicle-circling and stupid questions was performed by a different man at the gate. I showed my identification and the guest pass Schumer had given me and I'd left in my car, said I should be cleared in the system, and waited while he looked it up and used the phone. He came back, told me the same story about parking in the lot to the left and waiting for an escort. The young lady would have to wait in the car. I nodded and pulled forward into the lot, into nearly the same spot I'd parked before. It was a Saturday, so the place was a bit more deserted than when I'd been there before. I hoped Schumer would be there on a weekend, but if not I wouldn't mind just walking around the "university" to see what kind of fun I could have.

A Jeep pulled up after a few minutes, I got out of the car without saying a word to Amy and got into the Jeep. The driver brought the car down the road in silence, dropped me off in front of the same building, and drove off. Outside the front door of the building was Lt. Colonel Schumer, flanked on both sides by fatigued Marines holding M16s and standing at attention. Schumer looked the same, albeit a bit more nervous. When I approached him he offered his hand, I just looked at it.

"Right," he said, retracting it. "Well, I assume you've thought of more questions for me. Why don't we head to my office?"

"What's with the centurions?" I asked, looking at both Marine guards. They both eyeballed me as if they could shoot knives from their orbital sockets.

"Oh, just part of their Executive Protection rotation. For their training. They pretend I'm somebody important and I give them a grade based on how well they keep me from being killed."

I couldn't decide which was more odd, the fact that Schumer was lying, or the fact that I knew it.

Regardless, I followed them inside the building and through a metal detector. I didn't remember that being there the last time. Schumer

and his guards each went to the side of the detector, but one of the guards stopped me from bypassing it and pointed me through it. I went through to no fanfare. I had decided to leave my gun in the car.

I followed Schumer down the hall to the left and into his office. The two guards stood outside the office, one on either side of the door. When I sat down in the same seat as before, Schumer closed the door and stepped around and sat behind his wide oak desk. I glanced at the back of his computer and tried not to smirk.

The fact that I'd been kept from considering for the past 12 hours was that, for some reason, he had a video of me on his computer. A recent video, taken of me at a time I could not remember. The intruders had distracted me from it, and then the fire had swept it from my mind. I'd remembered it while I drove, though. I'd racked my mind trying to make sense of it, and came up with nothing more credible than there being a clone of me running around somewhere. Rather than trying to play spy, I decided to go right to the source.

“So,” Schumer said as he settled into his chair and folded his hands on the desk.

“Shut up,” I said before he could continue.

I leaned forward against the desk to get closer to him.

“You’re going to tell me what the hell is going on. You’re going to tell me why you have videos of me on your computer, you’re going to tell me why my house was burned down last night after armed men came in and tried to kill me, you’re going to tell me why Nathan Comstock is being paid to keep tabs on me for you and why he hired a hitman to ‘bring me in,’ and – for the love of God – you’re going to tell me what my dad really did here.”

I leaned back in my chair and folded my arms, feeling slightly silly for still wearing a black concert T-shirt for a band I didn’t know.

Schumer unfolded his hands and leaned back in his chair as well. He pursed his lips slightly and looked at me silently for at least twenty seconds, as if contemplating some elaborate mathematical theorem. I mimicked his posture and waited. Schumer opened his mouth to say something, paused for a moment, considering his words, and said at last, “Your house burned down?”

I felt my arm tick slightly. If I'd had my knife on me, it probably would have gone through his forehead just then.

“Yes,” I just said, calmly. “After a brick of guys in tac gear and carrying XM8s broke in and started shooting.” I didn't know what “brick” meant, but it sounded appropriate.

Schumer leaned forward slightly and rubbed his leathery chin, then ran his hand through his stiff, graying hair. His voice deep and rough as ever, he said, “I can answer some of those questions, others I have no idea about. If you come back in a few weeks, I'll probably be able to answer them all.”

“Just tell me what you can now,” I said.

“It will have to wait. Come back in a few weeks, after the 5th, and we can talk about it as much as you'd like.”

“The 5th? My birthday? What does that have to do with anything?”

Schumer closed his eyes for a second, then opened them and began to shuffle papers on his desk. “It's just the best time for me, my schedule is just packed until then. Look at me; I'm working on a Saturday.”

I sighed, long and drawn-out. It was the same thing. Every time I wanted answers, some stupid thing came in the way. Everybody talking in riddles or treating me like an idiot. That was fine, kind of intriguing in fact, until someone burned my house down. Then the appeal was lost. Now, all I have time for is the truth.

Schumer knows the truth, but he expects me to wait for it? Wait while more government agencies introduce themselves or try to shoot me or blow me up. No more waiting, no more games.

The truth, *now*.

I brought my right foot up to the top edge of the desk and pushed with all my strength. The oak desk heaved, and tipped forward. The monitor and computer on the right side of the desk slipped forward and crashed onto the floor, then the desk itself fell forward to the floor, knocking Schumer over and pinning him down. He yelped as he fell and screamed as the edge of the desk came down around his stomach. The

desk had come down onto the metal computer case on one side, propping it up slightly and holding some of its weight off of Schumer.

Behind me, I heard the door open. One of the guards spilled into the room, his M16 drawn and ready. I was on my feet and at the door in a second, my hands around the barrel of the gun and yanking it from the Marine's hand. With a quick thrust I crashed the butt of the weapon into the guard's chin, and then swung it sideways to strike the other around the side of the head. I dropped the rifle and pulled the pistol from the holster on the waist of the second guard, brought my elbow into his gut, and the butt of the pistol into the forehead of the first man's. In one flurry of motion I had the two men on the floor. I slipped one of the pistols into the belt of my pants, and then grabbed the other pistol. The M16s I unloaded and threw the weapons and ammo down opposite sides of the hallway.

Back inside Schumer's office, I stepped around the tipped-over desk and pressed the barrel of the pistol into the cheek of Schumer's wincing face.

"How about you tell me right now?" I asked politely.

Schumer coughed and groped at the surface of the desk pinning him to the floor. "You crazy little shit," he said between coughs.

"Maybe we should start with what you really do here and what my father's job was," I said, still pressing the gun into his face with a steady pressure. My right elbow hurt slightly from the impact against two skulls.

Schumer's breathing grew weaker. "Fine," he said, "get this thing off me and I'll tell you."

"Tell me and I'll get it off you,"

"I can't breathe!"

I pulled the gun away, stepped over his head to the other side of the desk and pulled the edge of it up. With the few inches of clearance, Schumer was able to back himself out from under the desk. I let go and pulled him up, as he had trouble getting his balance. He hunched for a few seconds, catching his breath.

"I could have internal bleeding," he said.

“Tell me something to make me care,” I said, holding the gun into the back of his neck.

“Not here,” he said. “Outside, by the river. There’s a small park. We can walk there. I’ll tell you there.”

“Great,” I said.

CHAPTER 41

The walk took five minutes; outside, across streets and intersecting pathways. There weren't many people milling about in the Eastern end of Quantico on this Saturday afternoon. Those who were around chose to mind their own business and not wonder why a teenager in a concert-tee was leading around a decorated lieutenant colonel.

"I might have underestimated your ambition, but this should still wait until next month," he said once en-route.

"And why is that?" I asked in return.

"Because then it would be less illegal."

"You're going to explain that one, too," I said, shaking my head.

As the sound of the Potomac grew closer, we cut through a line of trees and found ourselves in a small park. There were some running paths weaving through the trees, a few park benches lined the edge of the fencing against the river's edge. To my right in the distance I could see the airfield and the hangars where they kept Marine One, the President's helicopter equivalent of Air Force One. I considered the existence of a Navy One; does the President have a personal aircraft carrier, perhaps?

Maybe a submarine. Maybe one of those inflatable motorboats the SEALs use.

My mind wandered, for lack of caffeine. Getting back to business, I walked the both of us over to a metal-framed, wooden-slat park bench that sat on the well-maintained lawn and overlooked the Potomac. The white noise from the river was loud and variable, going from shrill to low at random as the water level and surf changed. I imagined this made the use of listening devices rather difficult, and I wondered how many wars and top-secret operations had been planned from this very park bench. Wandering again.

Schumer sighed, losing some tension as he sat down and leaned back against the bench. I sat beside him and for a moment watched the river roll. This point of the river was over a mile across. Maryland's shore looked in the distance like a foreign country with an ocean between us.

"How well do you know your history, kid?" Schumer asked beside me, facing the waters too.

"I can tell you anything about the French Revolution you want to know," I said.

The gun I'd slipped into my belt poked into my back, so I shifted in the seat a bit to ease the pain. The other gun was in my right pocket. I hadn't taken the time to examine them, but I assumed they were Berettas.

"I mean recent history. Political," Schumer went on. "The 1970s, the Cold War long gone, the military and its ancient tactics were beginning to show their age. Things like Iran-Contra and the hostages were cropping up all the time, terrorist groups posing more of a threat than entire armies."

"Iran-Contra was in the 1980s," I said.

"That's just the one example," Schumer said. "The point is during the mid-70s the military became aware that they would have to change their outlook on the world in order to survive in it. This is when the 'black budget' was invented. Each branch of the military found new and creative ways to skim billions of dollars from the defense budget for their own off-the-books projects. With this money, the Army and Navy built their black-ops counter-terrorism units like Delta Force, SEAL Team Six, and Red Cell; and the Air Force built and commissioned next-generation, highly secret aircraft like the stealth bomber and the F-117. It

was a whole new age, Uncle Sam's pocketbook was wide open and all we had to do was be clever about the bookkeeping and we could do or try whatever we wanted."

"Slush funds, right, I've heard of all this," I said.

"What you didn't hear is what the Corps did with its share of the money," Schumer went on, his voice a bit lower. "Aside from a few projects I don't know about or won't talk about, our primary concern wasn't with new counter-terrorism units or invisible airplanes. Our concern was recruitment."

"Recruitment?" I asked, glancing at him for the first time since I'd sat down.

"Yes. All across the military, enlistment was down. The sense of 'join up and fight for your country' diluted after Vietnam, we weren't fighting for God and country anymore, almost every military maneuver in the past 25 years has been about politics or money. Even the simpletons at home on their couches could see that. Dropping your shovel and going to fight Hitler, that's one thing. Sitting around a hole in the sand, polishing your gas mask and waiting for another bio-attack alarm, all to make sure we keep friendly parties on top of the oil reserves, it's a whole different thing.

"The only people joining up were the wrong kind of people. People join the Army now because they flunked out of college and have nothing else to do. They join the Navy because their dad, or uncle, or neighbor, or barber was a Navy man. They join the Air Force so they can stand on, in, or near a ten million dollar jet fighter. The Marine Corps was always lucky enough to have the distinction of being the best, the warriors, but still that wasn't enough. So, while the Army built black-ops death squads and the Air Force built black-ops planes, we formed black-ops enlistment strategies."

"And what does this have to do with me?" I asked.

"This... has everything to do with you," he said, "and I mean that in the most literal way possible."

"Enlistment strategies? Posters and commercials?"

"No, not that. I'm talking about research, lots and lots of research. How to make the Marine Corps look better, how to make

people want to join, and a few... more elaborate programs. I was put in charge of one of these back in the late 1970s. You have to understand the timing of all of this in the civilian sector, as well. It was a new medical renaissance, the first successful in-vitro fertilization was done in 1978, modern psychology was being re-invented, and the human genome was all but mapped. It was very exciting times for anybody paying attention.”

“This isn’t one very long lead-up to telling me I’m a clone, is it?” I asked.

Schumer turned his head slowly and looked me over. “No,” he said after a moment.

“My project was to look into a way to make enlistment seem like less of a major life decision and more of a matter of course. If your father was a Marine and he spends his whole life talking about it, it’s much more likely that you’ll enlist than if he was a farmer or a plumber. This is because, in a way, you feel like you’ve inherited it. Your destiny, or what-have-you. Of all the projects tasked with addressing that, mine was the most advanced.”

“Will you stop telling me about your stupid project and just tell me what you did already?”

Schumer grunted. “This is a complicated subject and there is no way to explain it without explaining every component.”

“Fine,” I said, “go on.”

“In essence, I was to use the newest medical and psychological techniques to significantly reduce the weight of one’s decision to enlist. We looked at currently available genetic and psychological possibilities and set ourselves the following hypothetical goal:

“A married couple has been unsuccessfully trying to conceive a child for years, they are candidates for in-vitro but cannot afford the several-thousand dollar procedure. They agree to let the government pay for the in-vitro fertilization, with the caveat that when the child turns 18 he will be given a presentation and offered the chance to join the Marines. Keep in mind that I said ‘offered,’ not ‘forced.’”

“We’ll give you a baby if you promise to give him to us when he grows up?” I said, actively choosing not to believe any of this.

“No. I said we can’t force anybody to enlist. In this hypothetical situation, we’re footing the cost of a very expensive procedure to allow a couple to have a baby, and all we’re asking is that the child be *offered* to serve his country. He would be free to decline, of course. This was the goal my team and I were given, my job was to make it realistic.

“The problem is that most parents don’t like the idea of their kids joining the military, because they’re afraid they’ll be killed. We can run advertisements proclaiming the extensive training we conduct, but to them it’s like sending their kids off to sleepaway camp where they’ll probably die. To reduce that anxiety, the only thing we could think of was to convince the potential parents that not only would their children do fine in the Marines, they’d do *better* than anybody else. Since we were doing in-vitro fertilization, and we had the capability of slightly altering genetic profiles to allow for growth in a technically foreign host, it wasn’t difficult to—”

“Wait,” I interrupted. “Wait, wait, wait. You’re saying your big idea was to screw around with fetal DNA or whatever to make it so their kid would be some kind of super soldier, aren’t you. Genetic super soldiers. I knew it, either you’re crazy or lying your ass off.”

“Stop getting ahead of yourself,” Schumer said, “this isn’t the movies, we can’t make people stronger or faster, all we can do is make sure that the right genes were there. When a person is conceived, many genetic traits are still left to chance. Things like metabolism, reflexes, cellular regeneration, these are all much more open to outside influences than inherited traits like hair and skin color. In the process of in-vitro fertilization, we had the ability to filter out any potential genetic defects for the highest possibility of a ‘perfectly able’ child. We weren’t ‘engineering’ anything.”

“It still sounds wrong,” I said.

“Now,” Schumer continued, “going back to our initial hypothetical, we can now say to a young couple who could get in-vitro but can’t afford it, ‘We’ll pay for the procedure and do everything we can to make sure your child is perfectly healthy and has the best possible reflexes, metabolism, blood-clotting time, etc. and when he turns 18 we’ll just give them a talk and see if he’d or she’d like to be the best Marine he or she could be.’ It’s still a tough sell.”

“Could you please drop the lead-in and just get down to it? What was the big stupid black ops project of fantastic unethical baby-making that you came up with?”

Schumer sighed again, and said, “After looking at our resources, the most enticing version to sell would-be parents goes like this: Young couple, can’t afford in-vitro. We tell them we’ll pay for the procedure, we’ll use genetic filtering to make sure he’s healthy and has the best traits available to him from each side of the genetic tree, and after the child is born we will use discrete hypnosis to instill in him all the values and knowledge one would learn in boot camp but without him knowing. When he turns 18, we’ll tell him that he has all of this training buried in his subconscious, and if he’d like to join the Marines we can ‘activate’ that training and he would join at a private first class ranking, bypassing boot camp altogether. If he doesn’t want to join, we can have the training removed.”

“Hypnosis?” I said.

“Yes,” Schumer said.

“...Hypnosis?”

“I just said—”

“And I’m still supposed to be taking you seriously?”

“It’s possible,” Schumer said, “we spent nearly ten years putting the program together. We brought in the best psychologists and hypnotherapists to help design the program. With hypnosis, a person can be told or taught something while hypnotized and instructed not to remember any of it when awake. According to the program we designed, for a few hours each day during the child’s adolescence we could have a hypnotist put him under, teach him problem-solving skills, teamwork, and so on and told not to remember it or the hypnosis until later. At 18, a hypnotist could put the child under again, tell him to remember all of the hypnosis, and in an instant he’s a fully-trained soldier.”

“And that’s legal?”

“Amazingly, yes. While the child is a minor, the parents own him. They would authorize this ‘treatment’ for the child, and as long as there’s no danger or harm it’s fully ethical. And like I said, at 18 if the now-adult chooses not to enlist, we can have a hypnotist put him back under and

remove the training, and even forget the conversation ever took place if he so chooses.

“This whole psychological component was developed in tandem with the genetic side. We brought in leading geneticists and put together the program to allow for the encouragement of healthy fetal growth without breaking existing ethical boundaries. The two parts, building a soldier, mind and body, was my project.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Your father worked for me. He was my lead geneticist. He’s the one who outlined the project on the genetic side; he made sure we wouldn’t create a mutant and that we didn’t do anything at all unethical.”

So that was it? My dad actually *did* work in a lab?

“And the Marine Corps University?” I asked.

“We used it for cover, for financial and logistical reasons. Genetic research being conducted by a university seems less suspicious.”

“And this ‘program’ he helped you design, the whole not-quite-super soldier program. It was never, I don’t know, ‘activated,’ was it?”

Schumer laughed, a hearty chuckle. “Oh hell no, it never went beyond testing. The world is a different place now from when we first started. If such a program were in existence now, the second we went up to some couple and made that kind of offer, that couple would be on Fox News or blogging about it within hours. The project could never be put into use, not in this country at least.”

“So, did my dad really have a heart attack?” I asked after taking a few minutes to process everything and decide how much was a lie. “Or was that a cover-up? Or some kind of poison that made it look like a heart attack?”

Schumer glanced at me sideways. “We were trying to protect him – to protect you. He *was* killed, but not by us. As I said, the program would never be used in *this* country. He tried to sell the program to our enemies, Chris. We don’t know if he’s the one who put it on the market, or if someone made him an offer first—”

“What?”

“Yes. I can’t say to whom, but I can say it’s exactly the people who don’t need to hear about our dirty secrets, and not the type of people who would let ethics prevent them from doing what ethics prevented us.”

“*That’s* why the FBI knew him? *He* was the one selling secrets?”

Schumer nodded, still watching the water. “The FBI became aware of his dealings a few weeks before his death. They informed the Marine Corps, and the news filtered from the top down to me only after he was killed.”

“Killed how?” I asked, a lump growing in the back of my throat.

“I don’t know for sure, the word I’ve been getting is that the FBI moved in on a meeting between your dad and the foreign. Things went bad, there was a shootout. We tried to cover that up to preserve his reputation as a scientist and a patriot, not a traitor.”

I was silent again, trying to process it all.

“As you can see, this situation involves several parties. Many agencies of many governments are all involved in this now. Everybody on this side seems to want it covered up; people ‘over there’ are upset about dead agents. People who are friends with ‘over there’ want to know what was being sold, and everybody in between just smells blood in the water. We’ve been working to wrap this up quickly, but it seems that it’s all fallen into your lap just the same.”

“And the money? The insurance money?”

“Oh, that. The FBI looked into it, as did we, to see if there was foul play involved. It seems that your dad simply knew he put himself in a risky situation, and wanted to make sure you and your mother would be protected if he were killed. He took out a new policy as soon as first contact was made with the foreign agents.”

I thought of it, tried to feel some form of closure. I felt nothing, no satisfaction, no anger or sadness. Nothing. I thought of my list of questions, tried to shape everything I’d just heard so it would cover the whole list. Things still didn’t make sense. Nothing has explained Comstock, or Austria, or Lorton, or the guys in my house.

“That doesn’t explain everything,” I said, my eyes on the water. “What about Comstock, and me, and everybody trying to kill me? What

about the two guards you had on your office, and the video you had of me sitting at a—” I stopped talking, because I suddenly knew the answer.

It had been staring me in the face since Schumer had started talking, since he chose his words so carefully, since everything he said had seemed unbelievable but all somehow very, very possible.

Schumer seemed to read it on my face. “I told you the program was never activated,” he said, trying to dissuade me.

“You said it never went beyond *testing*,” I said.

Schumer sighed, yet again. He folded his arms around his chest and stared out at the water.

CHAPTER 42

The wood-slatted bench was beginning to get uncomfortable. The air was getting colder. The slight breeze becoming offensive.

“Okay,” I said, “so, explain this to me. Step by step.”

“Step by step?” Schumer said, breaking his own silence.

“How all this happened. How this program works, how I came to be.”

“You want me to tell you about the birds and the bees?” he said, arms still crossed.

“All right, genius, you *just* told me that I was a test for your insane fetal recruitment program.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes you—you just did.”

“We should talk about this later.”

“Yeah, after my birthday. My eighteenth birthday when someone takes me into a dark room and waves a gold pocket watch in front of my face and tells me I’m feeling very sleepy.”

Schumer scoffed, or guffawed; I don't think I could ever tell the difference. The wind picked up, knocking around the branches of the trees.

"As program neared its tenth year, we had all of the specifics worked out. The genetic profiles, the training curriculum, everything. Powers-that-be grew tired of paying for the program, so Daniel said we should try it. A clean run-through, prove we can do it."

"Easy to objectify the creation of human life, isn't it?"

Schumer unfolded his arms and sat up straight, looking over and down at me like I'd just insulted his haircut.

"I don't know what you think, but we're not monsters. This isn't Frankenstein business. We took the young field of IVF and made huge breakthroughs, doubled the success rate. People are conceived and born from in-vitro every day, there's nothing unorthodox or unethical about it. Your parents were trying to conceive and failing. It was IVF or adoption, and considering your father's vocation, the choice was obvious."

"And this... hypnotic training. How is that orthodox and ethical?"

"Because hypnosis is equally legitimate and perfectly ethical with parental permission. A person can be put into a hypnotic state easily by a trained professional, the subconscious takes over and becomes open to suggestion. It's not like in the movies, where you can hypnotize somebody and tell them to kill the President. The hypnotist just acts as a stream of consciousness communicating with your own. If you tell a hypnotized person to jump off a bridge, his mind will reject it. You can only tell him things you could tell him while awake; the only key advantage is that the subconscious is more willing to... pretend. This is how stage hypnosis shows are possible. You can suggest to somebody that their shoe is a telephone while hypnotized and they'll go along with it, but they know it isn't."

Like lymphocytes attacking a transplanted organ, my mind rejected the entire concept. I kept going over it in my head, trying to find a weak spot in the story. The problem was, it was so huge. So huge, yet I couldn't react to it.

"So the training, how does it work?"

“Hypnotize somebody, tell them that a mile is 5,280 feet, wake them up, and ask them how many feet are in a mile, they’ll know. Hypnotize somebody, tell them how many feet are in a mile but tell them not to remember until you instruct them to remember, then wake them up and they’ll have no idea how many feet are in a mile until you put him back under and tell him to remember. Do that a thousand times with a thousand facts, and you’ve got hypnotic training. It’s a lot of work, but it’s the only way to train somebody without them remembering it until you want them to, so it’s the only way we could train a child.”

“And you’d just take one of these kids on their eighteenth birthday and, what, say, ‘if I snap my fingers, you’ll know everything a well-trained soldier knows. How would you like that?’”

“We had a script prepared for that conversation. The important thing, the psychologists told us, was that we be able to answer all of the questions they’d have. Questions like these.”

“And the training, when exactly do you do that? If I were being hypnotized every so often, wouldn’t I be missing time?”

“You weren’t being hypnotized every few years, Chris. Training somebody everything that a reasonably trained soldier knows, deliberately, point-by-point takes an extraordinary amount of time. You were being hypnotized every day.”

My heart skipped a beat.

“Every day?” I said, no longer taking time to think about what I was saying, “How is *that* possible?”

“In school. You’ve always had a class or a period of the day that wasn’t a real class. You went to an empty room where a team would put you under, train you for an hour or so, and bring you back. You were told to remember a typical boring class, your mind making up the details as you needed them.”

I started to breathe faster, sucking the chilled air into my lungs; it felt like shock slowly taking over my body. I was shaking my head, slowly, without realizing it at first.

“No. No. Too many lies, all of it, my whole life?”

Schumer ignored me.

“Obviously, to facilitate this we needed to have somebody inside the school system to coordinate your training and to monitor your progress and behavior. Nate Comstock was looking for an early retirement from the Corps, so we gave it to him and put him into your schools since elementary. He made sure your class schedules allowed for a free period, coordinated the training team, and made sure you behaved normally for the rest of the day. We had to keep moving him around from school to school to follow your scholastic career.”

My face felt hot. “Comstock,” I said, finding it harder to speak. “He... Dingan.”

“Dingan?”

“Some guy, in Lorton. Police officer.”

“Oh, him.” He paused. “Things became more complicated after the fight in your school,” Schumer continued.

I tried to remember. Just over a week ago, it felt like a distant memory. Vodka in orange juice. A locker handle into my back. Hands on my arms. A fist coming at my face. A twitch in my brain.

That was it, I realized, that moment. Something snapped in my mind when I was attacked, and my life was never the same after it.

“We hadn’t anticipated the effects of the fight-or-flight response when we developed the program. All of your training, knowing how to fight, how to use weapons, how to live like a soldier on the battlefield, it was all protected from your conscious mind through a series of mental barriers put in place during hypnosis so that the only way to ‘unlock’ the knowledge would be for a trained hypnotist to specifically reverse the series of barriers. But fight-or-flight is above that, it seems, a core component of our basic evolutionary programming. When one feels like his life is threatened, the mind literally grasps at anything it thinks it can use to defend itself. As far as we can tell, the acute stress of being in a fight combined with external stresses like grief over your father’s death or other social issues weakened the mental barriers, and when you thought you were in mortal danger for the first time, your mind broke down its own walls and used whatever it could.

“Unfortunately, you never returned to classes after that event so they were unable to repair the damage.”

“Damage,” I said, reflecting on it all. The *damage*. My car, some guy named Dingan, a wake of destruction in Austria, my house.

“After that, with the walls cracked, it seems that the training we put in your mind has been leaking out and you’ve been able to recall it as instinct for self-preservation. I didn’t believe it at first, until then I saw what you did to the two guards in my office.”

“Why did you even have bodyguards?”

“I called for them when you showed up at the front gate. I thought you might be out to kill me.” He rubbed his stomach through his clothing where the edge of his desk had fallen on him. “Clearly I was wrong.”

“Why would you be afraid of me?” I asked. “You didn’t seem worried when I came the first time.”

“The first time I didn’t know how much you knew or even what happened. Comstock said you got in a fight, and then stopped showing up at school. After that he stopped contacting us. Apparently he thought we were trying to kill him. Nervous guy, Nate.”

“That was you on the phone that day, wasn’t it? Telling him not to punish me for the fight or to tell my mom. ‘It could be expensive.’”

Schumer’s brow furrowed slightly.

“Why didn’t you want him to tell my mother? Doesn’t she know about all of this?”

Schumer looked down at me again from the corner of his eye. He was getting better at telling me things without saying anything.

“She doesn’t?”

“Not as far as I’ve been led to believe.”

“So it was only my dad? He lied to her, just told her she was getting an in-vitro and don’t ask questions.”

“Don’t ask questions,” he repeated.

“She never knew about the training? The program?”

“Don’t think so,” Schumer said.

“Okay,” I said, trying to get back onto one of the trains of thought I hadn’t finished. “Dingan. Why did Comstock hire him to bring me in, and why did he try to kill me?”

“According to Nate, when you stopped showing up at school and things started happening with his bank account and car, he thought we were angry so he contracted somebody to scare you into coming back to school, or to bring you in so you could be put back under and the problems fixed. I don’t understand why he did this, but he did. His mistake was that he contracted the wrong kind of somebody. Somebody who usually doesn’t finish the job with the target still alive.”

“Another member of the program?”

“No, somebody outside the program. Outside the military. Outside a lot of things, actually.”

Okay, a hitman. At least I was right about that.

“You know more about what happened that night than I do, but you must have done something to upset him if he tried to kill you.”

“I think I broke his wrist,” I said, recalling the cracking sound and the feeling of forcing an arm into the edge of my car’s open window and blistering pain in my eyes. “Or his arm.”

Schumer smiled slightly. “Well,” he said, “we’ll have to work on getting that cleaned up with the police. We’ll also need to sit you down with one of the psychiatrists and work out what went wrong with your training and how to fix it.”

“What?” I said, standing up from the bench and facing him. “You want to put me back under and start screwing around with my head again?”

Schumer looked up at me, confused. “Something has clearly gone wrong with your mind; you’ve practically got two conflicting subconscious minds now. One of a teenager, the other of a trained soldier. We can have the training removed if that’s what you want, but the broken parts of your mind still have to be put back together.”

“How do I know you won’t just make me forget this whole conversation, make me think I spent the last week camping in the woods or washing my hair?”

“Chris, you have to trust that what we’re doing here isn’t as devious as you assume—”

“Devious? You still haven’t explained why my house was burned down last night, and why guys in tac gear with prototype assault rifles stormed my house, or why I’m probably a wanted fugitive in Europe now.”

“I told you, some of your questions I can’t answer. If you come with me back to the labs, we can have somebody go over your experiences and try to figure out what went wrong.”

“What went wrong? Why do you need to know that? So you can fix your program and do this to more kids without the nasty side effects? Use me like the test subject I was born to be?”

I stepped back from the bench, turned to face the river, and then turned back to Schumer when he didn’t respond. “I’ll just go to a regular therapist, have him undo whatever you did to my head.”

Schumer stood up weakly, “You can’t do that. If someone doesn’t know what he’s doing, he could cause more damage to your mind. He could either further blur the distinction between who you are and what you know, or introduce too much stress to your subconscious and make it collapse. You need to see somebody who knows the exact protocol for your training.”

“You just want to clean up your mess, put back together your broken toy soldier.”

“You need to understand, Chris, you’re in danger of literally losing your mind. Until those walls in your mind are put back up, any amount of stress will destroy them further. Haven’t you felt it growing worse? Felt yourself doing things you can’t account for?”

Doing things I can’t account for? He was right, I realized, I *was* getting worse. I could feel my personality diminishing with every event. Looking back, I had no idea why I did what I did to those Interpol agents in Vienna, what I did to Comstock in that hotel room, or driving a knife into the body of a person I didn’t know, or only passively wondering if I’d killed him when I’d twisted his neck with his own rifle strap, or aiming at a man’s head down the rail of a rifle and being a hair from pulling the trigger; I didn’t give those things a second thought as I did them, but I would never have dreamt of doing such things before all this.

Before all this, before the seams of a secret life were pulled free by the *stress* of my father being killed by and for that very secret life.

My jaw clenched so tight that my whole head shook. I pulled the Beretta from my belt with my right hand and pointed it at arm's length at Schumer's chest.

"The only thing I'm in danger of is you, your program, and the hitmen you have on speed dial. Whatever is wrong with me, I'll figure it out myself." I kept the gun pointed as I backed away. Suitably distant, I turned in the direction we'd come and started to walk forward.

"You have no idea how far this goes," he said with a whole new clarity.

I kept walking.

"You won't know who to trust," he shouted from a distance.

CHAPTER 43

If you're going to get lost somewhere on foot, don't get lost in Quantico. And if you do, don't do it with two handguns on your person after having just incapacitated two Marine guards. It's torture on your nerves.

I got back to my car after half-an-hour of hoofing it, nobody seeming to care about me. The base appeared deserted, and I wondered if the military in fact took weekends off. I only saw two other people the whole time, and neither of them noticed me. All the walking reminded me of my early years of high school, when on warm days I'd walk home instead of taking the bus. This was bearable because of digital audio players and headphones. Without either of those, walking seems crude and pointless.

When I arrived at my car, I opened the door and used it for cover while I removed the two guns from my pants and held them awkwardly with one hand while I got in the car and shut the door. Amy had her seat reclined all the way back and seemed to be trying to find some measure of comfort; a pointless endeavor in an American sports car. Sitting in the driver's seat, I looked the two guns over briefly, confirmed that they were

Beretta 92s, and only for a moment wondered how I'd already known that. I couldn't be sure if it wasn't just my own unique situation, but I was quite certain that every teenage boy's dream is to hold the same model of gun in each hand. Berettas akimbo. Thanks, video games.

Amy leaned her seat back up and watched me drop the clips from both guns at the same time (another fantasy) and set the two guns in the back seat next to the USP. Nice little collection I had going.

"Have a good time?" Amy asked, looking back at my new arsenal.

I opened my mouth, ready to say something, but I couldn't think of a thing to say. I still wasn't sure how much of Schumer's story I believed, but even if it was all true it wasn't something I could condense into a few sentences.

So I sat there, my face frozen in an expression of mid-speech. Amy waited for noises to come out, and then ran her eyes around the inside of the car as if looking for the remote to turn my volume up. She pulled my cell phone from the center cup holder and handed it to me, saying, "Your mom called."

As if I'd forgotten each, the fact that my mom was supposed to come home today flashed into my mind, and then the fact that home wouldn't be there.

"Called me?" I asked.

"Your phone," she said.

"Did you answer it?"

"I did."

"What did she say?"

"Who's this?"

"And what did you say?"

"Amy."

"And she said—"

"Amy who? 'A friend of Chris.' 'Where's Chris?' 'Meeting with someone.' 'Meeting with who.' 'Someone in Quantico. 'Oh.' 'Yeah.' 'So he's all right.' 'As far as I know.' 'Okay, could you have him call me back as soon as he can?' 'Okay.' End of communication."

“You told her I was here?” I said.

“Yeah, I didn’t really know what else I could say. I didn’t know what would be believable for you.”

I sighed, not knowing either, and called my mom’s cell phone from my own. It rang once.

“Chris?”

“Yes.”

“What are you—oh, God, so you’re all right?”

“I... am. Are you back in town?”

“Yes. I mean I, I’m at the police station. Do you know what happened to the house?”

The phone felt hot on my ear. “Oh that, it’s this whole... thing. I can’t really talk now; I’ll come meet you at the police station in 45 minutes or so.”

I hung up, started the car, and drove out.

“The police station?” Amy asked.

“Oh... no,” I said in realization, “I’m trying to avoid them, aren’t I?”

“That’s what I thought.”

“My mom’s there, though, so if they still think the dead cop in Lorton was my fault they’ll have already told her. And there’s the fact that you called 911 last night saying there were guys with guns at my house.”

“Should you call the FBI people? Maybe they can keep the police off you like they did before.”

The FBI. If what Schumer said was right, the FBI may have been the ones who killed my dad. Or responsible for it, or something. I could use a few hours to sit down and process everything.

“Chris?” Amy said.

“What?” I’d just pulled onto the highway.

“FBI?” she repeated.

“I don’t think–” I started. “What was our working theory for what’s going on with... everything?”

“Umm, I think we were at him being a spy and getting killed overseas while escorting a diamond baroness trying to emigrate from a communist regime.”

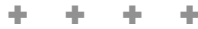
“And about me?”

“Stress plus super movie fight scene-absorbing powers?”

“Had we ever brought up brainwashing?”

“I think it may have come up once.”

“Well, whoever came up with that one gets horseshoe points for being closest.”



I only had a vague idea where the police station was in Fredericksburg, so we drove around town for a few minutes before I was onto its trail.

I didn’t exactly have a plan for what I was going to say. The police will wonder why my house had burned down and why someone had called 911 saying men with guns had stormed in just before. Were it not for that 911 call I could say I wasn’t home, or that I left some stress-release candles burning next to the drapes while I was scraping the safety labels off of all my aerosol cans with a knife and cooking bacon in my bedroom with a portable stove, using wood shavings for that hickory flavor. Without that 911 call, it was just another house burning down in the middle of the night. Instead, it was a whole conspiracy that I didn’t have the capacity to lie my way out of. This is all peripheral to the fact that my car was found bisecting a guy with a dead cop in his trunk seven days ago.

“What exactly did you say when you called 911?” I asked Amy as I parked in the lot of the station, a rather modern-looking building made of tan stone blocks and metal accents. It looked more like a mall food court than a police station, and the architecture reminded me of my high school. Maybe they were designed by the same guy.

“Last night?” she responded, not seeming to appreciate the slight curvature of the roofline or the amount of natural light that would come from the glass atrium on the eastern side of the building.

“In my closet.”

“I don’t know, why?”

“Because depending on what you said, I might have to go into there and tell some nice police officers that some guys burned my house down to hide the evidence of their failed attempt to kidnap or kill some teenagers because of, or as a product of, the fact that I had my DNA screwed around with as an embryo and have been secretly trained as a soldier every day in school in some black ops experiment run by the Marine Corps and designed by my dead father, who may have been killed for trying to sell those designs to foreign governments.”

“Let me think...” she said, pursing her lips and rolling her eyes slightly upwards.

“Did you say who you were, at least?”

“N–no,” she said.

“What *did* you say?”

“I gave them your address, which I didn’t really remember because I’ve never sent you a letter so I just said the brownish house about nine houses down on your street, and said to send the police.”

“You– you didn’t say anything about guys with guns?”

“I didn’t *know* about any guys with guns. You started watching that video of yourself on your computer, then you stopped talking, darted out of your room, then came back and stuffed me in your closet and handed me your illegally purchased handgun and told me to call the police. This was all before I heard shooting downstairs and you came and jumped out your window.”

“So all you said was to send the police to my house?”

“Yes. They asked for my name but I hung up.”

“Oh.”

“Is that good?”

“Yes it is.”

I put my hand on my door's handle and started to open the door. Amy did the same with hers, but stopped and looked back at me. "Am I coming in?" she asked.

I thought about it, and decided it was probably best if she did. I tried to remember everything that happened that night so I could put together a reasonable story. Amy called 911 from my cell phone, so that number would be on record, so I couldn't exactly say the call was from a neighbor who noticed the house was on fire. We'd gone out to eat just before and I'd used my debit card to pay so there'd be that as proof that I was out of the house. But why would I call 911 from my phone if I had nothing to do with the fire?

"We were driving back to my place and from outside we saw people breaking into my house, so we parked and you called 911 from my phone while we watched from across the street, or something."

"And why didn't I give my name or say what was going on?"

"Because... you were scared, and tried to make the call quick because you didn't want any of the guys to hear you."

"And why didn't you make the call?"

"Because... I'd left the car and was going to sneak around to the back of my house to see what they were doing, and I gave you my phone and said to use it."

"And why didn't I use my phone?"

"Because... yours had died."

"And why didn't we go right to the police?"

"Because... we're stupid teenagers? We went to your place."

"That doesn't make sense. Anybody would go to the police if their house was being broken into."

"I don't know, maybe we were all kinds of high and didn't want to go to the police until we'd come down."

"That's dumb."

"Then what? Stupid teenagers? We were going to wait at your place until the cops came but we both fell asleep and didn't wake up until a few hours ago."

“Right. Fell asleep. Because of all the drugs.”

I sighed.

After a few minutes we had our story straight, making sure we were synchronized on every made-up detail so we couldn't be separated and made to contradict each other. We went into the police station, stopped at the front desk and explained that my house had unfortunately burned down and I believed my mother was inside the station somewhere. I was directed to the second floor, and so to the second floor I went. The sign by the stairwell door on the second floor said “Investigation: Robbery, Homicide, Arson, Vehicular” and I paused, noting that in the past few days I'd dabbled in a bit of each. I couldn't think of any robbery per se, though, so I awarded ten points to my own scruples. Bank fraud must be on the third floor.

It was when I pulled the heavy metal door open that I remembered stealing that kid's passport in the Vienna airport and took back those ten points.

The floor wasn't the bustling, open floor of littered desks and furious investigation and stale coffee I expected. Instead, it looked an office building, standing in the midst of a hallway flanked on both sides by rows of office doors and wide windows. Amy and I wandered the halls until I saw my mom through one of the windows, sitting inside a large conference room, at a long, wooden table with her back to the window. Across from her was sitting, in the same plain black suit I'd seen him wear a few days ago, Special Agent Bremer. He was talking to my mom from his seat, his left hand idly spinning an empty Styrofoam coffee cup on the surface of the table.

“Who's that?” Amy asked, peering into the window along with me. “He doesn't have a badge.”

“It's on his belt,” I said.

“So he's a cop.”

“No, he's FBI.”

“One of the guys who talked to you before?”

I nodded in the affirmative.

“What would he be doing here?”

“No idea,” I said.

Then, into view strolled Special Agent Rubino, walking and talking into a cell phone. He paced the room and had stopped behind Bremer when he glanced up at me through the window, acknowledged recognition, and waved me into the room.

I shrugged, took in a breath, and pulled the wooden door to the conference room open and waited for the bullets to start flying. When my mother saw me she got up and darted toward me, hugged me and asked if I was all right. I couldn't remember the last time I was so embarrassed. I realized that the last time I'd seen her, the biggest concern I had was a fight at school and an unwillingness to return. With her out visiting my aunt and leaving me alone, I'd gotten used to the slight amount of freedom and having to fend for myself. With her back, I feared I might slip back into being a kid again. Maybe, I pondered, if that happened all of this madness would go away again. Maybe all the death and guns and lies were all just teenage home-alone antics I'd “gotten myself into” and, with at least one parent around again, I'd take my scolding and have everything sorted out by grown-ups.

Just maybe.

I noticed that there were no police officers in the room. Just two FBI agents, two Bakers, and one confused girl trying to decide her place in all of this.

I sat down at the table across from where Bremer sat, and Amy sat a few seats over, I suppose to suggest her disconnection. She was only really there to back up my story to the police.

“How was Vienna?” Bremer asked with a grin once I'd sat down. I opened my mouth slightly and darted my eyes in my mom's direction.

“She knows,” Bremer said.

Rubino, having just finished his phone conversation, said, “We told her everything.”

I looked over at my mom, noticed the redness in her eyes and the tears drying on her face. I looked back at Bremer. Rubino sat next to him.

“And what does ‘everything’ include? Because I'm not exactly crystal clear on everything myself,” I said.

Rubino glanced at Amy, then back at me. “Looks like you’ve answered that question at least,” he said.

Bah, more question talk. “Which question?” I asked, very near losing my patience. I wondered how easy it would be to flip this table over.

“How to tell if a girl likes you. I thought you were joking at the time.”

I glanced at Amy, grinning and shaking her head, her face leaning into her hand propped up on the table.

“I *was* joking,” I said, “but I really need you to tell me what’s going on here. I’ve had a very tedious week and haven’t gotten much in the way of answers.”

“She’ll have to step out,” Rubino said, indicating Amy.

“What? She already knows everything here,” I said.

“It’s adorable that you think that,” he said, “but she’ll still have to be outside the room for this.”

Amy looked over at me, I shrugged at her. She shrugged back, then got up and exited the room. My mom watched both sides of the exchange.

“You said you were in Quantico this morning,” Bremer started, “We assume you were there to get Schumer to tell you. About the program, I mean.”

“You know about the... program?” I asked.

“Well, yes. We always have.”

I thought I felt my jaw twitch. “You knew, this whole time, and you didn’t tell me? God, if you’d have told me about this last week I wouldn’t have had to go through all of this!”

“We weren’t sure that you didn’t already know yourself,” Bremer said. “We couldn’t tell you about it if you didn’t know, and we couldn’t ask you if you knew without telling you. So, we just asked if you had any questions. We figured, if you knew or didn’t, the fact that somebody tried to kill you last Saturday, or that you managed to kill him amazingly, might make you just a little bit curious.”

“What do you mean you couldn’t tell me if I didn’t know? That would be the main reason *to* tell me, so I wouldn’t have to go trekking across the globe and scare the hell out of my pretend principal to find out.”

Rubino spoke up. “It’s not exactly something you can just go up to somebody unsolicited and tell them.”

Then Bremer said, “And it was important for us to know how you found out. If you’d already known, that meant that your father told you before he died. If not, we needed you to track down the information from its source.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Bremer said slowly, “we needed to use you as a source to get the information for yourself so we can get the rest of the story.”

“Still not making any sense,” I said.

“We don’t know exactly what Schumer did and we don’t have enough evidence to take him down for it. We were planning on approaching you just before your birthday and tell you, hopefully get you to wear a wire for when he or one of his stooges tells you that he just has to say a few words and you’ll wake up as a fully trained soldier or whatever lie he was going to tell. We wanted you to be able to find out naturally, so we could track the information organically until we had enough evidence.”

I sat silently, contemplating. I still hadn’t had any caffeine today so my brain was slow to process all of the new information.

“Were you two the ones on my dad’s case before he died? Is that how you knew him?”

Schumer said that the FBI was who found out that my dad tried to sell secrets, and that it was an FBI sting operation that led to his death.

“Yes, we were dealing with him. We hoped he would get us enough information about the program to be of any use to us, but he died before we had enough.”

“Wait, what are you talking about? ‘Be of any use to you?’ I thought it was enough that you had my dad trying to sneak out the information. Why would you care about the program itself?”

Bremer furrowed his brow. “I don’t follow,” he said.

“And neither do I,” I replied.

“All right, look,” Rubino cut in, holding his palms up, “the relevant information here is that we need to know about Schumer’s little project and you’re in the best position to help us.”

“And with no motivation for me *to* do so—”

“Your motivation is that we and the entire Bureau are the only people holding the police back from locking you in a cell. We had to tell them that you’re an asset to us last week when they had you for a dead cop and John Doe in Lorton, and today we had to tell them a similar lie when they wanted to know why neighbors heard shooting at your house and then watched out their windows as the place exploded.”

“Exploded?”

“Since all of this may be our fault for not approaching this correctly and putting you in harm’s way, we’re keeping the heat off of you. When the Austrian government or Interpol or Europol call to ask us about whatever havoc you probably caused there, we’ll be holding them back too. All of this is still on the condition that you remain an asset, and continue to provide us with information about the program or whatever else we ask for.” He shut up and folded his arms.

“I guess that means I play ball,” I said through my clenched teeth.

Bremer and Rubino stood up in unison. “Good,” Rubino said.

“We’ll leave you to deal with each other, and we’ll take care of the police report on the fire so your insurance will cover it. One of us will call you in a few days when we need you.”

The two walked to the door, which Rubino opened and walked through. Bremer followed, and then stuck his head back in the room.

“Oh, I thought you should know,” he started, “that Doe you left in Lorton. We tracked down his identity. Name’s Carl Dingan, he had a file at the Bureau as a hitter and I guess we’ve been looking for him for a while now. So, nice work on that one.”

“Glad to be of service,” I said with a feigned smile as Bremer disappeared out the door.

CHAPTER 44

“So,” I said, cutting through a thick silence in the police station conference room where I sat with my mother; the first time I’d been able to sit quietly and think for about 12 hours, “I was a test tube baby?”

My mom looked up from the table.

“I guess you could say that,” she said.

“Any reason you never told me?”

“When you were younger it would have been too hard to explain,” she said, “and after a while it just seemed like it’d been too long to bring it up out of the blue. It’s not an unusual thing. It’s not as though you were adopted or grown in a jar. You grew inside me, and I gave birth to you.”

“And Dad never said anything about it? About genetic... whatever?”

She was silent for a while, and then said, “No.”

“Nothing?”

“No. We had talked about having an in-vitro. I’d seen my doctor and he said I was a candidate, but the procedure was too expensive. Your dad said that he could have them done through his coverage at work, so we did that.”

“Nothing about training regimens or hypnosis?”

“No, nothing like that ever came up. He did always seem protective of you, trying to keep you away from danger. I just thought that he was trying to protect his only child.”

It was still too weird to think about. I couldn’t be sure how much of what Schumer said was the truth, after all, and parts of it still didn’t make sense. If I were being hypnotized every day at school, it seems like I would be able to tell that the time was... *missing*. He said I always had one class that wasn’t real, but if that were the case how can I remember all my classes? How can I remember everybody in all my classes? They couldn’t have me make up fake students during hypnosis, that would take just as much time as whatever they were teaching me. They couldn’t have made me have false memories of real classmates, because I might have one day said I’d see him in *whatever* class and he’d ask what I’d meant.

There had to be more to this, I decided. The information I had now just didn’t add up. If the only thing about me was that I was part of some training experiment and had boot camp squirted directly into my brain, it didn’t explain the growing number of people who seem to want me dead.

Even though it was less realistic, I could almost believe the clone theory. If there were a fleet of me’s running around, it would explain how someone who looks like me was apparently in Vienna two years ago killing a guy. There can’t be clones, though, it’s just silly.

Though, they could have designed me from scratch and whenever someone comes in for an in-vitro, they end up with a me. That could be how they’d do it.

Still, though, no clones.

If there were clones, though, it would be cool to meet one. I bet clones of me would all be jerks, though.

Amy came back with three cups of coffee from a machine. She set them down on the table, and the three of us each took one.

“You really went to Austria?” my mom asked me a bit later.

“I did, yeah, last week,” I said.

“How was it?”

“It was nice, I think. I was in a kind of mood the whole time, not really paying attention to the culture.”

“I went to Europe when I was in college. Never went to Austria, though. We spent most of the time in Italy.”

Amy cut in, “Did you guys go over the part about your house burning down while I was outside?”

“Oh, shoot,” I said, “I was going to ask Bremer or Rubino if they had any idea who those guys were.”

“What guys?” my mom asked.

“The guys who broke in and burned the place down.”

My mom didn’t seem to be handling this well.

“Have you called the insurance company yet? We have fire insurance, don’t we?” I asked.

“Fire. Yeah, it should be in with the homeowner’s policy. I haven’t called yet, I was told to wait until the police report was taken care of because they wouldn’t cover it if it looked like you burned it down on purpose.”

“I didn’t burn it down at all,” I said.

She nodded, slowly.

I was getting restless and anxious, but I knew things would be like this for a while. I had no leads, no trails to follow to Europe or havoc to create. I began to worry that this was it, that this was the end, that my life actually was going to slow down and peter on from this point. The thought of no more running, shooting, fighting, stabbing, or lying seemed nice at first, but as I thought about it I actually worried I’d miss it. Special Forces types would come back from Vietnam, feeling like they were built for one thing and moping that they’d never be put to use again. They went through years of hellish atrocities in the jungle; I’d only considered my life interesting for a few days, could I already be addicted to the high?

I wasn't sure "high" was the right word, I never felt particularly elevated when I was in those dangerous situations. Perhaps it's the clarity I'm addicted to. If my brain really was switching from one set of instincts to a second, maybe I liked the second one better. If there were a whole other Chris Baker in my mind, one who knows everything a trained soldier knows, maybe I'd rather be him. Always knowing what to do, knowing how to get myself out of danger, how to hurt people, how to protect people. Maybe I would enjoy that.

Would I lose myself, though? If there really is a way to have all of this knowledge "activated" and become part of me, would it really become part of me or would it just become me?

All I know is that I can't go on like this. I can't have a whole world of knowledge in my mind that's only accessible when I'm in danger. I can't keep wondering if the person controlling my body is the real me or the killing me.

CHAPTER 45

The insurance company put my mother and me in a hotel while they figured out what they were going to do about our burned-down house. The options were seemingly to have them pay to rebuild it or for them to just send us a stupid-huge check for the value so we could buy our own house. I wanted the latter, for receiving stupid-huge checks from insurance companies was becoming a pastime of mine.

Though I wasn't a fan of losing the things important to me.

The hotel they put us in wasn't a traditional hotel in the "bed and a bathroom" sense, it was one of those home-away-from-home places for traveling businessmen or families whose homes have burned down. All the rooms were suites with two bedrooms and two bathrooms, a living room, and a full kitchen. Downstairs in the lobby they served full meals buffet-style for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and inside the room there was a card we could fill out for what kind of groceries we wanted and some hotel lackey would run out and get it, charging it to the room. Insurance would be paying the room bill, whatever it ended up being, so we went a little nuts on the lackey groceries.

After one day, the insurance company sent an adjuster to examine the remains of the house; he determined that it was a total loss and cut us a rather large check for us to replace clothes and furniture until the even-more-gigantic check to replace the house itself showed up. He also noted that the garage had fallen onto my dad's Cadillac and suggested we call our auto insurance for that.

My mom was still a mess, but I almost enjoyed it. It was unique and interesting, and nobody was shooting at me so I could remain myself through it all. It seemed that I wasn't too attached to any of my stuff after all, at least not so attached that I couldn't re-attach myself to something that insurance check would replace. Maybe I could get that larger bed I always wanted, or the more expensive clothes I had been thinking about; only this time using the new insurance money instead of the old. Tracking my windfalls was getting complicated, though, it seemed like I could make a new profession out of having insurance companies buy all my stuff.

Don't be morbid, your dad died for some of that money, echoed a voice in my head. I began to think it was worth it, after all. My dad practically built me from scratch and unloaded me onto some mind-warped doctors to test some unethical mind-warping experiment, and then he tried to sell that information to, what, Russia? North Korea? That insurance policy was just so we wouldn't be completely screwed if his plan failed and he was killed for his treason. Some consolation prize. Did he hope I wouldn't find out? Or that the money would make me overlook the fact that my whole life was a lie and that he tried to sell that lie for a quick buck?

Whatever he did, it's probably his fault that the house was destroyed. It's probably his fault that people keep coming at me from all angles, trying to get their hands on the amazing hypno-killer boy.

Screw it, I'd take the money but I wouldn't accept it as some kind of reparations for my bungled life. I'll buy overpriced jeans, handguns, or a million candy bars if I want to. I'll let that postmortem bribe buy me a new life, not forgiveness.

Amy, surprisingly, had opted to return to school on Monday. She must have been more worried about graduating than I, because at this point I couldn't be bothered to consider school. I was living in a hotel; the only things I owned were a pair of pants and a handful of weapons. I

slowly began to accept the fact that there is a killer inside my head, and that there's little chance that my life will ever be normal. Ever since that phone call a month ago, my life took a running leap away from normal. School was practically off my radar.

It was Tuesday when the insurance adjuster came out and cut that initial check for clothes and furniture. We'd just gotten back to the hotel when my cell phone, for which I no longer had a charger, rang. I recognized the number as either Rubino or Bremer's, didn't really care either way which one it was, and answered accordingly.

The earpiece pumped out a reply. "Chris, it's Special Agent Bremer."

"Special. I know," I said. I could tell it was Bremer from the first word, the coarseness of his weary old voice was more pronounced over the phone.

"We'd like to see you for a bit of a debrief, sit down with you so you can tell us exactly what you know so far and what Schumer told you."

I wasn't sure how I felt about these FBI Agents – *Special* Agents – anymore. At first they had been a pretty decent, if unpredictable source of information. Now, it seemed that they only want information. Schumer said my dad was killed in a shootout at a botched FBI sting. For all I knew it could have been Bremer or Rubino who pulled the trigger, if that was supposed to be a bad thing. The thing that bothered me the most was that they seemed to want to know everything about Schumer and his blasted "program" as he called it. If the FBI's only attachment to this is that they caught and stopped my dad from selling secrets abroad, why would they care about what those secrets were? If it was a black ops, black budget outfit, it seems that the FBI would want to keep its collective nose out of it, but here it seems that my two Bureau buddies are just as interested in getting their hands on the specifics as whomever my dad was trying to sell them to.

"Okay," I said, knowing I didn't have a choice, "when and where?"

"We can come to your hotel room tonight, around seven or eight."

I looked around for a clock, found the one by the bed in the room that had become my own and saw that it was just after 2 PM.

“All right, I guess. Though, maybe somewhere outside the room, like the conference room down in the business center.”

“Why there?” Bremer asked.

I didn’t want them in my room because I didn’t want my mom hearing any of what they, or I, would have to say. I couldn’t say that, though, so I said, “There’s not a lot of room in here, it’s kind of cramped with the two of us. And, hey, I can have the conference room catered. Insurance company’s treat.”

“Fine, we’ll call you when we’re outside the hotel.” He hung up.

I tossed the phone onto my bed and went back out into the common area and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. My mom was at the kitchen table, looking through the paperwork the insurance evaluator gave her and idly tapped the check with her free hand.

“I should probably put this in the joint checking account so you can use your debit card to buy yourself some clothes or whatever you need for the short-term,” she said, watching me spin the cap to the water bottle.

“Or you could put it in the savings account with the rest of the money; let it earn some interest,” I said, leaning against the counter.

“Then you wouldn’t be able to spend it with your card,” she said, looking down at the paperwork again.

“I could withdraw cash from it at an ATM with my card,” I said.

“It’s not a good idea to walk around with a bunch of cash on you.”

I remembered being back at Dulles Airport and pulling a thousand dollars from an ATM, and consistently feeling like a band of ninjas would appear from nowhere and rob me until I’d spent most of the cash. I also remembered that I’d spent most of the cash on an Austrian Sparbuch account, and that the only things proving I owned that bank account had gone up in flames along with the house. That sucked; wasting however many real dollars that thing cost me. With the card and documentation destroyed, it meant that the account was going to sit idle, untouched, for years and years. That €100 balance was going

to accrue interest until the global economy fails. In a thousand years, some account manager will notice that there's an anonymous account, untouched since the 21st century, with a balance in the billions. Oh, my imagination.

I told my mom she could deposit it into the checking account and whatever we didn't spend after a while could go into savings later, then went back to my room and shut the door. If Amy was still skipping her afternoon classes, she should be out by now. I sent a text message to her phone asking just that.

While I waited for a response I sat at the edge of my bed, opening and closing the bottom drawer of the dresser with my foot. Under a folded blanket were three pistols, the USP .45 and the two Beretta 92s I'd taken off Schumer's impromptu bodyguards. I didn't know what else to do with them, so I hid them in the drawer and feel compelled to check on them every few hours. I had three loaded magazines for the USP, and one apiece for the Berettas. The 92s use 9mm ammo, so I can't use any of the .45 ammo I bought, though that doesn't matter I left it all in the house. The one that burned down. Exploded.

Looking at the guns in the drawer, I did the mental arithmetic to determine that I had 69 rounds if all the mags were fully loaded. If the boogeyman came through the front door of the hotel suite, at three-round bursts fired twice per ten seconds, I could hold the boogeyman off for just over a minute and a half.

My phone beeped, distracting me from my wandering mind. Amy wrote that she was out of school and asked if I wanted her to come to the hotel. I sent back that she should come over around 6 PM.

There were still some things I need to go over with her before I the sit-down with the FBI.

In the meantime, my mom and I went to the bank together to deposit the check. She jokingly said I made a good bodyguard, being so quiet. The quiet was on account of my contemplations, but the idea was interesting to me. When I'd read that novel on the plane to Vienna about a bodyguard, I thought it sounded like it might be a cool job. Swearing your life to protect somebody, it seemed noble. It was interesting to watch the teller at the small bank branch try to hide her reaction to the

amount on the check, the same way they had when we deposited our life insurance checks.

After a few hours of staring at my arsenal, Amy sent notice that she was downstairs. I told my mom I was going to go check out the dinner buffet in the lobby, but that's not what I did.

"Am I not going to see your room?" she asked when I approached her in the lobby.

"I'm sure you can imagine it," I said, walking toward the business center where there was a room with a few computers for rent. It was empty, and suitably private.

"So you're still leaving school at lunch?" I asked.

"Well, I wasn't going to. I was going to start hitting classes four through six, but yesterday I got a memo from the office that fourth hour study hall was canceled so I thought, what the hell, and called off the rest of the day."

"They canceled study hall?"

"Yeah, couldn't get anybody to proctor it or something."

"How hard is it? Everybody just sits there."

She shrugged.

"Was Comstock there?" I asked.

"At school?"

"Yeah."

"No, not today or yesterday."

"All right, we need to go talk to him," I said.

Amy paused, thinking. "Why?" she asked after not coming up with an answer for herself.

I told her about the meeting planned with my FBI friends tonight, how they want me to tell them everything, but that there was too much I didn't know. Comstock would have those answers, so I have to ask him.

"Do you have his number?" she asked.

“I did,” I said, “it went with the house. I think there was a three in it.”

Amy looked down at the bank of computers. “Is that camera thing still at his house? We could at least see if he’s home.”

I thought about it. I didn’t have the address to view the camera feed, but I could get it from my e-mail. “Good idea,” I said.

I sat at one of the computers, logged onto my e-mail, got the address, and in a few seconds the familiarly grainy and tree-obstructed picture of the front of Comstock’s house was on the screen. The lights were on inside the house.

“Good enough for me,” I said.

Before we left I stopped at the business center’s main desk and asked if I could reserve the small conference room from seven to nine tonight. It was available, so I reserved it and asked for coffee service and a sandwich platter for the room. I walked away feeling like a rich person, realized I technically am a rich person, but felt better about it knowing it wasn’t my money I was spending.

“What do you need to talk to Comstock about, anyway?” Amy asked in the middle of the drive across town.

“What Schumer told me doesn’t add up,” I said. “He says that Comstock’s main job was to wrangle an open class into my schedule so I could have my brain blasted with Marine Corps trivia every day, but if that’s the case, why do I remember every single class? There should be on class where I can’t remember any classmates, or that I can’t focus on.”

Amy and I walked through my class schedule for this semester. College Writing was my first hour, and I had group projects that I’d talked about with other kids. Anatomy was my second hour, and I had done group projects there too. I also had to memorize and learn so many terms that it had to be real. Third hour was Pre-Calc/Trig, and while it was amazingly boring, I remembered it too vividly and I’d done too much homework for it to be a self-imagined product of hypnosis. After lunch was fourth hour study hall, which I had with Amy so that had to be real, plus I can remember the other students from the class. After that was Euro History and the Computer Networking class, both of which I had with Dale Carpenter. He definitely wasn’t imaginary.

“Maybe the hypnosis classes were before, and since this is your last semester there aren’t any fake classes now,” Amy suggested.

“Schumer said it all started because I stopped showing up for my daily brainwashing after the fight, and he said that if I *had* kept going, they could have ‘fixed’ whatever went wrong with my brain.”

“So maybe Schumer was lying,” Amy said.

“He was lying about something, I know that much. If he was lying about this, then it changes everything.”

“So you want Comstock’s side of it?” Amy asked.

“Yes, and another thing,” I grinned.

“What?”

“I, uh, want to have him make sure I graduate,” I said.

Amy was silent, and then laughed. “Are you going to hold him at gunpoint and tell him to make sure you have the credits?”

“I don’t have any guns on me. I could hold him at knifepoint. Again.”

“You’re serious?” she asked.

“I–no, not about that, but I can still ask him. He owes me that. I don’t want to have to make up a summer of classes because of the stupid ‘program’ and this recent screw-up. He can fiddle with my grades the same way he fiddles with everything else about my school life.”

“Allegedly.”

“Right.”

We arrived at Comstock’s house and, for the first time, didn’t have to sneak around. I pulled into his driveway, and we both got out and walked up to the front door. I practiced in my head how this would go, I could play it straight or I could be the bully again. The shadowy man with a knife and a tape recorder. Did he even know that it was me in Vienna? I thought Schumer said he figured it out, but I couldn’t remember.

We got to the door and Amy reached out to ring the bell but I stopped her. Something twitched in the back of my mind like I was

missing, something that wasn't right. The door was already open a crack, I noticed.

I stepped around and tried to look through the windows beside the door but couldn't see anything inside, just empty hallways and a living room. I reached my palm out the door and gave it a light tap to swing it open, but the door didn't move. I pushed again, something was blocking it. I used both hands and my shoulder and pushed, the door opened slowly, pushing whatever obstructed it. After a few feet, the obstruction had been pushed out of the way and the door, newly free, swung open and slammed into the stopper loudly.

The foyer wasn't lit, but the thing blocking the door was evident. It was about six feet long, laying on the floor awkwardly, and looked a lot like a dead Nathan Comstock.

CHAPTER 46

“Okay, I wasn’t expecting this,” I said, standing in the open doorway of Nathan Comstock’s house and looking down at his corpse.

“Is he dead?” Amy, standing beside me, asked. If she was either shocked or alarmed, she demonstrated neither.

I took a broad step over the body, into the house, and looked around for a light switch for the foyer. I found one, and flicked it with my knuckle. An overhead light turned on, scaring away the shadows from around Comstock’s face. Oh yeah, he’s dead.

“Still wondering?” I asked, looking down.

Comstock’s body was rigid, lying across the wood floor like he’d stopped suddenly in the middle of running. His legs were bent, his arms tucked in against his body. His fingers were flexed as if holding invisible baseballs. His face was pale and sickly, trapped in an expression of panic. There was no blood anywhere. He was wearing khaki slacks, a turquoise polo shirt, and brown loafers; as if he had planned to go out for a late brunch, got as far as the front door, and dropped dead.

“Why does he look like that?” Amy said before stepping over the body.

“It looks like rigor mortis,” I said. “The more pertinent question, I think, is why he was killed.”

“I thought rigor mortis takes a few days to set in. And why do you think he was killed?”

I looked up from the body, around the parts of the house I could see from where I stood. Everything looked reasonably normal. He couldn't have just *died*, though. Not when he's in the middle of this conspiracy. I was somehow involved in a spiraling swarm of death and secrets.

“People involved in government conspiracies don't just die, they're killed. It's like a rule or something.”

“We should call the police,” Amy said.

“Should we? I mean, are there any reasons we shouldn't?” I asked, trying to think through it. They'd wonder why we were here, but there's nothing too suspicious about that. The FBI would probably swoop in anyway and take over.

“I don't know. Maybe you should call one of your FBI pals instead,” Amy said.

“I was just thinking that,” I replied.

I pulled out my phone and held it in my hand as I took a few steps around.

“It's disgusting,” Amy said as I walked away. “Look, his eyes are still open.”

I stepped around a corner and found myself in the kitchen. It was nicely appointed with stainless steel appliances and Italian-looking tile. There were bags and wrappers from a carryout place nearby scattered around the counter. Maybe he had brunch in, instead.

“He might just be paralyzed,” I said, loud enough so Amy would hear me from where she was. “We should check for a pulse.”

“*I'm* not touching him. It could be contagious,” she called out.

“What? Death?” I said, going around a corner into the living room.

If death were a contagious disease, I must be a carrier.

The lights were out in the living room, but enough light from the kitchen and foyer came in to let me see rough shapes. There was a glass sliding door in the back, a long sectional couch facing a square TV set sitting on a wooden stand, and a fireplace on the opposite wall.

“Who could have done it?” Amy asked, now in my line of sight.

“He was afraid that his bosses in the Marines were going to kill him, I guess he was right,” I said, standing in the middle of the living room.

“If they’re capable of doing that, then this is worse than you figured.”

“Worse than I figured...” I said, “This gets worse than I figured by the day.”

I’d always hoped that the threat was coming from an outside party. Schumer acted like he wanted to help me, the FBI agents acted like they wanted me to help them. Someone came to my house, shot at me, and then burned the place down. If it was Schumer or the Marines behind all this, there’s nothing I can do to stop them. I can’t outrun them, I can’t hide. The real mystery was why I wasn’t dead already.

The sight of Comstock’s face flashed in my mind for a moment, sent a chill down my spine. The last time I saw the face of a dead guy was the photograph Pratt showed me in the Vienna coffee house. Some Austrian political guy that Pratt thought I’d killed. Killed with an injection that causes or mimics a heart attack. I wondered if that’s how Comstock died. Could they have been connected? Comstock and the Austrian guy; Nes-something, Nesiri? Nesimi? Swanson?

If the deaths were the same, it meant somebody came in here and shot him up with something. Somebody good. Somebody expensive. There aren’t many people with the ability or resources to call professional hitters for every little annoyance. The only person I knew with a hitman on his speed dial was Comstock, he called Dingan to – allegedly – bring me in for questioning or more brainwashing. Maybe Comstock had a

whole Rolodex of hitmen. Maybe Schumer has his own Rolodex. Maybe Schumer did have Comstock killed. But why?

“I can’t figure out why someone, Schumer or anyone, would want Comstock dead,” I said, still in the living room.

“Comstock somebody was after him because he lost track of you and screwed up with the Dingan thing,” Amy said. “Maybe he wasn’t being paranoid after all.”

“Is that worth assassination? Because I stopped going to school? It couldn’t have messed them up too bad. I marched right into Quantico twice now, if they really needed me back in the hypnosis chair, they’ve had plenty of chances to grab me.”

“Because he talked, then? Maybe since Vienna, he’s been talking to someone else. The FBI, the press, anyone.”

“I don’t know. Maybe. From what I can tell, the stupidest thing he’s done in the last month has been sending a hitman to track down a teenager and then having that teenager end up killing the hitman.”

“*You* killed Dingan?” came a different voice, from behind me.

I turned around, and from the darkness in the corner of the room, behind the fireplace mantle, stepped a man. He was dressed in black, like the men who’d come to my house, with various indiscernible shapes hanging from his vest harness. In his hand was a black and silver pistol with a long, silver cylindrical tube jutting from the barrel. The gun was pointed at me.

“I’d heard the cops got him,” he said, “that changes things just a bit.” His voice had a bit of an accent, though I couldn’t put my finger on it.

Amy hadn’t said a word. I assumed she was still in the foyer and was seeing this.

I looked at where the man had come from. Unless he’d been creeping around this whole time, I must have walked right by him and not seen him. That, the suit, and the gun; it all added up to one thing.

Another hitman.

CHAPTER 47

At least the mystery of Comstock's death was pretty-much solved.

The man with the gun remained in the shadows, I couldn't really see his face. As far as I knew, this was the first time I'd stood before someone pointing a gun at me. Unlike in the movies, it's hard to be curt and dismissive to the person aiming at you. I tried, really I did. Some sarcastic quip or ironic observation. I had nothing. I said nothing, did nothing. Sure, there was the possibility that the switch would flip in my brain and I'd do a back-flip or drop a ninja-style smoke bomb for a stylish escape, but I was nonetheless gripped in an unnatural fear that monopolized my attention.

Someone said my name. The voice came from behind. I turned my head just enough to see that Amy was still standing in the foyer. Great. She was supposed to have cut through the kitchen, grabbed a knife, and thrown it at this guy's face. Why wouldn't she instinctively do that? I would have. Maybe.

I looked back at the presumed hitman. Why isn't he saying anything? Am I supposed to answer his question or was it a rhetorical sort of thing? Or is he just enjoying the panic he's put me into?

"Dingan tried to kill *me*," I managed to say.

"So it's true?" the man said, finally. I still couldn't figure out his accent. He spoke lightly, as if whispering.

I said nothing. Just stood there like an idiot, with a cell phone in my right hand.

"I was told *he* was at fault," he said, probably talking about the corpse by the door.

"So you killed him for it?" I said, waiting for a plan to float to the surface of my brain like they usually do.

He was silent for a moment, then turned his head slightly and said, "You, away from the door. Come in here." He was talking to Amy. A few seconds later I felt her standing a few inches to my right.

After another pause, the man asked, "Who are you?" He seemed to choose his words carefully.

I tried to measure the distance between us. It was over six feet. At a distance, the guy with the gun always has the advantage.

"You don't know?" I said, mildly incredulous, "I thought I was at the core of this."

"I guess I'm being kept in the dark," he said. The accent sounded Scottish maybe.

"Hey, I've been kept in the dark for a while now. I find the best way to get answers is to threaten people, though I usually don't get that far," I said, pointing at Comstock.

The man stepped a bit closer. Maybe five feet away now. "I do as I'm told, I don't look for answers. I was told to kill the man responsible for Dingan, and I was told that was him."

Hired to kill the man responsible for Dingan's death? Who would do that, other than Schumer?

"You're just a kid," he continued, "how the hell could Dingan have tried to kill you?"

“I’m scrappy,” I said. He took another step forward. Four feet. I could see the gun in his right hand better; it was a black pistol with a silver suppressor. It wasn’t a Beretta or an H&K, those being the only two guns I’d know by sight. The fact that I couldn’t identify the gun made me wonder if I was only myself at the moment. If I’d had weapons training, shouldn’t I be able to recognize a gun by sight? I thought that whenever I was in danger, the training took over like a second personality. I felt alone in my mind.

I said, “Dingan was an accident. He tried to take me in, I escaped. He tried to kill me, I killed him back. My understanding is that Comstock hired him, but he did so for someone else. If you want revenge, you’ll want to head up the ladder, not down.”

“And you’re down the ladder?” he asked, less careful with his words. The accent was definitely Scottish. Or Irish. Welsh, maybe?

“At the bottom, and off. I’m off the ladder. I’m running around the yard trying to *find* the ladder.”

“But you’re here,” he said. “I can’t walk away with two witnesses.”

“Not my fault you showed yourself. You had a nice hiding spot going there.”

After a moment, he said, “Toss the phone.”

I frowned and threw the phone in my hand over to the couch.

He took another step forward. Three feet.

Close enough.

My left arm went left, my body went right. I gripped the top of the gun’s slide and pulled it backwards, heard the chambered round tumble from the gun and onto the hardwood floor. My right hand went knuckles-first into the man’s wrist, freeing the gun from his grip. My right elbow flexed into the man’s neck, and I brought my fist down into the back of his head while I turned the gun in my left hand to hold it by the grip.

The flurry of movement took only a second.

I felt it now. That clarity. I was glad it was back.

Leveling the pistol in my hands I stepped backwards to put some distance between us. I felt a tug on my leg for a moment, and before I could process it, I saw that Amy had the knife from my pocket in her hands and open; she lunged forward at the man and threw her shoulder into the man's chest and plunged the blade into his right thigh. They both howled at the same time, for different reasons. Slightly taken aback, I pulled Amy away from him as he tumbled backwards from the impact. His back hit the stone fireplace mantle and he began to slide down but he stopped himself before he hit the floor.

"What the hell was that?" I asked, moving the gun to my right hand and keeping it pointed at the man.

"Just helping," Amy said, breathing heavily. I put a hand on her shoulder and walked her to the couch and sat her down.

The man leaned now against the fireplace, keeping his weight off his leg. He grimaced and winced, both hands wrapped around the handle of the knife stuck into his leg. After some panting, he pulled the knife from himself with a quick tug and a low groan. He held the knife in front of himself with both hands.

"Drop it," I said, leveling the gun again, and holding it with both hands like you're supposed to, so that somebody can't just grab it and rip it from your hands.

He pressed the latch on the knife and folded in the blade with one hand, then his fingers went limp and the knife fell to the floor. His hands retracted and he held them both over the wound in his leg.

"Now, while we wait for the police, you can tell me all about who you're working for," I said.

The man kept grimacing. I turned to Amy and told her to call 911. She couldn't find the phone. I turned my head for a moment to look at the couch, and I noticed a slight blur of movement from the corner of my eye. I turned back to the hitman just in time to see a small, black cylinder fall from a strap across his torso and hit the floor with a slight clank.

I tracked my eyes upward to see the man had turned his face toward the wall and covered his exposed ear with one hand, a small shiny ring of metal around his index finger.

I tried to say, “Oh, crap,” but was cut off just after the “oh” by a sharp, blinding white light and a deafening explosion. My senses all vanished, the image of the man holding his face to the wall burned into my brain as I stumbled backwards blindly and tripped over a piece of furniture and fell to the floor. I barely noticed myself hit the hardwood with my back. I existed in a world of sharp ringing and bright white. I was aware of the gun in my hand, but there was nothing I could do with it.

For a second time, I wondered if my eyes were destroyed.

After a few seconds, the photosensitive cells in my retinas wore themselves out and my vision slowly crept back. I could smell ammonia and gunpowder. My ears rang still, a high-pitched whine. It was hard to find my balance, but I pulled myself up to my feet and tried to assess the situation and perhaps verify that I was still alive.

Amy was still on the couch, only now lying down and rubbing her eyes. I discovered the gun in my hand and drew it upwards, scanning the room. There was no sign of the hitman. Still fighting for balance, I stumbled into the kitchen, and then the foyer. Comstock was still there, as dead as ever. I noticed that the glass window closest to the fireplace was broken. Outside it, surrounded by bits of glass was one of the small wooden chairs from the table just by the window. He must have used the distraction to escape.

I went over to Amy and put a hand on her shoulder. With her eyes still closed, she tried to fight my arms away until I yelled her name loud enough for me to hear it. I sat down and we took a few minutes to let our senses return.

“Was that a flashbang?” she asked, her voice a bit raw.

“Yeah,” I said. The flash, the bang, it was all there.

Stun grenades, or “flashbangs” are often used by SWAT teams needing to clear a room full of hostiles. With anybody in the room disoriented by the blinding flash of magnesium and the deafening, but harmless, explosion, the good guys can breach the door and take out the hostiles without the risk to hostages a more lethal grenade would obviously pose.

On me, the intended effect of the flashbang was achieved. Not prepared for it, I was incapacitated long enough for the hitman, who was

prepared for it, to gain the upper hand. He could have taken the gun from me and shot me, or used the knife at his feet on me. That he had only escaped seemed unusual, though highly fortunate.

“I thought it was a real grenade,” she said, “I thought we were dead.”

A dull ringing still echoing in my skull, I said, “We’re not. Not yet.”

CHAPTER 48

Before long the stinging had completely faded from my eyes, without the help of milk, even. There was still a distant ringing in my ears, but it wasn't too bad.

Amy had apparently had the presence of mind to duck when she saw what she thought was a grenade fall to the ground, so the only hit she took was to her ears.

Both of us stayed put on Comstock's couch. I looked out the window at the tree-filtered moonlight. I didn't know if those were actual woods behind the house, or just a patch of trees. That guy, Shamus O'Flashbang, could have fled away under the cover of the trees, or he could just be hiding out there waiting for another chance to strike. For perhaps the fifth time I realized I had his gun in my hand, and felt better about my odds for a moment.

Still, I found my phone and dialed Rubino's number and told him that I had to reschedule our meeting, and that Comstock was dead and the guy who killed him was about to kill me when this girl I know stabbed him with my knife and he jumped out the window under cover of flashbang. Rubino had me repeat the sentence a few times as if I were

speaking too quickly or reading a physics equation, then said he would be over with a crime scene crew.

While we waited patiently in the unlit living room of a dead guy, I asked out loud, “What was that?”

“What was what?” Amy replied, leaning against the arm of the couch and looking uncomfortable.

“That. You grabbed my knife and stabbed the guy,” I said, as I searched for somewhere prudent to set the gun down.

“Oh, that. You’re welcome.”

“You don’t think it was a little, I don’t know, dangerous?”

“And grabbing a gun with your hand isn’t?”

“That’s different, I’m...”

“A guy?”

“*Capable*. But you’re...”

“A girl?”

“*Not*.”

“Not?”

“You know what I mean,” I said, setting the gun on the floor.

“Yeah, there’s something wrong with your brain and when you’re in danger you turn into Batman. That doesn’t mean I can’t help out.”

“By stabbing someone?”

“What were *you* going to do?”

“I don’t know. Ask him questions.”

“So I should have done nothing?”

“I don’t know. I don’t like my danger spilling over onto others.”

“It’s spilled. I’m covered in it. I was there in Lorton, I was there at your house. I’m in this too.”

“I wish you weren’t.”

“I wish none of this was happening, but here it is. I stabbed a guy and our principal is lying dead by the front door.”

“*My* principal.”

“No, I was assigned to him too. I just never saw him because I was never sent to him.”

“Because you waited until now to start stabbing people.”

“Something to tell my grandkids, I guess.”

I didn’t say so, but I wasn’t sure if I was going to live that long.

Special Agents Bremer and Rubino soon showed up, along with their “crime scene crew” which, I found, was practically a small army. FBI forensic agents milled around the house, some uniformed police officers showed up to watch the outside of the house, and some detectives came and mostly stood around and waited for somebody to tell them what to do. It seemed on their end like another jurisdictional pissing match. Once again, the FBI calls dibs on a crime that the cops would love nothing better but to occupy themselves with. Once again, I was in the middle of said crime.

We two youngsters stayed in the living room mostly, and after ten minutes or so Bremer and Rubino came over to again go over what had happened.

I explained how we’d come over to talk with Comstock, how we’d found the door slightly open and his body blocking it. I explained how we walked through the kitchen and around to the living room, talking out loud about Dingan and all that, when Angus McHitman stepped from the shadows and confronted me about my involvement with Dingan’s death.

“He referred to Dingan by name?” Bremer asked, looking a bit tired.

“Yeah,” I said. “He said he thought that the police had killed him, not me.”

“He seemed interested in him? Like he knew him, and this was personal?”

“Yeah, like they were friends or partners or... partners.”

Bremer made a slight face. “Nothing we know about Dingan indicates that he worked with others,” he said.

“Well this guy didn’t seem too happy about Dingan being dead. He gave up his position just to confront me about it.”

“He might have been planning to kill you two anyway,” Rubino said.

“That’s nice to know,” Amy said with a nod.

“He wouldn’t have expected us,” I said. “We hadn’t made plans to come here, it was last minute.”

“Did you talk about it over the phone?” Bremer asked.

I thought for a moment, and then said, “No, we talked about it in person. Do you think my phone is tapped?”

Bremer and Rubino both shrugged. I decided I needed a new phone, and a new account.

“We’ll be able to figure more out once forensics determines a time of death,” Rubino said.

“How?” I asked.

“If Comstock was killed just before you arrived, maybe you caught the killer in the middle of his escape,” Bremer started, “or if he died hours ago, maybe he was waiting for you; or waiting for someone. Or maybe he was looking around the house for something.”

I nodded, about to reply when two uniforms came through the back sliding glass doors. They each had flashlights and were switching them off and slipping crime-scene booties over their shoes.

“We’ve finished checking the perimeter,” one of them said to Bremer or Rubino. “We found a trail of blood leading into the woods, but it ends a hundred feet or so in, he may have patched himself up. We could bring in K-9 and continue a foot search, or call in some choppers from State.”

Both FBI men seemed to consider it. I said, “Couldn’t hurt,” feeling good about contributing, and then Bremer said, “It’s been over half an hour. If he’s a pro, he should have disappeared by now. You can try the dogs but a chopper would be a waste of time. This isn’t a manhunt.”

The two cops nodded and went about their business. Over by the fireplace, some forensics people poked at the drops of blood on the floor

with cotton swabs. One of them dropped my knife into a plastic evidence bag.

“Ah,” I said, loudly, “Do you have to take that?”

Everybody in the room stopped and looked at me, decided to whom I was talking, and all but the forensics people went back to work.

“It has his blood on it,” the woman holding the bag said.

“There’s blood all over the place,” I said.

“What, is it your knife?”

“I... maybe,” I said, not sure if I should have admitted it or not. I just didn’t want my knife to get taken and absorbed into the system. The woman, on her knees, shook her head and tossed the bag across the room over to Rubino. He held the bag up, looked at my knife through the clear plastic, and then handed it over to me, saying, “Happy birthday.”

I took the bag, looked at the knife through it, and decided to wait until I could clean the blood off before taking it out.

“So, *why* isn’t this a manhunt?” Amy asked.

Bremer and Rubino turned toward her, then looked at me and saw that my expression matched hers.

“Some guy gets drunk and shoots his wife,” Bremer started, annoyed, “you have a manhunt. Someone breaks out of prison by shanking a guard and scaling a fence, you have a manhunt. Both of those people are scared, sloppy, untrained, and predictable. If this guy is a real hitter, and everything here suggests that he is, he spends hours each day planning how to evade a manhunt. Someone like this, you have to track down with your brain, not a posse of badges with bloodhounds.”

Over by the door, examiners in blue FBI jackets finished fluttering around Comstock’s body and loaded him inside a fresh body bag and onto a stretcher. Forensic examiners came out of the kitchen loaded with evidence bags full of various items. One of the medical examiners, a middle-aged woman about as tall as my belt, came over to our little circle and snapped off her latex gloves.

“Cause of death?” Bremer asked, looking down at her.

“Unsure at the moment,” the woman replied.

“Time of death?” Bremer asked.

“Also unsure,” she said, hesitant.

Bremer lowered his head slightly to look at her from the top of his eyes.

“The problem is, all external indicators say he died no more than an hour ago. But, just looking at the body, it looks like three to four hours. His body is in mid-stage rigor mortis, which takes three or so hours to even begin; but the musculature is locked into the position it was in at the moment of death,” she held up her arms and took the posture of your average undead zombie as she said it. “Usually the body will relax into a more natural posture before going stiff. This body looks to have experienced cadaveric spasm, or instant rigor. It happens when the body is in extreme muscular distress at the time of death and becomes locked into the posture held in the final moments. We see it often in cases of drowning, where someone will be thrashing their limbs or gripping their hands around seaweed or a rope. Nothing indicates he was drowned and then brought here, however.”

“Is there anything else that can cause it?” Rubino asked.

She scratched her cheek and looked thoughtful for a moment. “Anything that causes massive skeletal-muscular distress, prior to death. Certain nerve agents like VX will do that, and glycine-antagonist poisons such as strychnine can do it.”

“Are either of those injected?” I asked, thinking of the Austrian man supposedly injected with a poison.

The examiner seemed to notice me for the first time, but hid any shock or confusion well. “They can be,” she said, “but it would be a waste of time for either. VX is a nerve gas that’s inhaled, and strychnine works best if it’s ingested but it can be fatal if inhaled or even absorbed through the skin.”

She went on, “Most likely, we’re looking at strychnine added to something he ate or drank. It’s a pretty common and time-tested poison, historically taken by accident just as often as used intentionally. Jane Stanford, co-founder of Stanford University, died of strychnine poisoning. And if I recall correctly, it’s what Norman Bates was supposed to have used on his mother.”

Amy, Bremer, Rubino, and I stood in an odd silence for a moment.

“How does it work?” Rubino asked, eventually.

“Almost always, it kills by spasming the skeletal muscles until the spinotrapezius and latissimus dorsi muscles work against each other and break the spine, but it doesn’t seem like our body’s back is broken. It could also cause the diaphragm to displace itself, which may have happened. We’ll know more once we pump the stomach and analyze some of the foods it looks like he’s eaten.”

Bremer thanked her as she headed out the door with the rest of the science brigade. “You didn’t eat anything while you were here, did you?” Bremer asked me.

“No,” I said, “and I didn’t sniff anything, either.”

“Me either,” Amy chimed in.

Bremer nodded, and then noticed the gun on the floor by where I’d been sitting before. It was partially knocked under the couch.

“That yours or his?” Bremer asked. I turned and looked at the gun. It seemed like a nice gun, and I rather liked the idea of keeping it.

“His,” I said, unfortunately.

“Sorry,” he said, “That, we *will* have to take.”

Bremer pointed to it, and Rubino stepped over and picked the gun up by sticking a pen through the trigger guard.

“A Walther,” he said, “a .22, with an AAC silencer.”

Bremer chuckled and said, “Well there you go.”

I looked from him to the gun, and then said, “What?”

“Two types of people use .22s,” he said, “beginner target, women usually, and hitmen. Consider the silencer, and it’s pretty obvious. A .22 bullet is so small it can barely pierce bone. Sometimes, shot right into the torso, the bullets can get caught up in the abdominal muscles and won’t even get through the gut.

They’re only really any good at point blank range, but they’re so quiet – especially with a silencer – that it can make it worth getting close. It might take two or three shots to do any damage, but with practically

no report it can be as stealthy as a knife. Plus, the bullet velocity is so low that they usually don't exit the body."

"So there's no mess," Rubino added.

"Wow," Amy said, dryly, "this is all very fascinating and I'm sure I'll one day use that information for a novel, but I think a more relevant topic would be what are you doing to catch this guy, and when can we go home?"

Rubino stood for a moment, holding the gun with his pen in silence. He pulled an evidence bag from his suit jacket and dropped the gun into the bag.

"Finding the guy isn't likely," Bremer said. "It's more feasible to find whoever hired him. If this was retribution for something to do with you, or for Comstock screwing up by hiring Dingan, then there are few suspects."

"Who, Schumer?"

"Probably."

I sighed, wishing I had some kind of clue as to what was going on.

"So, there's nothing to stop this guy from coming after us now?" Amy asked.

"Coming after you? If he wasn't contracted to kill you, he's got no reason to bother," Bremer said.

"These types aren't likely go off-book," Rubino said. "When you're good at something, you don't do it for free. That is, unless you've really managed to piss him off."

"It's a good thing neither of us stabbed him in the leg, then," I said, looking at Amy.

She shrugged. "*You* grabbed his gun and hit him in the throat, I'm not the only one he'd be mad at."

Bremer looked us both, and asked, "Are you two in some kind of piss-off-hitmen contest or something?"

"We *do* have a knack for it," Amy said.

“Oh yeah,” I said, “Dingan *was* supposed to be bringing me in, but I managed to coax him into wanting to kill me. How’s that for off-book?”

“I don’t understand this,” Bremer said, “You want credit for annoying people into wanting to kill you?”

“I’m just saying, this new guy could still be a threat.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Bremer said.

“How about my house? Do you have any idea who burned it down?”

“Blew it up,” Rubino said.

“Right. Do you know who *blew up* my house?”

“Nope,” Bremer said.

“Awesome,” I said, sarcastically. “Since I have little to no idea what the hell is happening in my life, could you perhaps provide some kind of list of people who *might* want to shoot me or blow me up?”

Bremer looked confused, “Well, it’s a short list. It starts and ends with Schumer.”

Why would Schumer want to kill me? If nothing else, it seems like he would want to strap me to a chair and have some hypnotist take a swan dive into my mind and undo his mistakes. I represent the last two decades of work and probably millions of dollars in development. There is no reason for him to want me dead, so why are my FBI pals saying that he would?

I remembered something Schumer had said. “You won’t know who to trust.” At the time, I thought he was just trying to be mysterious. He implied it was the FBI who’d actually killed my dad, as little of a fan I was of him at the moment. Lately, it seemed as if all Bremer and Rubino cared about was using me to mole out as much information about the program as they wanted. Maybe the FBI cared more about the program than about me. Maybe it was the FBI my dad was selling the program to, not a foreign government. Maybe the FBI double-crossed him, or he double-crossed the FBI, so they killed him, and are now pumping me for the information they couldn’t get from him. I supposed if that was their goal, they would want me to hate Schumer, wouldn’t they?

My head was spinning and my stomach felt sick. I don't like the thought of being used. I don't like the thought of anything that was happening to me. I don't like that my dad was dead, or that my house exploded, or that I'm wanted in Austria, or that for the last 17 years I've been having my head screwed around with. I don't like that I'm still standing in my dead principal's living room, or even the fact that my principal is dead. I also don't like the fact that wherever I went, whatever I did, I put my and Amy's life in danger. Once again, I'm fed up. For all I know, Bremer and Rubino could have blasted Comstock with VX gas, or hired the .22-Caliber-Killer to "off" Comstock.

Wasn't VX gas the stuff in that movie, *The Rock*? The little, green, glass balls? Whatever.

I told Bremer and Rubino I'd call them later, grabbed Amy's hand, and left the building.

CHAPTER 49

I didn't sleep that night.

It wasn't insomnia, and it wasn't bad dreams from seeing yet another dead body or finding myself in yet another situation where I have to wait around for a more prepared version of myself to take the reins of my body. It was more of a crisis of identity, something I couldn't stop thinking about.

I brought Amy back to the hotel's parking lot so she could get her dad's car and go home. Later, in my hotel room I lay in bed in hot, dark silence for hours but couldn't sleep, my mind kept buzzing. The TV helped pass the time once I'd stopped trying, but through all the commercial breaks I sank right back into my brain and kept re-thinking the same things.

I wished I had a computer. I thought I might head to the store and buy one, like I'd done before. Something about that made me feel impressive. Like those people who can just go into a store and buy whatever they want and not even consider the price. Too bad, I thought again, that such things come at the price of death and destruction. More to think about, less to sleep for.

Dawn came eventually, light began to blot out the darkness and brought sounds of morning; birds chirping, sprinklers, early commuters opening car doors and starting engines.

After some time, the reruns of shows long canceled and advertisements for hair removal cream are replaced by morning news shows and morning talk shows. First we banter about recent news events, then an actor comes out to talk ever-candidly about the movie they happen to be in which happens to come out on Friday, then somebody shows us how to bake a pie with half the carbs, then someone comes to drone on about a book they just wrote.

Somewhere in there, a band plays their latest single and somebody in the audience wins a trip to someplace depressing like Boston or Seattle, places millions of people live day by day and don't consider it a vacation. Betwixt these segments are three minute chunks of advertisements for cars, coffee, and travel websites.

I grew tired of telling myself that if I slept now I'd probably sleep until 2 PM, then 3, and so on. I got out of bed, opened the window the rest of the way, and took a shower in the bathroom connected to my room. A few times I nearly nodded off with hot water hammering my neck, but I held on to my lucidity. I felt like I needed a massage, if not from the car crash at least from the stress. When we first got to the hotel I made a point to see if they had a spa, they didn't. Maybe when I'm out buying computers by the armful I can stop for a day in a spa. Drape salad toppings over my eyes while a Dominican rubs sea-salt lotion or ground-up snapping turtle shell all over my body. Pish, it's only money.

When I was through the bathroom and into the only other set of clothes I owned, I got my knife out of the plastic FBI evidence bag and dumped it in the sink and ran hot water on it, wiped it dry with a towel, and clipped it in my pocket. I went into the kitchen and opened the front door to get the newspaper and found a plastic bin with the groceries we'd asked for yesterday. Trying not to make too much noise since my mom was probably still asleep, I brought the bin inside and put the food away. Crackers and granola bars in the cupboards, bottled waters and green tea in the fridge. I probably should have specified a brand of green tea when I wrote it down, since they got the cheapest and most notoriously awful brand. When I put the three bottles in the fridge I thought about having one then, for the caffeine, but hot coffee from the lobby sounded better.

The room phone rang, loud and annoying. A quick wave of concern pulsed through my mind, but I scrambled over to the phone and answered it as casually as I could manage.

“They won’t give me your room number,” Amy said through the handset.

She must have been at the front desk. “Well, you could be a crazy person,” I said. I tried to get a handle on the time and why Amy would be here, but I could only manage one thought at a time.

“When has my being crazy ever gotten in the way of our visits?”

“You’re going to scare the person at the desk,” I said before telling her the room number and hanging up.

It could have been a trick, or she could have been making the call under duress. I could never seem to figure out whether I was the one who was in danger or if I just kept stumbling into danger. My only source of information on this matter, the Federal Bureau *of* “Information” was being tediously glib on the subject. I’d have to call one of those boys sometime in the day and find out if they know who hired Scrooge McDuck to kill Comstock, and whether I should be concerned.

I watched through the peephole until Amy finally appeared, alone. I opened the door before she could knock.

“Good morning, sunshine,” she said. She was wearing khaki-colored cargo pants and a striped button-up shirt. No rock bands I’d never heard of.

“Do you know what time it is?” I asked, still in the doorway.

“Do *you*?” she asked.

“No,” I admitted, dropping my arm from the door and letting her through.

She took a few steps in and looked around at the kitchen area, the couches, the TV, and the open door to my room.

“It’s seven,” she said, “the time you used to have to get to school every day.”

“Huh,” I said, rubbing my head. “Yeah, I used to go to school.”

“So did I,” she said, looking down at the parking lot through the window near the couches.

“Not anymore?”

“I don’t know,” she started, then turned around. “I woke up, got dressed, got in the car, and drove towards the school, but I just couldn’t give myself any real reasons to go through with it. I mean, after all this, it just seems like...”

“Another life.”

“Right. How do I go back to business as usual, seeing what I’ve seen? FBI, hitmen, it’s all way above high school level stuff. I don’t know how you went back, after your dad.”

“You made it easier,” I said, leaning now against the refrigerator. “I didn’t stay very long, anyway.”

She nodded. “So, it was either home or here.”

“Home away from home,” I said to myself.

“So, is there any sleuthing for us to do, perhaps?”

“Not today,” I said, “I’m going to leave that to the professionals. Maybe this afternoon I’ll call Rubino or Bremer and see if they know anything, but I don’t really feel like sticking my neck out anymore.”

“Then what are you going to do today?” she asked.

“Was thinking about getting some shopping done with the home insurance money. I need clothes, a computer, maybe some food for here. Do you want to go shopping?”

“Well, they tell me I’m a girl,” she said, “so I guess that means I love to go shopping. Where were you going to go?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “if I had a computer I’d probably just buy it all online.”

“Do you have a Costco membership?”

“I... do not.”

“I do,” she said. “It’d be a good place to start. They have food, computers, and some inexpensive clothes. They have furniture, if you want to start decorating your new house.”

“I think the decorating will be my mom’s job, but we could go there.”

“Do you have anything to drink?” Amy asked. I pulled the fridge door open, pointed inside, and went back in my room to get my wallet, phone, and keys.

From the kitchen I heard Amy cough and say something to the tune of “Eugh!”

I came back out and saw she was holding one of the bottles of green tea. “This stuff is nasty,” she said.

“I know, I forgot to specify which brand to get,” I said. “Did you shake it? I think you’re supposed to shake it.”

“I shook it,” she said before taking another sip and wincing. “It’s bitter,” she said after forcing it down. She held the bottle out and said, “You try it.”

“Well, with such a ringing endorsement...” I said, not moving.

She said, “All right,” and set the plastic bottle down in the sink, I could hear it running down the drain.

“We’ll get some coffee downstairs,” I said, opening the front door and letting Amy through.

I held the door open for a second to make sure I had a card key when the door to the other bedroom in the suite opened and my mom came out in a bathrobe.

“Hey,” she said, “are you going to school?”

Amy was in the hallway, so my mom didn’t see her. “No,” I said, “I was going to go get clothes and stuff.”

“Okay”, she said, sitting down at the kitchen table.

“Don’t drink the tea they brought, it’s unpleasant,” I said as I pushed the door open and went through it.

Amy and I went down, drew ourselves each a cup of coffee from the food area, and got in my car. She told me where the nearest Costco was, about 20 minutes away. I opened and closed my eyes a few times to make sure I was awake enough to drive.

Once on the road, Amy asked, “Did you not sleep or something?”

“Why?” I asked.

“You look like you didn’t sleep.”

“Did you sleep?” I asked her.

“Some,” she said, “no worse than after the day in Lorton or after the siege on your house.”

“I didn’t sleep,” I said.

“Why? Afraid of—”

“No,” I cut in. “Just, thinking.”

“Thinking?”

“Thinking.”

“About what?” she asked.

“It’s complicated.

“Everything’s complicated with you.”

I sighed, realizing this conversation wasn’t going to go away, and resolving to, in the future, not bring up with a female something I don’t want to talk about.

“It’s just, when someone talks about their body, or their arm, it’s ‘my body’ and ‘my arm.’”

“Right...” she said.

“And when they talk about their mind, it’s ‘my mind.’ Like, your body and your mind are both something you own. But if you aren’t your mind *or* your body, what are *you*?”

“You... what?”

“What makes you you, what makes me me? If your mind and body are just possessions of yours, what exactly is the ‘you’ in that scenario? There’s that thing, ‘I think, therefore I am,’ like there’s no real way to know that you even have a body because the only way we experience it is through our senses – through our mind, and our senses can be tricked, so the only thing we can know for sure is that we’re at least thinking. So, the only guarantee is that you have a mind.”

“All right.”

“So if the *you* in ‘you’ is your mind, how can it be *your* mind if your mind *is* you?”

She thought for a minute. “I don’t know. Your mind exists on a conceptual plane and your body exists in the physical plane. Maybe the only way to bind together something from both planes is with an abstract concept like the self.”

I drove in silence for a while.

“Okay,” Amy said, “maybe we are nothing but our minds. Maybe our bodies are just manifestations to serve the purpose of the mind, since our minds would be useless if they couldn’t move around and interact with objects. Like, if the purpose of a knife is to cut things, then the physical knife is just a manifestation to allow for the knife’s purpose.”

After exactly five seconds I said, “I don’t think I’m high enough for that to make sense.”

Amy laughed her little laugh, then said, “So what’s the point of all this? Are you considering a career in philosophy?”

“No,” I said. “I’m just... I don’t know. Most people are content with what they are because their minds and their bodies are all they have and they’re both the products of chance and effort. But me, if I’m to believe Schumer, my body is the product of some genetic screw-turning and half of my mind was given to me. If I’m nothing more than my mind and my body, there’s very little here that’s me. The only thing I have that I made myself is the me that I am now, when there aren’t any guns or bad guys around. The body, not mine, and the part of my mind that keeps me from dying a few times a week, isn’t mine.”

“But Schumer also said that you can have all the hypnosis garbage removed if you want, so it’d be all you up there.”

“The problem is, though, that I like it. I like being able to do the things I can do. I like being able to protect myself, and you. I like the answers to all my questions popping into mind before I ask them. I just don’t know if I like it enough to always be wondering what’s me and what’s the other guy.”

“Ok, I can imagine losing sleep over that.”

“I’m glad,” I said.

“All right look, there’s that other saying. That a man is nothing more than the sum of his actions. It’s not your body or your gray matter that makes you Chris Baker, it’s the things you do. Your cells die and regenerate a million times a day. You’re not even the same physical person you were a few months ago, and your mind changes just as often. The only thing that makes you you is that through it all, you do what you do. If I told you to draw a picture of yourself you’d probably draw yourself in that shirt and those pants, but those are just as peripheral as your hair and your body. The you is what you want it to be, whether it’s a high school kid with a dead dad or the preconfigured Marine running around inside your skull.”

“You just put that together yourself?” I asked after a bit.

“Yes, but now I have a headache.”



At Costco, Amy flashed her membership card to get us through the door. A quick gust of heat from an industrial heater mounted high above the door seemed to cook the top layer of my skin as we stepped into the giant warehouse. Soon we stood surrounded by flat-screen HDTVs. Delicious, reasonably priced televisions. Suddenly I could feel the debit card attached to hundreds of thousands of dollars burning a hole through my wallet, pocket, and skin.

“Come on,” Amy said, “I need something for this headache, the pharmacy is over here.”

“I thought you were joking about that,” I said.

“The real joke is that we’ll probably have to get a bottle of 400 pills when I only need one.”

I followed her past the TVs, around a corner with a few laptop computers set up on display and knew I’d be coming back here. As we approached the white, boxy pharmacy inside the store Amy stopped in an aisle covered in over-the-counter meds. While she looked through the shelves for something for a headache, I looked around at the store, the shelves, the door, and the stuff they carried.

“You know something?” I said, still looking around.

“What?” Amy asked, looking at a box of some kind of medication.

“If there were ever a full-scale zombie outbreak, this would be the perfect place to come.”

She set the pills down. “Zombie outbreak?”

“Yes. Zombie outbreak. Like, zombies everywhere so you’d have to hole up someplace safe.”

“And you’d go to Costco?” she said, looking at another brand.

“Yes. Just look at it. Tall, brick walls. No windows, the only front entrances have two sets of heavy steel gates and the back entrance and loading dock seal from the inside. The store is laid out so you can see each corner wherever you’re standing, whereas most stores are set up in sections so you can’t see very far, meaning lots of blind corners and places for a zombie to pop out. There’s a ton of food here, a whole meat section in the back, bottled water, clothes, plenty of tools for makeshift weapons, and they even have grills and cooking supplies. And generators. And there’s a gas station out front. You could live in here for a year or more, I bet.”

Amy turned around and looked with me. Her face seemed to show some of the pain from her headache, and she rubbed the base of her neck with one hand.

“But there’s no guns or ammo here,” she said. “A Wal-Mart or something like that would have all this plus guns and ammo.”

“Yeah, but they all have huge windows, and glass doors that could be smashed in. Plus, like I said, the different departments are walled off and there’s a whole warehouse in the back of those. It would be impossible to lock the place down, and it would take forever to clear the place out of any residual zombies.”

“Residual zombies.”

“Yeah, zombies already in the store when you get there,” I said.

“But here...?”

“Since everything is so sparse, and you can see through all the shelves, there are very few places where you’d have to make a blind turn.”

“But how would you clear out the *residual* zombies if there’s no guns here?”

“You’d need to start off with some guns first, to get here. That’s the only downside, really.”

“Residual guns to kill the residual zombies.”

“Oh, and look at those shelves where the food and stuff are. They go all the way to the ceiling, practically, and the top few levels are just storage. You could clear out the stuff off of those and use the top shelves for sleeping, and use ladders to get up there. If zombies did ever get in, they couldn’t get you up there since they can’t use ladders; so you could use the shelves as a last-resort fallout spot.”

“Zombies can’t use ladders?”

“No, they don’t have the coordination.”

“I see,” she said, going back to the painkillers.

After a few minutes of complaining about the headache, she grabbed a package of Excedrin and said, “Hrrr.”

“What?” I asked, turning back to her.

She made the sound again, dropped the package onto the floor, and brought her hands up to her jaw. She said a few more garbled words without opening her mouth, then her eyes went wide and she started breathing faster. Her arms went stiff and she shot backwards a step and backed into the shelf. She kept breathing quickly, her eyes darting around, her arms at odd angles and her fingers half-taut.

It was a decent imitation of a zombie.

I half-laughed and said, “What are you doing?”

She didn’t laugh. She kept trying to talk but her jaw wasn’t moving. Her breathing quickened more and she started to whimper. Tears began to flow from her wide eyes. I repeated the question, but she fell to the floor before I could finish.

I caught her as her legs gave out and she slid against the shelf, dragging allergy pills and decongestants down with her. Her arms and legs were flailing in quick bursts now, her chest heaved with each breath. Her eyes begged for something.

“Hey, is she all right?” came a voice from somewhere around me.

“I don’t know!” I yelled.

I shook Amy slightly, called her name. She just looked at me, and kept twitching.

“I’ll call an ambulance,” said the same voice. “Is she having a seizure?”

I couldn’t think of anything to say.

CHAPTER 50

Through all of this, the one thing I'd never felt was helpless. I conned my way into bank records, broke a guy's arm without caring, slipped into a double-locked hotel door, and escaped a slow-moving car drifting through oncoming traffic; through all of it, the only fear I ever felt was that it wouldn't be enough. I'd never feared that there was just nothing I could do whatsoever. I never felt my heart beat echo in my own ears and my breathing stutter because something was completely out of my hands.

My hands were gripped around the back of Amy's neck and her arm as she lay on the cold, cement floor of a Costco Warehouse. Her muscles twitched rhythmically as her eyes darted in all directions. A few feet away a man was half-screaming into his cell phone about a girl having a seizure, or something, in the middle of the store. The guy tried to repeat instructions and questions from the 911 operator, but he made a poor proxy and I couldn't concentrate on anything except the girl in my arms. The only language I could process was the "No, no, no" playing on repeat throughout my skull and escaping as whispers from my lips.

What was going on? I had no idea. My mind raced in circles but couldn't stop on anything. Sixteen-year-olds didn't have seizures. People don't die when you care enough about them.

A slight panic spread outward from my position like ripples on the surface of a sea of self-concerned shoppers. What's all the commotion? Is someone hurt? My God, she's just a kid. Is she on drugs? Is there a doctor? Does the coupon for applesauce apply if I buy the single-serving cups or is it just for jars?

After the first concerto of dread finished in my mind and the encore was about to begin, a guy who didn't seem much older than myself filtered through the forming crowd and knelt on the floor across from me. He said some words I didn't hear, pulled up his sleeves, and put one hand on Amy's chest. What kind of pervert, I thought. I tried to focus my consciousness onto something nearby with which I could bludgeon him to death. He repeated the same words, but they were again lost to the thick soup my brain had turned into. I had a knife. I could flick it open and swing it up into the base of his jaw. The blade wouldn't reach his brain, but it would get him the hell away.

"I said, is she a diabetic?" he said again, much louder this time.

The volume seemed to trump my hysteria. My thoughts pulled together slightly.

"Are you a doctor?" I asked in one quick breath.

"I'm a medical student," he said, dismissively. "Do you know this girl? Is she a diabetic?"

I tried to process the words. "Diabetic. I don't think so. Medical student?"

"I'm a third-year. I started my internship at the hospital a month ago," he said, leaning in and putting his ear near Amy's mouth. "This looks like hypoglycemia. Insulin shock. You don't know if she's diabetic? Has she eaten or drank anything yet today?"

Diabetic. Diabetic. The word hung for a moment before I remembered what it even meant. "I haven't seen her take insulin or anything before," I said.

I let go of her arm with one hand and grabbed a hand, looked at the tips of her fingers. I didn't see any puncture marks. I pulled the

sleeves of her shirts up to look at her arms, saw no needle marks or scabs. There were a few long, very narrow scab-looking scars on her bicep in a neat row. Was she a cutter? Did she ever mention that?

“I said did she have anything to eat or drink? If she’s hypoglycemic she has to get a certain amount of sugar. These spasms are severe.”

I tried to remember. We had coffee on the way over and she drank from that bottle of tea back at the hotel, but she didn’t have much because she said it was bitter. Bitter. Something about that stuck in my mind. Bitter. The groceries. What was it? My mind tried to tell me something. Why is my mind trying to tell me something? That doesn’t make sense. I am my mind. What does it know that I don’t? Well, besides all those handy ways to kill people...

“Wait,” I said, then let my mouth hang open. Amy had stopped spasming for a moment. They seemed to come and go.

“What?” the guy said.

It was coming to me, but it was coming slow. Ways to kill people. How did they say Comstock died? Spasm something. Where did that tea come from? The first time, someone had to sign for the groceries when they were delivered to the room. This morning they were just sitting there. Bitter tea. Plastic bottle. Comstock. What was it all? The lady said Comstock may have been dosed with VX nerve gas or something else, but I was too focused on VX having a cool name. Can you put nerve gas in tea? Is it bitter? Shouldn’t nerve gas be a gas? What was the other thing? Damn it. It started with S.

“Strychnine,” I said at last, in a low, somber voice.

“Strychnine?” the med student said, incredulously. “What about it?”

“She might have been poisoned. Do you know what strychnine is?”

“Yeah,” he said, “it’s poison. How could she have—”

Amy started spasming again. The muscles in her chest and back seemed to crunch against each other. The medical examiner said most people die by breaking their own spines.

“Oh God,” the guy said, looking down at her.

“What?” I asked.

“This is going to be bad.”

I swallowed.

He looked up, tried to pick out the guy in the crowd who had called 911. He was still on the phone, seemingly narrating the events.

“Is that still 911?” the med student asked the narrator.

The man said yes.

“Tell them to inform the ambulance dispatch that it’s strychnine poisoning. They’ll probably want to prep the ER for her arrival.”

The man nodded slowly.

I looked back at Amy. Besides the twitching, she looked almost peaceful. *Not yet.*

“So it’s poison,” I said. “Can’t we just induce vomiting?”

The med student placed a hand on her throat. “No,” he said, “I don’t think so.”

“You don’t *think* so?”

“No, I mean. If the throat muscles are in spasm, reverse peristalsis is impossible. She’ll choke on the vomit.” He sounded like he was reciting study notes from memory.

“What can we do, then?”

“Wait,” he said. “And try to stop her from snapping her spine. Strychnine activates all the skeletal muscle tissue at the same time, her muscles are flexing against each other at once. If they ever get into a contrary rhythm, they could tear themselves apart or break her bones.”

“There are couches over there,” I said, “we could move her off the floor.”

He thought about it, and then said, “No, motion can make the spasms get worse.” He turned around and asked the crowd, in general, to go fetch a pillow for her head. A few people scampered away.

Wait? Wait. Amy was lying there on the floor, her body turning against her and we just wait?

The med student repositioned himself and pressed one hand against Amy's chest and the other against her stomach, like he was pushing her into the ground. He told me to hold her legs, but the words bounced right off me. I had an idea, but I didn't understand it. For a moment I wondered if I had slipped into the *other* me, but I didn't care.

"I'll be right back," I said as I stood up and ran through the circle of onlookers and down the aisles of the store.

I ran full speed, bobbing my head in all directions like a robin to look down the aisles as I passed them. Office supplies. Desk chairs. Clocks. Kitchen knives. Water filters. There. I stopped in my tracks and doubled back, cut through the aisle and stopped in front of the water filtering pitchers. I grabbed a box of replacement filters, and then started running again. Winter jackets. Toothbrushes. Shovels. Car batteries. Books. DVDs. Wine. Cakes. Raw meat. Fresh shrimp. Produce. Bottled water. I stopped again, pulled my knife out and cut away the plastic wrapping from a large case of bottled water. I grabbed two bottles, replaced my knife, and headed back to the pharmacy area.

Now a store manager was on the scene, trying to cordon the spectators away from Amy and the med student. I slipped through the crowd and slid on my knees back to Amy's side. I set the two bottles of water on the floor; I tore open the box of replacement filters and pulled out a single white, plastic water filter cartridge.

The medical student, and everybody whose face I could see, looked at me as if I were crazy. If I had the time, I would have smiled at them.

I pulled my knife back out, set the water filter on the floor, and stabbed into the side of it with the knife. Once through the thin plastic exterior the knife stopped against something dry and sandy. I used a sawing motion and twisted the filter with my other hand to cut the whole top off of the filter and tossed it aside, leaving a kind of makeshift plastic cup in my hand. Inside the cup, and overflowing onto the floor, was a black, slightly crystalline powder with a few plastic-looking, tiny rubbery balls mixed in. I had no idea what the balls were, but the black powder was pure carbon. Activated charcoal.

The med student held Amy's torso against the floor, someone else held her legs down by the ankles. When the med student realized what I'd done, he let out a slight chuckle.

I poured some of the charcoal onto the floor to make room in the filter cup and topped it off with water from one of the bottles. I covered the top with one hand and shook the filter to get the carbon particles wet, and then poured the sandy sludge right into Amy's mouth, followed by some water from the bottle. The med student held Amy's mouth shut and lifted her head slightly. She coughed a few times, but it went down.

"What was that about?" the man holding Amy's legs down asked.

The med student turned his head toward him and said, "Activated charcoal. It absorbs the poison in the stomach so it isn't metabolized. *Most* people get it in tablets."

"I'm not most people," I said, standing back up and retreating again. I squeezed through the crowd and headed over to the small, white mini-building that acted as the store's pharmacy. I looked around for people in white coats, but the room was empty. I turned back around and saw that the pharmacists were all in the midst of the crowd, standing out like grains of salt in a pile of pepper.

"I need Diazepam," I said from just outside the pharmacy window, loud enough for the pharmacists to hear me. "Or Pavulon."

The outer ring of the crowd turned toward me, pharmacists included. The oldest of them, a man with graying hair, walk-jogged over to me.

"You need what?" he asked.

"Diazepam," I repeated.

"For her?"

No, I just remembered I had a prescription to fill and thought I'd do it now while there's no line. "Yes, for her!"

He looked around, nervous and distraught. "I can't issue meds without a doctor's authorization—"

"This is an emergency!" I interrupted.

"Even still. Only a doctor can know what she needs."

I sighed, then turned around and slid the pharmacy window open a bit wider and jumped onto the counter and dropped into the pharmacy.

“Hey!” the guy said. What was he going to do?

I looked at the shelves, hundreds of white bottles perched at the edges of each shelf. I tried to make some kind of sense out of the ordering of the medications, incorrectly assuming it would all be alphabetical, and after about seventy seconds stumbled upon the Diazepam. I grabbed the whole bottle and hopped back over the counter and pushed past the protesting pharmacist, through the crowd, and back to Amy and the men keeping her down.

I held the bottle out to the med student, the label facing him, and said, “How much?”

He squinted to read the label, looked at Amy, then back at me.

“What *are* you?” he asked.

“Unique,” I said. “How many pills?”

CHAPTER 51

Sirens slammed against my head in steady intervals as I bounced around the back of an ambulance. It was too bumpy to put in an IV, so they'd strapped Amy in tightly and shot something into her leg and pumped oxygen into her mouth with a clear, plastic... oxygen squeezy thing. I tried not to notice that her shirt had been cut open.

Someone tried to poison me. Amy had taken it instead. Her body was out of her control. Her mind locked in a convulsing prison.

I watched a heart monitor displayed on a screen mounted to the side of the vehicle, lines danced their merry dance. It was then that I realized this was my life now. As much as I tried to run from it, my life will never calm down. Something in the core of me seemed to summon havoc, manifest it all around me. I let go of any hope for a normal life then, and just hoped that my curse wouldn't spill onto any more of the people close to me. I did not want Amy to die; I couldn't let her take my bullet.

The ambulance screeched to a halt and the doors burst open, the chaos amplified. White jackets and green scrubs yelled back and forth

between blue coats. Everything moved, everybody made noise; I couldn't track any of it.

“This the poisoning?”

Out of the ambulance.

“Amy Westbourne, 16. Suspected oral strychnine poisoning, muscular spasm, diffuse esophageal spasm.”

Automatic doors.

“Pulse ox 88 and slipping.”

Past a desk.

“Twenty-five of diazepam and unknown dosage activated carbon administered orally at scene. Ten-cc Phenobarbital administered en route.”

Around a corner.

“Trauma three is clear. Any idea how much strychnine was ingested?”

More people show up.

“Get me a line of saline with two milliliters of diazepam and seventy dantrolene.”

Through double doors.

“We need to intubate.”

Past a waiting room, people's heads drew to the motion.

“No, not with DES. Keep bagging.”

More doors. Curtains and beds everywhere.

“Who's he, a relative?”

Last set of doors. Even more people.

“Boyfriend, I think.”

“Isn't this a school day?”

“Sir, do you know how she was poisoned?”

I figured the voice was talking to me so I answered without tracing the source, “She drank from a bottle of tea, said it was bitter.

After ten minutes she complained of a headache, after another ten she went lockjaw and dropped.”

“You recognized it as strychnine poisoning and gave her activated carbon and Valium yourself?”

The rolling stretcher stopped beside a bed on wheels. Four of the people floating around her slid Amy from the stretcher to the bed.

I turned to look at who was talking to me, it was a doctor, female, forties. “Yeah,” I said. “I mean, no. There was a guy there, a med student.”

The woman nodded, then turned to a nurse and said what I thought was, “Get Petey down here.” The nurse nodded and went out a set of doors behind her.

Another nurse ran an IV line into Amy’s left arm, another stood over her head and squeezed the plastic bag pumping air into her mouth and nose. A few doctors shouted terse directions back and forth.

“Is she going to be all right?” I asked the doctor who’d been talking to me.

“Don’t know yet,” she said, “we’re pushing anticonvulsants to keep the muscles from spasming, but her lungs aren’t working properly so she’s not getting as much oxygen as she should be. We can’t intubate right now because her throat keeps opening and closing. If that doesn’t stop we may have to perform a tracheotomy, cut a hole into her trachea so we can run air into the lungs.”

The doctor stepped away from me and over to Amy, a flurry of hands moved all around her. Amy just lay there, motionless, like a CPR dummy, until another round of spasms would overpower the effect of the drugs and she would shake and pull at the restraints like she was being electrocuted.

Something in my mind told me to get out of there, like something was wrong. I should call Amy’s dad, I knew, and I should call my mom and make sure she doesn’t touch any of the new food. It was something else, though. Who’s Petey? *Get Petey down here*, it kept repeating in my head. Do I know a Petey? Or could she have said “P.D.,” the police?

A girl was poisoned with some obscure chemical used almost exclusively to poison people, and I just happened to be able to identify it

and know how to treat it. That might look bad. Cops will want to talk to me. They'll want to know where the strychnine came from, how it got into a bottle of tea that was technically mine. The fact that I was on the shitlist of a Scottish-accented killer who'd used the same poison to kill my principal the night before probably wouldn't go over too well either. They might also wonder why I wasn't at school, if that made any difference.

I started to back out through the door we'd come in when I realized that I was clutching Amy's purse in my hand. I set it down on a small cart of supplies by the door, and slipped out the door into the hall. I pulled my cell phone from my pocket, the screen was black. I tried to turn it on, but nothing happened. Shoot, I was supposed to get a new charger for the phone since the original one was in my house. The one that burned down. I headed toward the main waiting room for the ER and found the payphone. I slid my debit card through the phone's slot and dialed Rubino's cell number from the business card I was given last Sunday.

Four rings. "Rubino."

"It's Baker. You need to come pick me up at Mary Washington Hospital."

"I, uhh, why?"

"So you can take me to Quantico and so I can put three bullets in Schumer."

"Okay," he said, "any particular reason?"

"So he can tell me who the guy is that he hired to take out Comstock," I said.

"What, did he come after you?" Rubino asked with little concern.

"Someone put strychnine in food delivered to my room. Amy got some of it—"

"Is she okay?"

"She's in the ER right now, they're talking about cutting a hole in her throat so she can breathe. Are you going to pick me up or not? I need to get out of here before the police find me and start asking why there was poison in my tea."

“I can deal with the police, for the hundredth time,” he said. “I can also send Bremer over to your hotel with some uniforms to check on your mom and watch the place.”

“Okay, good,” I said. “He’ll probably try to come after me again when he finds out I’m still walking.”

“All right,” Rubino said, “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

He hung up, I hung up.

I paced around the waiting room while I waited.

Strychnine. Damn it all, someone tried to poison me. Some crazy hitman. What is this? This isn’t normal. A guy my dad worked for hired a hitman to take out my pretend school principal because he screwed up in hiring a hitman, and now the hitman is upset that Amy stabbed him, or upset because I’m the one who actually killed the first hitman? This, all because I’m the product of some insane program to build preprogrammed soldiers from scratch? I felt like my head was about to explode. I’d been awake for over 24 hours now and my brain felt like mush. Amy was laying on a slab in the ER unable to breathe for herself, my dad was dead, my ankle still kind of hurt from when I’d kicked out the back window of a stupid little European car in Austria, I hadn’t eaten anything all day, and my house had recently exploded.

I wanted to go find Schumer, dragging the wrath of a holy hellstorm behind me. I wanted to make this all go away, make him tell me what’s going on, make him call off the hitmen and put my life back together. I knew that wouldn’t happen, but I’ll be satisfied with a bit of revenge.

Rubino finally came in through the main ER entrance, spotted me, and walked toward me.

“Congratulations,” he said, “it looks like you *did* manage to piss off a hitman.”

“Looks like,” I said with my arms crossed, trying to contain my roaring stomach and ignore the screaming madness in my head.

“I suppose it will be no surprise to you that the lab report came back on Nathan Comstock, and the cause of death was, in fact...”

“Strychnine,” I said.

“You bet,” Rubino said. He looked around for a moment, then asked, “How’s the girl?”

“I don’t know,” I said, truthfully, “I’m afraid to go in there. Plus, the police will have questions I can’t answer.”

“All right kiddo,” he said, putting a hand on my shoulder. “Let’s go face the music.”

My dad used to call me “kiddo.”

CHAPTER 52

Hospitals. Most people begin and end their lives in the same building. Were it not so creepy, it would be slightly poetic.

With absolutely no sleep in me, everything going on around me buzzed on the edge of my attention. I felt like a tree stuck in time while the world evolved and moved around me, sitting in a hard plastic chair while Special Agent Rubino talked into his cell phone, Amy was still in the ER, her dad on the way, and none of it made any sense. I watched Rubino across the waiting room, pacing back and forth in his cheap black suit. Even though I was pretty sure he was probably somehow involved in my father's death, I felt like he was one of the few people I could count on. All the acquaintances I had in school had fallen off the map after I'd become dead-dad-kid. In the past few weeks the only people I'd been able to talk to were Amy and my two FBI tag-alongs.

The longer I sat still, the more the gravity of the situation sank in. I'd become rather comfortable with the idea that there are actually hitmen in the world, a fact I'd have argued as fiction a month or so ago, and it didn't seem to faze me that I'd killed one of them and another was trying to kill me. Strychnine in the tea, what is that? If he wanted to kill

me, why didn't he just stand outside the hotel room door and shoot me in the face as soon as I came out? It was illogical.

I wanted to be doing something. I wanted a weapon in my hand and bodies at my feet. I wanted to pry the truth from dying lips. I'm not, though; I'm sitting in a hospital waiting room while Amy struggles for oxygen.

"They picked up all the food from your hotel room and are testing it now," Rubino said as he walked over and sat in a chair across from me. "If that's what was poisoned, there may be some latent prints on the packaging."

"Is that likely?" I asked, wondering what the handful of people seated around me were making of this conversation.

"No," Rubino said plainly.

"And my mom, she's all right?"

"Yeah, Bremer's there with local police and a few lab guys now. He says she went downstairs for breakfast."

I was glad to hear that, though I hated that she had to go through even more of this nonsense. I hadn't even really talked to her since I'd found out any of this, just a few fragmented conversations to pass the time. I didn't know what she thought of me anymore. I don't know what I'd think of me.

"Any progress in finding out who's behind this?" I asked.

Rubino met the glances of the other people waiting, warning them away with his eyes. He finally turned to me and said, "Some. That, uh, profession isn't exactly my or Bremer's department so we've had to bring in some guys from DC. They're starting with Dingan and working backwards, trying to see if his name and fingerprints solves anything. They're also trying to find out where he keeps his money."

"So nothing really useful right now," I said.

"Right. It seems that we both know Schumer's the man at the top of all this, though."

Right, Schumer. The guy my dad worked for. The guy with the idea to use infertile hopeful parents to grow a crop of unwilling lab rats.

“Do you think this guy is coming after me for personal reasons or as part of his contract?” I asked, a bit quieter.

Rubino shook his head. “This is all uncharted waters for me, Chris.”

“He could come right through that door,” I said, “pop me between the eyes. Do you think I should have protection?”

“Do you think you need it?”

“What does that mean?”

He shrugged. “If this guy’s a pro, he wouldn’t do something like that unless he was desperate. The name of their game is untraceability. Anybody can walk into a room and pull a trigger. People hire these guys for more personalized service.”

“Personalized like, ‘I want them to suffer?’”

“Could be.”

Lovely. Whoever wanted Comstock dead, be it Schumer or whoever, clearly wasn’t a fan of his. He could have gotten a shot in the head with that .22 and not known what hit him, instead of a lethal poison that kills you by either making you break your own back, crush your own lungs, or die of exhaustion from the uncontrollable muscle spasms. That could have been Amy. Pangs of guilt shot through me once more. What she must be going through, I hated it. It should have been me. Maybe the death would stop with me.

The poison was meant for me. If it weren’t for me, Amy would be fine now. But if I hadn’t known about activated charcoal and diazepam, she would probably be dead. She’d be better without me, obviously, but here I am saving her all the time.

No, it’s not me saving her, it’s the *other* me. I’m just the one getting her into dangerous situations, and soldier-Chris always has surface to get her out. So it’s not that she’d be better without me, it’s that she – both of us – would be better off without half of me; the boring, everyday-teenager half.

It was odd, though, that I’d known how to treat Amy’s poisoning in the first place. That’s not something the average soldier would need to know. If the whole purpose of Schumer’s program was for people to bypass boot camp or basic training with hypnotic training, all I should

know how to do is shine my own boots and climb a rope. Where in standard Marine training does one learn how to bypass a security bar lock on a door, or interrogate someone with a tape recorder, or con his way into a hotel room, or field-treat a strychnine poisoning?

Schumer must have lied about something, but what?

“You know a bit about Schumer’s program, right?” I asked Rubino, who’d taken to reading messages on his phone’s screen.

“Some,” he said. “We were hoping that sometime you could fill us in on the rest.”

“Why would I know how to treat strychnine poisoning?” I asked.

“What?”

“When Amy went down and I realized it was probably strychnine, I knew exactly what to do. Activated charcoal and diazepam. Why would I need to know that?”

“I don’t know what you...”

“The only reason I can think that I’d need to know how to treat a specific kind of poisoning is that I’d also know how to administer the poison. You don’t teach someone how to arm a bomb without teaching him how to disarm it...”

“Okay, well...”

“So part of my program must include strychnine use. But why would I need to know something like that?”

Rubino looked confused. “I thought you knew about that.”

I tried to figure out what that meant, but I heard the doors behind me slide open and a man’s feet pounding against the floor. I turned and saw Amy’s dad stop at the entrance for a moment and look around, then he spotted the desk and headed toward it.

“Man...” I said.

“What?” Rubino asked.

“What are we going to tell him?” I asked.

“Is that the girl’s dad?”

“Yeah. How do I explain that she was poisoned by a guy who’s upset that she stabbed him in the leg last night?”

“I’m not sure. Did you call him?”

“No, they must have gotten her home number from her cell phone,” I said.

“Someone will tell him that you were with her. Does he know you?”

“Just as a guy who hangs around his daughter. He was in the Corps, we think he might have been Special Forces. He could kill me.”

“And that’s saying something.” Rubino smirked, then ran his hand through his hair. “We’ll see,” he said before standing up and walking over to Mr. Westbourne, still frantically trying to get information out of the nurse behind the front desk.

I sat alone in a hard, plastic chair in the sparsely populated waiting room. The lack of sleep was catching up to me, pressing down on my mind like wet blankets. I tried to fight it off.

CHAPTER 53

It was like another life. Graduation day, the world coming together at last. Friends cheer when they call my name, Amy's waiting for me at my car after the meet and greets. We talk about what we'll do that night; everybody's throwing a party, or we could just drive around. I tell her my dad is going to take me shopping for a new car the next day. Graduation present. I feel like my life is everything it ever could be. Amy and I drive with the windows down, we talk about anything that pops into mind. I smile at a joke she makes, pull a gun from behind my back, and shoot her.

I woke up with a sore neck and hunger pangs beating at the sides of my stomach.

I'd stayed still and the hospital had moved around me. A whole new crowd of people were seated in the waiting room; I didn't see Rubino or Amy's dad anywhere. The trauma room where Amy had been was empty. I pulled my phone from my pocket to check the time but remembered it was dead. I tried looking around for a clock but found nothing. Everything seemed distant, out of reach. I wondered if I was

still dreaming, but decided that if I were dreaming I wouldn't be able to wonder that. It must have been the tiredness and hunger.

Could I ask what happened to Amy? Is that one of the things they can't tell people? I stood in the middle of a hallway and closed my eyes, waiting for my thoughts to pull themselves together when I heard my name.

I opened my eyes and looked up to see Rubino, his little FBI badge hanging over the side of his belt. He looked tired and annoyed.

"What happened?" I asked when he was close enough.

"You fell asleep. It was cute."

"I mean with Amy," I said, pinching the bridge of my nose.

"Right. They moved her up to ICU for observation."

ICU. Intensive Care Unit. *The 'I' stands for Information.* I smiled for a second.

"So she's all right?" I asked.

"More or less. They said they have to leave the breathing tube in and that she's hypotensive. Or it might have been hypertensive."

"Was she still having spasms?"

"I think she would be, but they have her on paralyzing drugs."

"Okay, where's the ICU?"

Rubino paused. "Uhh, I don't think you should go up there," he said.

"What? Why?"

"Because her dad said, 'Don't let that kid up here.'"

"He's mad at *me*?"

"Yes."

"Why? What did you tell him?"

"That she got some food from your hotel room and that it had poison in it. I think all he heard was 'hotel room' and 'poison.'"

"So you didn't mention how I'm a walking rampage of destruction or the pile of dead bodies I leave in my wake?"

“I did not.”

“And he still doesn’t like me?”

“Correct.”

“Well I should still be able to see her,” I protested.

“Not unless you want to get mauled. Besides, there’s not much to see anyway, she’s out cold and is riddled with tubes.”

“So what am I supposed to do, wait?”

“Go back to your hotel; get some sleep and some unadulterated food.”

“No, I want to go see Schumer and get some answers.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, *no*? What, ‘*we need him alive*?’”

“No, but we don’t have anything connecting Schumer to any of this. Plus, if he does want you dead, which unlikely, but if that’s the case – you shouldn’t just march onto his territory with no sleep and an empty stomach.”

“So, I should get some food and sleep and *then* go kill him?”

“Nobody’s killing anybody—”

“Everybody’s killing everybody!” I said.

“Not anymore.”

“Are you sure? Because I can’t think of anybody I’ve met in the past month that hasn’t been killed or tried to kill me. Except you and your partner, of course. I’m just wondering whether you’re going to be one of the ones getting killed or one of the ones trying to kill me.”

Rubino smiled. “Killing you isn’t really my job.”

“And what *is* your job?” I asked. “I mean, I can’t figure out what you or the FBI is even doing in all this. Shouldn’t you guys be bugging mobster’s houses or something?”

He held his grin. “I’m just doing a personal favor. Now let’s go to wherever you left your car.”

In an hour I was in my car and then back at the hotel.

At the front desk there was a uniformed police officer talking with a hotel staffer. Up in the hall of my floor, two cops stood post outside my room. They eyeballed me as soon as I got off the elevator. When I approached the door, one of the two cops put a hand out to stop me. Just for fun I tried to imagine how many seconds it would take me to have both of these guys on the floor, but I decided to be polite and announce that I live in there.

Special Agent Bremer, Rubino's older partner, was just inside the door talking to somebody in the kitchen and he heard my voice, turned, and told the officers I was alright.

Inside the suite there were four more cops and five FBI personnel. It was like a law enforcement cocktail party, but instead of lemon rickeys and gimlets people mixed blue and clear chemicals in small glass bottles. My mother sat in one of the couches facing the TV talking to somebody with a notepad. When she saw me she got up and ran over to hug me in front of a fleet of law enforcement personnel.

"How's your friend?" she asked.

"Well enough, I think. She's in the ICU."

"You didn't have any of the food?"

"No, as can be seen by the fact that I'm alive."

The refrigerator door was open and everything from inside was either on the counter, the table, or being placed into large clear bags. Bremer saw me looking and came over.

"There's strychnine in pretty much everything," he said. "Heaviest concentrations are in the tea bottles, though. None in the water."

"The bottles were sealed, how'd he get the stuff inside?"

Bremer grabbed one of the bottles of green tea from the table and held it up to me, pointing at the plastic just under the rim and cap. There was a small raised bump in the plastic, like the bottle had a pimple. "Pierced the plastic with a needle and injected liquid strychnine, then sealed the hole over with some super-glue or by melting the plastic with a soldering iron."

"Diligent," I said.

“I’ll say. We’ve been going over everything with the hotel management and staff. Nobody saw anybody come in with a carton of groceries and the delivery staff says that there wasn’t a food order form on your door last night.”

I closed my eyes and tried to remember. When Amy and I left Comstock’s house around eight, I came back here and sat around for a while, wrote out a grocery list for the hotel people and hung it on the doorknob like always, then tried to sleep. Whoever this guy is, he must have followed me from Comstock’s, found out what room I’m in, saw the grocery list, and saw his opening. He bought all the food on the list himself, and laced all of it with strychnine. The thought of a killer with a knife wound in his leg at the grocery store, looking for green tea and cereal bars from a list seemed a bit absurd. That guy must have a whole vat of strychnine somewhere.

I told Bremer all of that, and he agreed. “Sounds about right, though for him to have followed you he would have had to have a car nearby your principal’s house. It’s possible that he didn’t follow you and already knew where you were.”

“If this is about revenge for last night, he wouldn’t know who I was or where I lived. If it’s about revenge, he would have just kicked the door in and popped me in bed.”

“Could be. He could just have a thing for strychnine. If it’s a pattern, we could use it to track him down. Someone’s back at the office looking up all the strychnine poisonings in recent history.”

“The alternative is that this isn’t revenge, though. That I was always a target, and my showing up at Comstock’s last night was just a coincidence. That would mean that whoever put the hit on Comstock also put a hit on me. It would mean there’s a guy out there with a paycheck riding on killing me, and a guy willing to pay money to see me dead. I don’t know if that would be better or worse than a professional killer simply having a grudge against me.”

“I really don’t know why you’d be so popular,” Bremer said, scratching his forehead with the top of his pen.

I tried to think, again, of all the people who would actually want me dead. It didn’t make sense for Schumer to put a price on my head; it made a bit of sense for him to want to kill Comstock, him being a

gigantic idiot and all, but is hiring a hitman really apt punishment for making the mistake of hiring a hitman? If it's not Schumer, who wants me dead? The Interpol guy, Pratt? He thought I *was* a hitman. Maybe it was the people my dad was supposedly selling Schumer's program to. Maybe they thought that if they couldn't have it – nobody should; so they kill anybody involved. Comstock, me, Schumer? My dad?

Considering Bremer and Rubino's odd interest in finding out exactly how the program works, I started to wonder if it was *them* that my dad was in the middle of selling the secrets to. Maybe they'd turned on him, killed him, and now wanted to wipe the whole program off the books. Could Bremer, Rubino, or both of them be the ones behind this? What does "a personal favor" mean? I was giving myself a headache.

If the FBI boys really want me dead, they could have just pulled me around a corner and shot me in the face with an untraceable weapon. They'd only have a hitman do all this if they really, really wanted to insulate themselves.

At the beginning, I thought this was all about my money. Those seemed like simpler times now.

For all of that, in the back of my mind was still the thought of Amy. They had to paralyze her to stop her muscles from tearing themselves apart, but what if she woke up and was still paralyzed. Unable to move, with a tube down her throat, in pain. A mind trapped in a useless body. I told myself that couldn't happen.

The hotel suite was still stuffed with FBI and police and all I wanted to do was sleep. I also needed to eat, but I doubted I'd feel safe eating for a while.

CHAPTER 54

I had a few hours of the sort of uncomfortable, worthless, semi-waking sleep that people settle for on airplanes or friends' couches. Bremer and a few FBI technicians were still in the suite, but the police had all left. I was annoyed that I had to put on the same clothes I'd been wearing, but by now it was too late to go shopping. My stomach was practically digesting itself as well. A picked-over tray of croissant sandwiches sat on the kitchen table, I eyeballed it warily.

"Don't worry," Bremer said, "we had some police officers down in the kitchen watch them make these."

I couldn't tell if he was joking or not, but I didn't see anybody writhing on the floor from strychnine poisoning, so I threw caution to the wind and ate a dry turkey sandwich, then roast beef, then another turkey.

The FBI techs seemed to be on their way out. All the gear they'd brought was packed up into metal cases and the bags of tainted food were nowhere to be seen. When one of them carried a case out and through the door I saw there were still two police officers standing in the hall and I felt a little bit better.

I looked around for my mom and didn't see her, but the door to her room was closed so I assumed she'd gone to sleep. Bremer pulled out a chair at the small kitchen table and sat across from me.

"You're wondering what you're supposed to be doing now," he said.

"You're going to tell me that we're waiting for him to try again," I replied.

"That's what *you're* doing. We're hoping to find him first. Local PD is on it, and our people are looking too. It would help if you could give us more of a description of the guy."

"I told you, I never got a good look at his face. He seemed average height, average build, and some kind of accent. Scottish, I think."

"Right. Well, you just described almost everybody in Scotland."

"You had a blood sample. Can't you analyze that and get his DNA signature or something?"

Bremer scratched his almost leathery cheek. "No, it doesn't really work like that. We could try to *match* his DNA against something, but we don't have anything to match it against."

"Prints from the gun?"

"Just yours."

"Security cameras from the hotel?"

"He looks away from every camera."

"But you have a shot of him, you know what he looks like?"

"Like almost everybody in Scotland."

I tried to recall the cop shows or detective movies I'd seen, tried to cull together a list of all the ways to catch a killer. It seems like in the stories they always purposely left behind an esoteric clue, and got in some kind of battle of wits with the lead detective. Or there's blood, hair, or saliva samples somewhere that glow blue under a black light and can be entered into a magical computer with every human's DNA cataloged. For lack of that, I have no idea how actual crimes are ever solved.

"What about grocery stores?" I asked.

Bremer's mouth tightened a bit. "What about them?"

“Can’t you go to all the local stores and pull up receipt logs to look for transactions matching the stuff he bought? That’d give you a timestamp, and then you could check their security footage from that time and see if you can get a shot of his face. Or maybe he paid with a credit card, which would have a name attached.”

Bremer tapped his middle finger against the surface of the table for a moment. “Ever considered a career in investigation?” he asked.

“I’ll be done with mysteries as soon as this mess is sorted out,” I said.

“We already put P.D. on grocery store duty. Most of the smaller stores don’t keep indexed logs so they have to be sifted through by hand. It could take a while.”

I frowned, more upset that my genius idea wasn’t very original than the fact that we were no closer to stopping the guy who wanted to kill me.

“Are you going to put me in a safe house or something? Protective custody? This guy clearly knows where I am.”

“We can, at least we’re going to move you to a different hotel and we’ll leave some police on the place for a while until we can sort out a legitimate security detail. One thing to keep in mind, however, is that these situations usually aren’t like the movies.”

“In what way?”

“Well, this guy isn’t sitting around in a darkened room, staring at a photograph of you and sharpening a bowie knife. Professionals aren’t the relentless at-all-costs arbiters of mayhem you’d imagine them to be. Right now the guy’s probably got more on his plate than you, more jobs, more legwork. They have to have to worry about cover identities, escape plans, avoiding detection, and keeping their finances in order; plus eating and sleeping like anybody else. You’re just a job, and if he was actually contracted to take out a teenager he probably expected little resistance. If anything, he’s probably contacting his client and asking for more money.”

I didn’t say anything, just stared at the remaining sandwiches.

“All I mean,” he continued, “is that this you make a low-profile target. He’s not going to blow up a building in hopes you’ll be inside, and

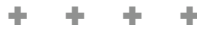
he's not going to take a thousand-yard shot at you from a clock tower. He might not even know how to work a gun. Maybe all he knows how to do is squirt strychnine into bottles of tea."

"If I happened to see this guy, and I happened to shoot him, where would I stand with the law?" I asked.

"What, you're going to go looking for him?"

"No, I need to buy some clothes and go back to the hospital. If he should jump around a corner and try to splash strychnine on me or something, I can shoot him, right?"

Bremer sighed and dropped his head into his palm.



The next morning, after more worthless sleep, I put on the same damn outfit I was wearing before, the only clothes I had that didn't smell like flashbang powder, and grabbed my dead cell phone, wallet, knife, and the USP and headed out. Out in the hall were two police officers sitting in two chairs from the kitchen table from my suite. I hid the gun from view and told them, if they even cared, that I was going downstairs for some food. One of them nodded, the other told me there was another officer in a squad car covering the entrance.

He was easy enough to avoid.

I got in my car, pulled the gun from my pants, and slid it between the center console and the passenger seat. If I needed it, I could grab it and fire out the passenger window in one motion. Another of the many concerning thoughts I'd produced lately.

Across the street from the hotel was a shopping center with a few stores I could use. I'd thought about going to Old Navy, where I usually got my \$18 jeans and \$8 T-shirts, but opted instead for an outlet store of a more upscale department store. For some reason I felt like having some nicer clothes, maybe it was just because I could afford it, or because dressing like a teenager had gotten old. I left the gun in the car and did my shopping, consistently looking over my shoulder and trying to avoid blind corners. I bought some expensive pants and shirts that didn't have the brand logo plastered all over the front for once. A few stores down

was a Radio Shack, where I purchased a car and a wall charger for my phone. I looked at the fancy new phones and considered an upgrade, but didn't feel like dealing with 2-year contracts and the fact that I'm under 18.

I changed into some of the new clothes in my car, which is quite a feat in a sports car, then plugged my phone in for the first time in nearly a week, and headed off toward the hospital.

At the front desk I asked where the ICU was and the lady said that only family members could visit people in the ICU. I told her I wanted to visit my sister, Amy Westbourne. The lady typed into a computer, then announced that Amy had been moved to a regular room that morning and gave me the number and directions.

I supposed that was a good thing.

After some tedious navigation of the poorly-laid-out hospital I found the right floor, wing, then room. I paused outside the door for a while, listening to hear if Amy's dad was in there and trying to figure out what to do. Everything inside of me said I should feel horrible, feel scared, feel guilty that I'd almost gotten Amy killed. Somehow, though, I felt nothing. I knew how I should feel, but I couldn't get myself to feel it. It was like the first time I'd seen *Citizen Kane* and everything said I should be blown away, but all I felt was that I'd just seen an overly complicated movie about an old rich guy who wishes he were young and poor again.

It didn't feel like denial. I'd been in denial when I heard my dad had died. It wasn't shock, either. It was just a kind of mechanical lack of emotion. Like whatever I was turning into wasn't the kind of creature who cared whether friends lived or died. Maybe I was compartmentalizing, I thought. Putting away the things I should be feeling now so I can feel them later when I'm in less danger. Maybe I'm just a robot.

After a few minutes I took a deep breath and stepped in.

There she was. In the middle of the small, tan-colored room was a fancy-looking hospital bed. In it, under a sheet and attached to more tubes than I could account for, was Amy. She was asleep, her skin looked pale and her hair drawn back awkwardly. She was asleep; I hadn't anticipated that.

I thought about what to do for a bit, then decided to sit down in one of the visitor's chairs against the window. I sat for a few minutes, used the bathroom attached to the room, then sat some more.

I almost felt myself drift off to sleep when I heard a weak, distant voice.

"You're here," she said, roughly

I stood up and crossed the room. She was awake, grinning almost stupidly. "I'm everywhere," I said.

Not really knowing what to say, I simply asked, "Are you all right?"

Amy shut her eyes for a moment and grinned just slightly. "More or less," she said. Her voice was weak and froggy.

"They were talking about a tracheot– tracheon– cutting a hole in your throat so you could breathe before."

She slowly lifted her hand to her throat and rubbed it with two fingers. "Ouch. No, they just stuck a tube down my throat for a while; that sucked. After a while they said I was breathing on my own so they took the tube out; that also sucked."

"Breathing on your own, so the strychnine is all out of your system?"

"I guess so. I'm not twitching anymore." She raised both arms a few inches and dropped them onto the bed.

I sighed in relief. "So you're going to be fine," I said.

"That's what they tell me. I just have to stay here until my muscles come back."

"Come back?" I asked.

"They say I tore up most of my skeletal muscles from that little dance at Costco. You know that kinda-good-mostly-bad pain you get in your muscles after a workout?" She spun her right hand around at the wrist, indicating her whole body. "Everywhere."

"At least it would be," she continued, "if they didn't come by and shoot morphine, or something like it, into this thing every hour." She moved her right elbow and nodded toward the IV line running into her

forearm. A clear rubber tube ran from it, wound slightly around the back of the bed, through a complicated-looking machine, then up into a plastic bag hanging from a silver pole. A smaller plastic IV bag was hanging next to the larger one; a tube from it connected it to the main line with a kind of Y-connector. The big one was saline, the other was protein and vitamins.

I took another look around the room. There was a flat-screen TV mounted on the opposite wall from the bed, above a dresser and below some bland artwork. Aside from the hospital bed and linoleum floor, you might think it was a hotel room.

“That pain you get after a workout,” I said, “is partly from the muscle rebuilding itself after being torn up. When it rebuilds it overcompensates, making the muscles bigger. You might be pretty beefy after all this.”

Amy chuckled. “Upside to everything, I guess.”

After a few seconds, I asked, “How much do you know? About what happened, I mean.”

She licked her dry lips and took a few breaths. “Strychnine. Isn’t that what they said Mr. Comstock might have gotten?”

I nodded.

“And it was in the tea from your hotel room.”

I nodded again.

“Told you it was gross,” she said. “So that Irish guy tried to kill you, and killed me instead.”

“Nearly,” I said.

“Right. Because you knew exactly what to do.”

I nodded, a bit slower. My eyes fell down to the tube in Amy’s arm.

Amy swallowed. “Was that you, or the – *other* you?”

I looked back up, into her eyes. “The *killing* me?” I asked, then paused. “I’m not sure. It could have been something I heard before, or it could be part of whatever Schumer and my dad did to my brain. I don’t

know why a program just designed to skip boot camp would include first aid for specific poisons.”

She shrugged. “I’ve never heard of cutting a Brita filter open and pouring it down someone’s throat.”

“Do you remember everything from when it happened?” I asked. She rolled her eyes upward slightly, looking pensive. “I remember your zombie theory, and a headache, then my jaw not working, but after that it all kind of blurs together.”

“Like you were passed out, or just not aware of what was happening?”

“I think I was aware; I remember being aware, but not what I was aware of.”

“So how did you know about the Brita filter?”

She grinned. “My dad told me. He says some FBI agent told him about it, and about what happened at Comstock’s house but none of the other stuff. Was that one of your FBI people?”

I nodded. “Rubino came here.”

“What for? Just to tell my dad?”

“No, I don’t know. I didn’t know who else to call. I needed a ride because my car was still at Costco.”

“A ride where?”

I dropped my eyes again, turned around and moved one of the chairs closer to the bed so I could sit down.

“To go... *see* Schumer,” I said after I sat down.

Amy was silent for a few seconds, and then said, “Oh. Did you?”

I shook my head. “No. It was good that Rubino was here, though,” I said. “When the doctors heard it was strychnine and that I magically knew exactly what to do for it they called the police on me. Rubino smoothed that over, and told your dad just enough of the truth for him to hate me forever.”

Amy rolled her eyes.

“Where is he, anyway?” I asked.

“My dad? He went back home to get me some clothes after they moved me in here. They cut up the shirt I was wearing.”

“I know,” I said, “I was there.”

“Oh,” Amy said, blushing slightly. “Well it was stupid; it was a button-up shirt. They could have just unbuttoned it.”

“They’ve got those shirt-cutting scissors and they like to use them,” I said.

“I liked that shirt.”

The hospital gown she was wearing had rather short sleeves that were being scrunched up because of the position she was in. On her left arm, just below her shoulder, I could see the long, thin scars I’d seen before. It looked like there were four of them. She saw me looking and perhaps too quickly drew her right hand upward and pulled the sleeve down. She winced from the movement.

“What?” I asked, carefully.

“I didn’t want you to see those,” she said. Her eyes seemed to be watering, perhaps from the pain in moving too quickly.

I’d seen scars like those before, mostly in pictures on the internet but a few times on girls in school. Depressed teenagers who wanted the rush of cutting themselves but couldn’t bring themselves to cut at their wrists would often use straight razor blades to cut very thin lines just below the shoulder. Same rush, less risk. People who cut at their wrists were usually just trying to get attention. Doing it below the shoulder, where few people would notice, means you’re doing it just to feel something. Using a razor blade also made a very fine, almost invisible scar; another sign that it isn’t so much a cry for help as in other forms of self-mutilation. People who do this to themselves are called cutters, and doing so is practically a cliché among “emo” and “goth” subcultures.

My silence seemed to frighten her. “Not because I think you’d judge me,” she said, looking away. “I just don’t like what it says about me. I think it tarnishes me.”

“I don’t care about it, Amy.”

She looked back at me, her eyes heavy with tears, then she leaned back and pressed her head against the pillow.

“Do you still do it?” I asked.

“No,” she replied after a few breaths. “When I was, like, fourteen.”

I tried to remember when Amy had said her parents split up. I thought it was younger, but it seemed to affect her later. From what I could tell, she was just coming out of a punk phase. I felt a bit of empathy for her, though my parental drama was much more recent and not as deep-seated as hers. Parents split up all the time, driving millions of teens into depression. The thought of it somehow made Amy seem more real.

“It doesn’t tarnish you,” I said. “Not unless you let it.”

She was silent.

I went on. “Earlier I was trying to figure out what defines a person; is it the mind, the body, the sum of his actions, and so on. I think it’s more than that. I think it’s how we take our experiences and our actions and move forward from them. A bum isn’t a bum because he lost his house and all his money, he’s a bum because he doesn’t do anything about it; he gives up and begs for spare change. Whatever you did before, it’s not who you are. What you learned from it, and did to move on from it, that’s who you are. That’s something between the mind and body.”

She was silent for a few seconds more, and then rolled over slightly to look at me with her head still on the pillow. “You were trying to figure that out because you said your mind and body weren’t yours. If your dad and a team of geneticists designed your body, and psychologists and drill instructors designed your mind, like Schumer says, what does that make you?”

I thought about it. “I wish I knew,” I said.

“Keep fighting until the answers come?” she asked.

“Or until there’s nobody left to fight.”

I thought about this guy who’s coming after me. If I, the police, or the FBI can stop him – what will that solve? If I knew who had hired him, would that lead me to the end of this mystery or just up another dark alley? Will a few more words answer all my questions, or just raise further ones? How many more people would have to be hurt before I felt safe, or before I had the truth? How much more of myself would I have

to lose just to find out who I am? My dad, Schumer, Rubino, Bremer, Pratt, dead Austrian guy, Comstock, Dingan, Scottish guy, how do they all fit together? Don't ask questions, don't ask questions.

"Wait," I said. "You said *Irish* guy, before. I thought he was Scottish."

Amy blinked twice. "Umm," she started, "the accent sounded like Irish to me."

"Not Scottish?"

"No, Scottish is more... Fat Bastard. That guy was more Colin Farrell."

"Huh."

"Does that answer anything?" she asked.

"No," I said, truthfully. "Absolutely nothing."

CHAPTER 55

A nurse came in to shoot Amy up with another dose of hydromorphone, which Amy described as feeling like being squished with a rolling pin from head to toe – in a good way, before falling asleep again.

I figured I should get out of there before her dad came back, and that I'd probably be in trouble for sneaking away from the hotel anyway.

I was right. When I parked my car and walked past the officer sitting in his car he gave me a funny look and brought his radio to his face, and when I walked into the lobby I almost ran into Special Agents Bremer and Rubino coming around the corner from the elevator bank. They both looked annoyed.

“Where the hell have you been?” Bremer barked, his jowls flapping with each syllable.

“I had to get some clothes,” I said, realizing I'd left everything I'd bought back in the trunk of my car. Rubino and Bremer eyed me suspiciously.

“We thought you might have been nabbed,” Rubino cut in before Bremer could continue yelling.

I took a quick look around the lobby. A man in a suit was standing at the front desk, flanked on all sides by expensive luggage, probably checking out. Two people were reading newspapers on the couches set up around the front door. Across the lobby I could see a few people scooping hot food from the breakfast buffet, reminding me how very hungry I was.

“All right, look,” I said, breaking away from the two-man FBI huddle and heading toward the food, “if there’s ever a situation where the options are that I’m either in mortal danger or just doing something reckless and self-serving, it’ll be the second one.”

“Noted,” Bremer said, falling in step behind me.

Forgoing any fears that everything probably had strychnine in it, I grabbed a plate and shoveled a bunch of fruit on it, then opened one of the two waffle irons and dumped a carton of pre-measured batter onto it, closed it, and set the timer.

“We need you to come with us,” Rubino said while I waited for my waffle to manifest.

I looked at him, then at Bremer, then back at Rubino. “What, like, I’m under arrest?” I said.

“No, we have some photographs we’d like you to look at on the computer. People suspected of murder-for-hire in the States who come from Western Europe. Maybe one will jog your memory so we can ID your newest fan.”

“Couldn’t you have printed them and brought them here?” I asked.

“There’s two hundred and thirty seven,” Rubino said, crossing his arms.

“Huh,” I said just as the waffle iron beeped behind me.

Seated at a table now, I jabbed at sliced strawberries with a fork while Bremer and Rubino sat opposite me and sipped water from plastic cups.

“Where is your office, anyway?” I asked. “Is there a field office in Fredericksburg or something?”

“No, we’re in the FBI headquarters in DC,” Bremer said.

“DC? That’s over an hour away,” I said. There goes my whole day.

Both agents nodded.

“But you’re always ten minutes away whenever I call,” I said, trying to recall our past meetings. When I’d called Rubino from the hospital he was there in under five minutes.

“We’re usually in the field during the day,” Rubino said.

“Investigating.”

“That’s what the *I* stands for,” I said to myself before finishing off the waffle.

“So that’s as far as you are with leads?” I asked. “Pictures from the computer?”

“You could say that, I guess,” Bremer said. “Other departments are doing most of the legwork, we’re mostly just liaisons between them and you.”

“Fancy,” I said, thinking. “Come to think of it, I think that guy’s accent might have been Irish, not Scottish. Scotch. Scottish?” I hadn’t thought of that before. Whiskey from Scotland is Scotch, the tape is Scotch, so are people Scotch or Scottish. Maybe Scottish is the language. No, that’s stupid, they speak English. Well, they try to...

“Okay,” Rubino said, “that doesn’t really change anything.”

“Absolutely nothing,” I said for the second time in an hour. “Though if he’s Irish he might be ex-IRA. He might have fled to another country, so he could be working out of anywhere. If he’s IRA, you or the Brits should have a file on him.” Yes, perfectly normal thing for a seventeen-year-old to say.

Rubino and Bremer were both squinting at me, like I was casting blinding light.

“Y-yes,” Bremer said, “hence, the pictures.”

“I know, I know,” I said. “I’m just trying to work this out from my end. If he expatriated from Ireland to somewhere else, he could possibly be from whatever country my dad was trying to sell Schumer’s program to.”

Rubino and Bremer blinked, almost in unison, looked at each other, back at me, and said, entirely in unison, “What?”

I looked up at each of them and shrugged. “What?”

Rubino squinted again. “What did you just say?” he asked, incredulous.

“That this Irish guy might not be from Ireland, he might be from whatever country my dad was trying to leak national secrets to. He could have picked up some heat for IRA nonsense when he was in his twenties and moved abroad. Like a free agent. This could have nothing to do with Schumer; this killer guy might be trying to clean up the evidence or whatever around my dad’s death.”

“No,” Rubino said, then shook his head slightly. “What are you talking about? Your dad wasn’t selling anything to anybody.”

My jaw went slack. “Huh?” I said.

Rubino’s face almost matched my own, he turned to Bremer, who said, “Is that what Schumer told you?”

I said nothing for a few seconds, then managed to echo my previous, “Huh?”

“Kid, your dad wasn’t selling anything to anybody. He realized that the work he was doing with Schumer was massively, *massively* illegal and he contacted us to see if the FBI could shut it down.”

I had no muscles. Nothing worked.

Rubino said, “He was in the process of filtering out enough information for us to move on when he died. He told us, at the beginning, if Schumer found out what he was doing, he’d probably kill him.” Both their faces were flat, slightly concerned.

My face felt flushed, my heart was pounding, my mind raced in a thousand directions. I wiggled my fingers, just to make sure I was still alive. I put my hand to my forehead, felt a bit dizzy.

My dad was trying to sell Schumer's program, government black ops secrets, to a foreign country. He was killed. That's the information I'd been working with this *whole* time. Where did I get it? Was it Schumer? Why the hell did I believe him? My dad was the bad guy. He was selling secrets. The FBI was investigating him for that. That was the truth, it was written on the back of my mind in permanent ink, but it never make any sense whenever I stopped and thought about it.

I tried to put everything in line, from the beginning. The FBI knew about my dad because they were investigating him for selling secrets. No, the FBI knew about him because he himself approached them to report on Schumer's secret program. My dad was killed in a failed sting operation while he was meeting with the foreign buyer. No, my dad was killed because Schumer found out that he'd gone to the Feds. My stomach twisted, I felt like throwing up.

Schumer had my dad killed? Or he did it himself? No, he would hire the job out like everything else. It could have been Dingan, or the Irish guy. The guy who killed Comstock, who almost killed Amy, who wants to kill me, could have been the one who killed my father! Was he shot? Poisoned with more strychnine, writhing on the floor, breaking his own bones with muscular convulsions? *Schumer* had Comstock killed, and he wants me dead. He must be trying to shut the whole program down, clean up all the scattered pieces.

God, this is all about Schumer. Why hadn't I just assumed that from the beginning?

"Are you all right, Chris?" Rubino asked.

I looked up at him, my face red and my teeth grinding. "Do you realize that if you'd have told me all this two weeks ago, absolutely *everything* would be different?"

Rubino frowned slightly. Bremer spoke up, "He told us not to tell you if you didn't already know."

"Who?"

"Your dad," he said. "And he told us that if he died, to watch over you until we bring this whole thing down."

I closed my eyes, hoping no new information could come in. "A personal favor," I said.

“Why do you think we’ve stopped the police from tearing you apart three times now, deleted an Interpol request for your apprehension, and even got you a gun just in case?”

“Got me a gun?” I asked after opening my eyes.

“The guy at the gun store in Lorton, he’s one of ours. He called us from the range, told us how well you were shooting. We told him to make sure you got a gun.”

“You had people following me?” I asked.

“When we could,” Rubino said.

I shook my head.

“Your dad took a huge risk,” Bremer said. “He knew what Schumer was capable of, knew that if Schumer found out your dad ‘betrayed’ him, he’d probably be killed. He said he wouldn’t give us anything unless we could guarantee your safety. I told him if he was worried, he should increase his life insurance policy until it was all done with. That’s what he did, so that if he failed, you would at least have enough money to protect yourself, to get away, or move on.”

I leaned back in my chair, tipped my head back, and groaned out loud. My world was imploding into itself.

“We had no idea Schumer told you that about your dad,” Bremer said.

“Though it does explain some of the angst,” Rubino chimed in.

“Okay,” I said, still looking up at the ceiling, “I feel like I’ve asked this before, but can I go shoot Schumer now?”

“Maybe later,” Bremer said. “Your dad was killed before he could get us enough evidence to convince our superiors to bring the hammer down on a Marine Corps lieutenant colonel. If you’re willing, we’d like you to help us by getting close to Schumer somehow. If we put a wire on you and you had one more meeting with him, he’d probably say enough to hang himself.”

“Meeting? He wants me dead.”

“Right. So, first things first, let’s go to DC and take a look at those pictures.”

We all got up, I left my plate and silverware on the table, and we walked to the front door of the lobby. I felt like I was walking through a fog, or there was sand in my shoes. Once again it seemed like everything I knew about everything had been wrong, and my brain had trouble processing it all again. Hopefully I'd be able to clear my head during the ride to Washington DC, and hopefully I'd learn to stop dancing around questions from now on and just get right into it. I couldn't figure out why my dad, after working in this program for almost twenty years would only now decide to report it. Did something new happen? Did I not turn out the way they wanted?

The three of us went out the front lobby doors and I stopped to find the black, officious-looking car that Bremer and Rubino drove. I spotted it in the middle row of cars and fell in line behind Rubino toward it. Bremer stopped at the police car in front and leaned into the front driver's side window to talk to the cop inside. Something felt weird, like it was a prisoner transport. Something else, though. Something nagging on me, which was surprising because there were a million things that should have been nagging on me, but there was just one little thing poking at my conscious like a sliver in my eye, but I couldn't figure out what it was.

I stopped for a second to look around, letting my brain filter out everything except movement. Bremer was still talking to that cop, Rubino was taking slow, steady strides toward their sedan, on the street a few cars drove past the hotel parking lot, there was nothing else. I turned to keep walking when a white streak caught my attention, the side door of a white panel van sliding open. I stopped again to focus in on what I thought I'd seen when I heard it.

A loud, resonant sound I'd heard before. It came and went in less than a second, and before I could even process the sound my right leg gave out, buckling completely, and my left leg pressed my foot against the pavement below just quickly enough so I'd fall sideways and onto my back. When I hit the ground I recognized the sound and heard it again, and again, and again. Gunshots, close, and a lot of them.

Behind me, the wall of the hotel was peppered with a line of small impacts that sent brick and mortar dust outward like little land mines. Then a series of hits rocked and shattered the glass of the row of cars I was laying behind. I turned my head to the right, Rubino was ducked behind the hood of a car, pulling the sidearm from his shoulder

holster. To my left, Bremer was bent over and making his way to the front of the police car, trying to put it between him and the shooting. Another quick round of shots trailed from the rear bumper of the police car, fragmenting the tail lights, straight up the trunk, piercing compact holes through the metal, up the rear windshield, cracking then shattering the glass into a rain shower of glass particles, then cut sharply to the left to cut down the police officer as he tried to jump from inside the cruiser. The cop landed face-first on the pavement, unmoving. Bremer stared at him, wide-eyed, from where he knelt behind the car's front end.

As I lay on the ground, feeling bits of gravel poking into my back, I remembered how much I'd needed a massage.

CHAPTER 56

I stopped trying to count after maybe 30 rounds fired without a break long enough to account for a magazine change. Either there were two of them, taking turns, or one guy with one heavy machine gun. The car I hid behind only swayed mildly with each hit, so the caliber couldn't have been too high.

Rubino was ducked behind a car roughly ten feet from me, covering his head with one hand and holding his cell phone up to his face with the other. Whatever he was yelling was lost to me underneath the barrage of gunfire, but I doubted he was ordering Chinese. Behind the police car, Bremer occasionally poked his head up long enough to fire a few rounds from his sidearm at whatever was firing rounds at us.

The volley of shooting stopped for a moment, and then began again, this time peppering the police cruiser with new holes. I took the opportunity to get up from my back and look through the battered windshield of the car I was behind to find the source of the shooting. Across the parking lot, about a hundred feet away, was a white panel van parked sideways across three parking spaces.

The van had a sliding door on the side, through which I could see somebody laying flat on the floor of the van and positioned behind some kind of automatic weapon with a bi-pod. I couldn't see a driver or anybody else around the van, so I guessed it was a one-man mobile turret system he had going on. I couldn't see his face, but somehow I knew it was the Irishman. This was a stupid, foolhardy way to stage an attack and reeked of inexperience or thoughtlessness. Right up his alley.

The gunman saw me and turned the fire once again to the sad little heap of metal I was hiding behind. I ducked, felt the shower of more glass scatter over my head, and watched a few more rounds hit the brick wall above me, adding to the random pattern of holes.

If I moved to either side of the car I'd be completely exposed, same story with Bremer. It looked like Rubino had a whole row of cars without any gaps. If he stayed low and was quick enough he could probably make it all the way to the street, if that would accomplish anything. He was still on the phone, though.

When he glanced over at me, I made a cowboys-and-Indians style handgun gesture with both hands to indicate that I needed a weapon. I thought maybe FBI Special Agents carried two. Rubino recognized and lowered the phone for a second, then yelled, "Where's yours?"

I pointed up at the building, two silver Berettas up in my room, then over at the other side of the parking lot, one USP in my car. I shrugged.

Rubino gestured over toward their car, the black Chrysler sedan parked in the middle row of cars, between this row and the shooter, then yelled, "MP5 in the trunk!"

The Heckler & Koch MP5 was a compact, automatic submachine gun and the star of most every counter-terrorist video game I'd ever played. It might help even the odds. I took a quick peek around the side of my car-shield and saw the sedan; the trunk was facing our direction. With some luck and quick legs, it might be possible; but not for me. I was pinned down.

"Keys?" I asked Rubino over the gunfire, which almost seemed random now.

He shook his head, and then pointed at Bremer. I turned around, got Bremer's attention, and asked the same question. He reached in his

jacket pocket and pulled out a shiny set of keys, then threw them straight-armed in my direction.

There was another burst of gunfire in my direction, forcing me to take cover and miss the keys. They passed me and landed on the sidewalk between me and Rubino, right in the gap between our cars. Rubino looked at the keys then up at me with an oh-what-next stare. I frowned and shrugged an apology.

Bremer seemed to have another idea. The unmoving, probably dead, cop lying on the ground beside the police cruiser was out of Bremer's reach, but he'd have a gun on him.

It was interesting how they'd both dropped the protect-the-kid attitude, but they probably both knew that I might be better at this than either of them. This was disturbing.

Bremer pointed at Rubino and yelled for cover fire, for Rubino to fire at the shooter as a distraction so Bremer could reach out and pull the cop in toward him. Rubino nodded, Bremer set his gun down on the sidewalk behind him, then Rubino took a few blind shots over the top of his car-shield, then moved to the other side of the car and shot some more. In a matter of seconds the heavy fire from across the parking lot returned, cascading around Rubino and the car. Bremer saw this and lunged out beyond the safety of the police cruiser and grasped wildly at the police officer's belt.

The automatic fire stopped.

Bremer got a hold of the cop's belt and heaved himself and the body backwards a few inches. Bremer leaned out to prepare another heave, but a line of gunfire cut through the pavement between me and Bremer, cut through the officer's body, and cut through Bremer before he could pull the body again. Two pink explosions tore through the top and bottom of Bremer's torso, and he collapsed backwards onto the curb where the sidewalk met the parking lot.

My eyes wide, locked on Bremer; my mouth unmoving. Bremer lifted one arm slowly to his chest, and then the arm fell.

Rubino took a few more shots around the side of the car then came back for cover. He looked around to see if it had worked, looked past me and over at Bremer. Horror and disbelief spread across his face. He called Bremer's name, Bremer didn't move.

Rubino looked down at the car keys sitting in veritable no-man's-land. He stared at them, fixated on them. He was going to do something stupid.

“Don’t!” I yelled.

Rubino looked up at me slowly, broken. He started to say something, and then his eyes cut suddenly past me. I turned around and looked over at Bremer. His arm was moving again, outstretched and feeling across the surface of the sidewalk around him like someone who’d lost their glasses. His fingers touched the edge of his handgun just beside him, and he stopped searching. He dragged the pistol in toward him enough so he could wrap his fingers around it, then he seemed to tense up his arm like a cobra preparing to strike. Bremer rolled his head just enough to see me out of the bottom of his eyes, and then sprung his arm forward, sliding the pistol across the sidewalk. The metal scraped against the cement and the gun made a little hop as it hit the seam between two segments, and then ran out of momentum and came to a stop just three feet from me, beyond the cover of the car. Bremer didn’t move after that.

Rubino looked at the gun, at me, at the keys, then back at me. “If we break for it in two directions,” he said, “he can’t target both of us!” I knew what he wanted to do, and I wanted to stop him, but his mind was made up. If he ran for the keys and I did nothing, Rubino would be a wide-open target. If he got the keys and switched directions, and I went for the gun, the shooter would have to choose which of us to aim for. That hesitation might be long enough for one of us to do something useful. The bigger risk was on Rubino, though. He’d be exposed for much longer. But if he moved, I’d be forced to move as well, or else I’d be effectively killing him.

“No!” I said, but it was useless. He looked up with fire in his eyes and yelled, “Go!” and he started moving. He got in a sort of sprinter’s stance and lunged from his cover, grabbing the keys. I had to move. I had to.

I scrambled to my feet and ran out from my cover and toward the gun. I had it in just over a second, a black, boxy Glock, and kept moving in the same direction. In my periphery I could see Rubino pop his car’s trunk with the remote and head toward it, in the open. If I took

cover, the shooter would go for the open target and nail Rubino, so I couldn't do that. I just kept running, hoping that I was the priority target.

I stuck to the sidewalk and ran past Bremer and the cop, and was just past the police cruiser when the shooting started. The police cruiser erupted in familiar destruction, then the next car as I passed it, then the brick wall just behind me as I sprinted. He was trailing me with a flurry of gunfire that hit the sidewalk, wall, and cars before my own shadow. His should have been aiming ahead of me, leading my path instead of trailing it. If he knew what he was doing, I'd be dead.

When I reached the end of the sidewalk, the end of the hotel's front side, I was out of the shooter's limited field of view. Firing through the open door of the van, he could only really see the hotel's front entrance and not much beyond it. I stopped for a moment to look around, saw Rubino duck and run toward the open trunk of his sedan, bullets flying just over his head.

I ejected the magazine from Bremer's gun and was slightly disappointed to find there was only one round in it, plus one in the chamber. Two shots, not quite enough for what I had in mind. Trying to think of an alternative, I made a beeline toward the white panel van, staying out of sight from the opened door. Rubino was at the trunk of his car and seemed to have his head buried inside of it. He pulled out a black metal case, dropped to the ground, and started working the latch. The shooter was spraying bullets wildly around the sedan.

When I was about twenty feet from the van I raised the Glock and fired a single shot through the right-rear tire. With a single gust of air the tire deflated and the van's rear corner sunk about four inches, and the shooting stopped.

Rubino had the case open and pulled out the MP5 and a long, banana-shaped clip of ammo. The shooting continued from inside the van, I kept running.

I could see the muzzle of the gun sticking a few inches out of the open door as I approached the van from the rear. When I was close enough, I kicked the side of the sliding door forward, rolling it on its rails and sliding it shut, knocking the tip of the gun to the left before the door latch clicked secure. Just as the door slid shut, Rubino let off a short

burst of fire from his MP5 which peppered the side of the van but didn't seem to pierce its metal exterior.

Inside the van I heard a quick series of thuds and saw the rear doors swing open, then shooter quickly climbed out and pointed a handgun around the side of the vehicle at me. Rubino fired another string of shots, this time across the back side of the van, and the shooter ducked back around the other side of the van. In the moment I saw him, he looked to have a close buzzcut, wearing a tight black T-shirt and urban camo pants. Rubino started walking, gun raised, toward the van. I leveled the Glock and turned sharply around the front of the van just as the shooter slid around again to the back, then I heard him jump inside the van through the open rear doors. Me on the left and Rubino on the right, we had him boxed in and he knew it. He'd probably want to have some kind of last stand with that full-auto of his, so I approached the rear slowly, minding the fact that I was only good for one shot.

The van's engine turned, suddenly, and the front wheels spun for a second and the van lurched forward. Why didn't I see that coming? I stepped around to the back of the van and looked through the open doors, saw a familiar-looking assault rifle discarded on the van's floor along with about ten drum magazines for it scattered across the floor, bare but for a single black foam mat rolled out where the shooter had been laying prone-sideways. There were two bucket seats in the front, and just as the van really started to move I caught the shooter's eye in the rear-view mirror. He turned quickly and fired three rounds out the back with his left hand, missing me as I jumped clear of the open doors to the right of the van. Rubino had stopped moving and opened fire, sending dozens of shots through the side window and across the side of the moving van before it picked up speed and approached the street.

The rear doors swung in both directions as the van sped off, Rubino pointlessly chasing it.

I kept my eyes on the driver's seat, through the rear. I raised the Glock with my right arm completely outstretched, pulled my left hand against my right for counter-pressure, and kept my eye on that driver's seat, waiting for the doors to swing open. When the van reached the parking lot's exit, I thought of nothing but that driver's seat, held my breath, and pulled the trigger.

About a hundred and fifty feet away, the van kept moving. It moved through the parking lot exit, onto the street, then straight into the front end of a car, and then stopped in the middle of the street. The rest of the street traffic stopped suddenly around the wreck.

Rubino ran, I ran. In a few seconds we were out of the parking lot and on the street. We both slowed as we neared the unmoving van, the people who had gotten out of their cars suddenly got back in when they saw Rubino's submachine gun and my empty Glock. Rubino saw the slide locked back on the gun in my hand and stopped to reach into his holster to pull out a loaded magazine and handed it to me.

I took it, dropped the empty, slid the fresh mag into the Glock, and dropped the slide lock in one fluid series of motions as if I'd done it

Rubino nodded at me as we approached the van again, he around the driver's side and me around the other. I noticed that the left rear door was closed, and there was a single bullet hole in its blacked-out glass window. The right side of the van was covered in bullet dents, the right rear tire was shredded from running flat on its wheel. The windshield and side window were smashed to oblivion, and the door handle was so shot up it wouldn't work.

When I got up to the side window I looked through to see Rubino on the other side, looking down at the shooter. He was in the driver's seat, leaning forward, his face pressed sideways into the steering wheel, surrounded by a pillow of mostly-deflated airbag. There was a fresh hole in the bucket seat, just below the headrest. The shooter had a matching hole in his neck, just below the head. Through the windows, Rubino looked at me with a blank expression. I wasn't exactly sure how to feel, either.

CHAPTER 57

The police came, as they often do. The wreck on the street was cordoned off and traffic was restored.

“I won’t be able to cover this up,” Rubino said when the first sounds of sirens began to echo off of the buildings. “You’ll have to make a statement, and I’ll have a mess of paperwork.”

I nodded, silently, and walked back to the hotel parking lot. I sat down on the edge of the sidewalk, rested my arms on my knees, and let the fully loaded Glock hang from my hand while I tried my best to keep the tidal wave of questions, feelings, and memories at bay.

Behind the police came ambulances to take away the injured, but finding only the dead. The shooter, with fresh bandaging on his right leg under his pants – making him and the Irishman one and the same, was dead. The cop, splayed out across the pavement, was dead. Special Agent Bremer, his back to the sidewalk, was dead. Rubino took the news with a slow nod and glazed eyes. Crime scene workers came in and floated around the parking lot like bees, placing numbered cards near spent

ammo casings on the cracked pavement and taking meticulous photos. Everybody seemed to ignore me.

I set the gun down and walked back to the white panel van. The discarded assault rifle in the back was an XM8, the same carried by the men who had stormed my house and seemingly blown it up. This one had the proper modifications to make it a full-on automatic rifle. I recognized the heavy 20-inch barrel, folding bi-pod, and 100-round drum magazine from the pictures I'd seen. As I recalled, the XM8 was a prototype project that was canceled before completion and the prototype units were very rare. This Irish guy and the men at my house having the same rare prototype weapon and them not being connected would be a phenomenally huge coincidence.

This means that, on top of the Irishman somehow knowing Dingan, he either works *with*, or gets his guns from the same person *as*, the guys from my house. It all comes back to the Marines, back to Schumer.

There was no other way to look at it. Schumer came up with the plan to train kids to be killers, Schumer had my dad killed when he tried to report the program to the Feds, Schumer had Comstock cover up my outburst at school, Schumer had Comstock killed, tried to have me killed, almost got Amy killed. Because of Schumer's affinity for reckless hitmen, two police officers were dead now, and one FBI Special Agent.

My life had boiled down to a series of unanswered questions interspersed with situations of danger, my dad was dead, and my only friend was in the hospital, all because of Lt. Colonel Schumer. That was all I needed now, no more mysteries to solve. No more bullets to dodge. Schumer was behind all of it, and he was going to pay.

My blood pumped with a newfound resolve. At last I had a clear purpose.

"Mr. Baker?" came a voice from behind me. There was a police officer, a detective from the look of him, standing just a few feet from me. "I'd like you to come down to the station with us to help fill out a report while they finish things up here."

I looked around the parking lot for Rubino, saw him over by the swarm of police cars, talking to another officer. He looked over at me, glanced at the officer staring me down, and nodded at me.

This will be interesting.

Four hours. I was there for four hours. Nobody seemed happy with my answer that I was assisting the FBI with an investigation, an investigation I could not talk about because of national security. They seemed to be missing the part of the story where I became so interesting to the FBI, but that too I could write off to national security. The key, it seemed, is to keep a straight face when you say, “national security.” That’s when they start taking you seriously.

The lead detective, an early-balding man with bags under his eyes, pulled out a file with my name on it, circled in red, and underlined four times in black. I thought they would have been using computers for these things by now, but that wasn’t the case. The file was full of unanswered mysteries that all lead to me. One of the Mexican guys from school, Martin Escamile’s parents had tried to press charges against me for assaulting him in school, but school administration reported that I wasn’t even involved. There was a dead Lorton police officer in the trunk of his own cruiser, which was split down the middle by a tree, and was practically fused with my old car; the FBI blocked their investigation. My passport was logged leaving the country and entering Austria, but not returning, and I was somehow sitting right there. Someone called 911 saying to come to my house, and when the police arrived the house was effectively gone; the FBI blocked that investigation. I’d come into the hospital with a girl suffering a rare type of poisoning and I’d known exactly how to treat it at the scene; the FBI blocked that investigation. Now, I was in the middle of a shootout in the middle of Fredericksburg which resulted in the deaths of the assailant, a police officer, an FBI agent, and the injury of one female driver whose car was struck by a van; no FBI block this time.

My answer to all of the above: national security. With a straight face, of course.

The fact was, it was easier to answer no questions than to try to explain the real answers, especially without incriminating myself in the process. I couldn’t imagine the police would be too receptive of any claims that I was in the center of a conspiracy headed by a corrupt member of the Marine Corps.

The detective was in the middle of explaining that I could be held for up to 24 hours without charge when Rubino came through the metal,

windowless door into the interrogation room I'd been sitting in for the last four hours. Seeing him, the lead detective threw his arms up in disgust and the other detective tried to block Rubino's path but he slipped right past him.

"Officers, I assume you've had sufficient time to take necessary statements and file a report on today's incident," Rubino said in one breath as he placed a crisp, type document onto the table and slid it over to the detective, saying, "This is a formal statement from the FBI Assistant Director declaring that Christopher Baker is not to be held nor are any charges to be placed against him until such a time that the investigation he is currently assisting us with has been brought to an end. Presuming you have enough to file your reports, I will be taking Mr. Baker now so he can get some rest and be moved to a more secure facility."

The whole monologue was delivered smoothly and without a break to allow for interjection. I was lead by the shoulder out of the room and the door was closed before the officers had time to open their mouths.

As we walked out of the building, Rubino asked me, "What'd you tell them?"

"That I couldn't tell them anything," I said.

"Fifth Amendment?" he asked.

"National security."

"Even better."

"Was that letter real?" I asked.

"Not even a little bit," Rubino said casually.

Rubino drove me, in the black sedan, back to the hotel and parked just next to my car. The bodies were gone, the van was gone, the spent casings were gone. But for some destroyed cars and a few bullet holes in the wall, it looked like any other hotel parking lot now. The morning's chaos just a memory, a news story, a police report, and something a few business travelers can go home and tell their friends about.

After a few seconds of sitting in silence, Rubino said, “We can see if that guy’s face or prints match anything we have on file, maybe give him a name.”

“Will that help you get any evidence, about who hired him?” I asked.

“Probably not,” he said, flatly.

From a legal standpoint, there would probably be no way to move from here to Schumer. We both knew it. He would have funded the hits with an offshore account or gone through a proxy.

Rubino turned and pulled a small cardboard box from the back seat of the car and set it on my lap. Inside it was a piece of paper, below that were the two Beretta 92 pistols from the dresser drawer of my hotel room, a roll of white medical adhesive, and a few other things. On the paper was a single address, an apartment in downtown Washington DC.

Rubino turned and looked out the windshield, thoughtfully. “I think I’ve taken you as far as I can,” he said. The sun was setting and long shadows were cast across his face, exaggerating the otherwise-subtle sorrowful look he’d worn since I’d looked at him over the body of our only remaining lead.

“I, Bremer and I,” he continued, “have broken a lot of rules and laws to get this far, because of what your father did, or tried to do. If you want to end this, you’ll have to take the last step. I have to do some explaining, take care of the paperwork required after discharging a weapon in the field, and call Bremer’s wife.

I pulled a small, black gadget from the bottom of the box and asked, “What’s this for?”

Rubino turned back to me and said, “You’ll figure it out.”

CHAPTER 58

I got out of Rubino's car and stood alone in the parking lot for a bit with the box tucked under one arm. I watched him drive off, watched the tail lights turn and disappear. I stood, in the twilight with a soft breeze playing with my hair and clothes, ignoring the world around me and trying for a moment to exist only in my mind. I tried to feel the things I should be feeling, tried to relive the things I'd experienced and remember who I was before any of them. It was useless, I knew. I opened my eyes a completely different person from who I once was. The walls from the sandbox in my mind had been kicked out, and all the things I was afraid I'd become were pouring into the spaces reserved for myself. The *real* me. The person I would be if my dad wasn't who he was and if my brain hadn't been used as a proving ground for untested forms of manipulation.

Of course, without those things, I wouldn't exist.

I should care about my mother, about Bremer or his family, about the police officer gunned down for being within the same field of fire as me. That I wanted to wasn't enough, I couldn't make myself feel these things. When I looked into myself I saw only a cold commitment to

vengeance. Schumer wanted me dead, so I'd make him dead first. It was as simple as that to me, and the casualness in which I'd decided such frightened me, the last shred of myself that remained which was capable of such fear.

Something had changed me. Were it the chaos of gunfire all around me, seeing Bremer go down, seeing Rubino risk his life to fetch those keys, or the moment I pulled the trigger to thoughtlessly yet willingly end a human life, it didn't concern me. What mattered was that I was fundamentally changed from the kid I had been even a month ago. Even at the beginning, when the switch was flipped in my brain and the training in my brain began to take over, I was different. The fight at school, the encounter at Lorton, even the gunmen in my house, I was on autopilot, letting myself issue pain and escape death as I may and only reacting afterwards. But now, it's a choice. I chose which way to disarm and incapacitate the bodyguards in Schumer's office, and this morning I chose to make a one-hit-kill from over a hundred feet; it wasn't autopilot, it was me. That scares me. But, I suppose, the fact that I can still frighten myself represents one glimmer of hope that there was still some small part of the old me left.

Whatever small parcel of humanity remained inside of me seemed to be amplified in proximity to Amy. I should see her before I go and jump from one field of fire to another. I tried to imagine how things would have gone in Vienna had I taken her along. Would I have been so cruel to Nathan Comstock if she were there to witness it? Would I have allowed myself to be taken into custody by Pratt and his buddy? Would I have been so reckless in my escape if it wasn't just my neck on the line? The whole trip had been a disaster and aside from language, time zones, and different-colored money, the only difference in those situations was that Amy wasn't hovering around me like my conscience.

I took one last breath of fresh air and got into my own car. I sat the box in my passenger seat, pulled the USP from between the seat and console and dropped it into the box, creating a nice little pile of armaments.

I drove to the hospital for the second time that day. I took an entrance and followed a route that I knew would bypass any desks or checkpoints where people could tell me visiting hours were over. On Amy's floor I took a longer route to avoid the nurse's station and as I

rounded the corner nearest her room I saw Mr. Westbourne, Amy's father, standing outside her door talking to a woman who looked about his age. The familiarity with which they spoke and the slight resemblance was enough to tell me that this was Amy's mother. They were too far away for me to hear, and it turned out that my list of superpowers didn't contain lip reading so I was oblivious to what they were saying, though they were certainly adamant about saying it. She flailed her arms around as she spoke, while he stood like an oak tree.

After a while she seemed to have had enough. She stopped, turned, and walked away. Mr. Westbourne, whose first name I probably should have learned by now, called for her, then followed after her. When they were both out of sight I slipped down the hall and into Amy's room.

The lights were off inside the room, but there was enough light coming from the TV to see. Amy was awake, propped up in her bed, watching the screen with her arms folded awkwardly on account of the IV line in her left arm. When I first entered there was an odd disconnect between the TV and sound, since I heard TV noises but nothing was coming from the TV set, then I realized that the sound was coming from speakers built into the rails of the bed. I was in the middle of thinking that was awesome when Amy saw me standing there, turned off the TV and pushed a button on the bed rail to turn on an overhead light.

"I can control the whole room from this thing," she said with a grin.

I was silent, not knowing what exactly I wanted to say and.

She got tired of waiting, I suppose, and asked, "What? What is it?"

"I thought you'd want to know," I said, stepping closer and lowering my voice, "the Irish guy, who poisoned Comstock, well, you too, he's dead."

Her face went blank for a moment. "Oh," she started. "That's, well, I don't know what that is. I guess it's good. How did he die?"

"There was a shootout at the hotel earlier today, right after I got back from here. I, well, we all were shooting at him. One of us hit him. Bremer, the older one, he was hit, though. Killed." It was a lie, of course,

I knew I was the one who'd killed him. It felt a bit better to pretend I didn't know that.

Amy took a while to register all that, needing clarification on what exactly "shootout" meant and how Bremer had died.

"If the guy trying to kill you is dead, does that mean this is all over?" she asked with a spring of hope in her voice.

I shook my head. "Irish Guy was only hired; someone else could just be brought in to take his place. This ends with whoever hired him; it ends with Schumer."

"You know it's Schumer now?" Amy asked.

"He's the only person it could be," I paused, "he's the one who killed my dad."

"What? Why? For trying to sell the plans to—"

I cut her off. "He wasn't selling anything. He decided to report the project to the FBI because it was illegal. Schumer found out about that, had him killed before he could bring any real evidence."

"So this is all Schumer?" she said after some consideration.

"All of it."

"Had your dad killed, had Comstock killed, tried to have you killed, nearly got me killed, and got Bremer killed."

I nodded.

"Does the FBI have enough evidence to move on Schumer now?" she asked.

"No. They might be able to put together some evidence to prove that he hired the Irish guy, but Rubino isn't hopeful. He gave me Schumer's home address and two guns. I think I know what he wants; what I want."

"Well... are you?"

I nodded again, "I think so. I'm certainly going to have a talk with him, at least."

She sank in the bed just a bit. "When?" she asked, carefully.

"Right now."

Amy bit her bottom lip and looked around the room. She looked past me at the small sink on the nearest wall and the cabinet above it.

“In there,” she said, “I think there’s gauze and Band-Aids up there. Grab me one of each.”

I glanced behind me. “Why?”

“Because I’m coming with you,” she said, “and I have to take this IV out.”

“What?” I said.

“It’s fine,” she said, leaning forward slowly, “they took one out of my other arm, I watched them. I can do it.”

“No,” I said, “you’re not coming.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“Why *not* not?”

“I’m in this as much as you,” she said, holding the IV up to her face and looking at all the parts. “Dingan could have killed me, I was there when guys with guns ran around your house, and I’m in this bed because of all this. I have as much right to see the end as you.”

I couldn’t tell her the real reason I didn’t want her to come, that her being there might make me too human to kill Schumer. That she could undo the mental hardening I’d recently attained.

“You’re supposed to stay in bed, right? You’re in pain,” I said, instead.

Amy shrugged. “I’m mobile now. They came and took most the tubes out of me. I go to the bathroom on my own now, thank God. The only thing wrong with me is that my muscles are sore, and they can be sore anywhere.”

“What is this? You want to get away from your parents?”

“No,” she said, poking me in the chest with an index finger. “This is because when I’m around, you’re more careful. If you have to worry about me, you might not do anything stupid.”

I sighed and wondered if this was actually why I’d come here. Maybe some part of me wanted to bring her along. I pulled a small piece of gauze from the cabinet and a bandage. Amy pulled the tape from her

arm and unclipped the IV line from the needle in her arm and tossed it aside, it swung around the bed like a jungle vine. She told me to press the gauze down where the needle went in, and she slowly pulled the whole apparatus from her arm, and then held the gauze down with the bandage. She got up to dump the needle in the biohazard sharps bin by the sink, grabbed some clothes from a bag by one of the chairs and headed toward the bathroom.

I sat on the edge of the bed and tried to think of the last time anything had gone according to plan, and then remembered that I worked best without them.

CHAPTER 59

Amy, dressed in regular clothes now, and me, going out of my mind, got out of the hospital without drawing any attention to ourselves. It took longer than I'd hoped because Amy could only move her legs so far before they ached, but she did an all right job of hiding that from me. Amy disappearing from her room would probably cause a bit of a panic, I told her, but she didn't care. They'd see that some of her clothes were missing and the hospital gown was in the bathroom and figure out she left of her own volition. I'd heard that some hospitals had weight sensors on the beds that would send a signal to the nurse's station whenever someone got out of bed, but that either wasn't the case or wasn't a problem.

We both got in my car after I'd moved Rubino's box from the front seat and we began the hour-plus drive north to DC. The drive was mostly long stretches of silence with some scattered conversations mixed in.

"So," she said toward the middle of the trip, "do you have an agenda?"

I thought about the different applications of that word for a second, then asked, “Agenda like, ‘Today’s Agenda’ or like ‘Hidden Agenda?’”

She turned from me to look out at the road ahead of us. “The first one,” she said. “Are you just planning on going in there and saying, ‘My name is Chris Baker. You killed my father, prepare to die?’”

I blinked twice, trying to remember what movie that was from and then giving up. “Not exactly that terse,” I said. “There are still some things I need explained.”

“Like what?”

“Schumer said that this whole thing is just a way to skip basic training. That the stuff I was taught under hypnosis would just be enough for me to know the basic stuff they teach, how to make your bed, how 1300 hours means 1 PM, chain of command, how to hold a rifle with the business end forward, how to climb a rope, stuff like that. If that’s the case, though, why do I know much, much more than that? Dumping milk in your eyes if you’re hit with pepper spray, a thousand different ways to get people’s addresses or bank accounts over the phone, picking security bar locks, picking handcuffs, treating strychnine poisoning, disarming two Marines of two weapons apiece, it all seems far beyond your average jarhead’s training.”

“When did you pick handcuffs?” she asked.

I remembered then that I never told Amy about Pratt, the Interpol officer in Austria.

“I forgot to mention,” I said, “I may or may not have killed some wealthy guy in Austria two years ago.”

“Two years ago? When you were fifteen?”

“At least one person thinks so,” I said. “It might have just been a ruse to get me into custody, like when Dingan said I’d kidnapped you. I don’t know how Schumer would be able to pull that off in Austria, but it’s more likely than anything else. That or there’s someone who looks like me, pulling hits in Europe.”

“What, like, maybe they saved your genetic blueprints when you were just an embryo and they sold it abroad as a grow-your-own assassin kit?”

“If clones have anything to do with this,” I said, “I’ll lose all faith in reality.”

Schumer’s apartment building in downtown DC was in a semi-upscale area but wasn’t quite as nice as the buildings around it. There was no doorman or lobby, just a locked door and an intercom/buzzer with a button for each tenant. I had his apartment number on the sheet Rubino gave me, but the nameplate for that unit on the intercom was blank. He must not have wanted many visitors.

Seeing nothing better to do besides scaling a ten-story building, and because my car was illegally parked on the street, I pressed the call button for Schumer’s unit. Then I pressed it again. Then I leaned on it for thirty seconds. No door buzz, no voice through the intercom. Either he wasn’t home or the intercom tone inside the apartments wasn’t annoying enough.

“Not home?” Amy asked over my shoulder.

“Could be. Or he could be dead,” I said.

“*That* would be unexpected.”

“And inexplicable.”

“He could still be at the office. Quantico’s on the way home.”

“It’s late, he should be home soon.”

“Want to wait here?”

“It would be easier than breaking into or out of Quantico.”

“Probably,” she said.

The thought that Schumer might be dead was starting to weigh on my mind. The last time I went to someone’s home to try and get some answers, that someone was laying dead at his front door. “Maybe we should go up and see, just to be sure,” I said, walking across the sidewalk back to my car.

“Up is this way,” she said, standing at the door of the building, pointing her thumb over her shoulder.

I opened the passenger door of my car, reached into the box in the back seat, and pulled out my as-yet unused USP. I made sure the magazine was full, the chamber was empty, and the safety was on, then

tucked the gun awkwardly into the back of my pants. Seeing this, Amy came over and seemed about to protest when I stuck the handle of one of the Berettas into her chest.

“Just like your dad’s,” I said.

She made a pained face, then grabbed the gun and turned around with her back toward me so she could tuck it into her pants without being quite as obvious as I. Back at the apartment door, I looked at the intercom panel for a good while.

“Know any super-secret ways to bypass these things?” she asked.

“I know one,” I said, counting the rows of buttons and the number of buttons per row.

Amy didn’t say anything, perhaps trying to decide if I was serious or not.

There were fifty-two buttons total. It seemed like enough. I pressed the first button, then the second, then every other button, sliding my finger down the rows like a kid selecting all the floors in an elevator. About twenty variations of “hello?” and “yeah?” came through the intercom before there was a loud buzz and the door’s lock clicked open. With fifty-two units, at least one person is expecting pizza or Chinese food, guests, or just doesn’t care who they let in.

“Gee, I never would have thought of that,” Amy said with just the right amount of derision as I pulled the door open and let Amy through.

Schumer’s apartment was on the fourth floor and, though I had a compulsion to take the stairs, we took the elevator for Amy’s sake.

The hall on the fourth floor reminded me of a hotel, with the vertically striped wallpaper and the overly complicated pattern in the short-fibered carpet. Schumer’s door was in the middle of the hall and, of course, locked. I pressed my ear to the door and knocked, listening for movement but hearing nothing. Not home, or not alive. The door had a lock on the knob and a deadbolt above it. The knob wouldn’t turn at all, meaning the knob’s lock was enabled.

Most people don’t bother with both locks, opting for one or the other, when they leave. The knob can usually be locked from the inside

with the door open before leaving, requiring far less effort. Odds were, the deadbolt wouldn't be locked.

"Know any super-secret ways to pick a door lock without a lock pick?" Amy asked.

I tapped on the wood above and below the deadbolt before saying, "I know *one*."

I took a step back and kicked the door just to the side of the knob, putting more pressure into the follow-through than the drive. With a sharp crack followed by a loud thud, the small latch ripped through the soft wood of the doorjamb and the door swung open freely. The noise was louder than I expected, so I went in, pulling Amy after me, before anybody would come to investigate.

"Your creativity is inspiring," she said.

I shut the door and looked around the apartment. It was sparsely decorated, with nonmatching furniture and nothing but military junk on the walls. There were no dead bodies in any of the rooms. Amy began roaming around the small living room, looking at the plaques and photos on the walls while I tried to survey the apartment as an ambush location. Right next to the front door was a tall bookcase, and on the middle shelf on the end closest to the door I found a loaded revolver hidden by a leaning book. There was another pistol in the drawer of the small table beside the bed in the bedroom. In the closet of the other room, made into an office, were two locked gun cases and several boxes of ammo. Above the door, inside the closet, was a shotgun mounted on the wall. This guy seemed a mite paranoid.

I closed the closet door and came back into the living room.

"We're leaving," I said.

Amy turned from a black and white group photo on the wall to look at me. "Why?" she asked, "We could wait for him here."

"This place has more guns than lamps. There's no way I could completely clear this place of weapons without missing something."

"Then where?"

"Parking garage," I said without thinking.

CHAPTER 60

Lt. Colonel Schumer drove into the underground parking garage of his apartment building just after 10 PM. The subtle roar of his oversized Cadillac's engine echoed from the confining concrete walls as he navigated two turns and pulled into the space marked with his apartment number. He sat in the driver's seat with the engine idling for a few seconds before killing the engine. He opened the door and stepped out, straightening his long gray trench coat as he surveyed the area around him in one broad turn of his head. The dim overhead lighting emphasized the drooping lines in his unshaven and weary face. He let out a breath and closed the door behind him, sidestepping to open the door to the backseat and reach in. He stood up again, clutching a square cardboard box to his chest with both hands and about to swing the door shut with his left knee.

He hadn't seen me, hiding behind the hood of a parked car in anticipation of his headlights and the limits of his sight lines. He hadn't heard me, baffling the sounds of my footsteps by carrying the tension of my weight in my knees and timing major movements to be covered by the sound of the engine shutting off and doors opening or closing. He hadn't even smelled me, the whole place smelled of exhaust and rubber.

He felt me, though. When I was finally within range and drove my right knee into his back, shoving his body into the side of his car. He felt when I drove my left elbow down into the back of his neck, slamming his chin into the roof of his car. He felt my right hand grip around his neck, my thumb pressing into the base of his carotid artery, causing his head to draw in to the right and his legs to weaken as a reflex.

He felt me pull his left wrist around and press it into his back, making him drop the cardboard box onto the cement floor. He felt me force him back and away from the car and forward, into the narrow hallway leading to a single elevator and a musty stairwell.

When I stopped four feet short of the far wall and gave him one last shove, when he had enough time to raise his arms to blunt the impact with the wall, when I'd had enough time to draw my gun and train it two-handed at the center of his mass, and when he pushed himself away from the wall to turn around, he finally saw me. The look on his face was neither shock nor recognition; it was a slight grimace with a hint of a smile.

"This is how you're going to do it?" Schumer grunted before I could speak. "A bullet, in cold blood? A *dance in pale bravado*." The grin on his face remained.

A slight tingle crept up the base of my skull and swept across the top of my head. "Can't think of anything more fitting," I said.

"It's just," he said before stopping to let out two dry coughs, "I thought you'd developed a thing for poisoning. Haven't eaten anything but fast food since you did Comstock."

"What?"

He leaned backwards against the wall and brought his left hand up to his neck, rubbing the right side. "Trying to kill your way to the top until you get your revenge, huh? It's noble, I guess."

He wasn't making sense, trying to distract me or take me off balance. "Answers first," I said, "then revenge."

Schumer straightened up a bit, dropping his hand from his neck.

"What the hell haven't you figured out already?"

"I want to know the truth about your program, why I can do much more than you claim I should be able to. I want to know how you

could have been training me my whole life when there's not any missing time in my day-to-day. And, mostly, I want to know why you killed my dad."

The expression fell from Schumer's face for a moment. "Wow," he said, flatly. "You're a lot farther behind than I thought you'd be."

"What are you talking about? All you've told me is lies, how would I know anything else?"

Schumer leaned his head back and chuckled deeply, sickly. "This is quite a situation, then," he said through a grin.

"So tell me, then," I said. "What am I *supposed* to have figured out already?"

"The program change!" said Schumer. "I thought this was all because you'd found out."

I just looked at him, my gun still pointed at his heart.

Schumer let out a low sigh, then adjusted his footing slightly as if his legs were cramping. "What I told you about the program was true, my intentions, how it was designed, that was all the truth. For a while, it was, anyway."

"I'm listening," I said when he stopped talking.

"Over a decade into the program, there was a regime change. New President, new bodies in the White House, new oversight committee, new superiors. The people who had approved my project, who were providing me with the funding under the table, they were all gone. Retired and redistributed. The people who came in after them didn't want to hear word one about what I was doing, about the money already spent and how much we'd lose if we scrapped the project. They wanted nothing to do with it. It was a new world, a new all over again. The climate that made the project a possibility had changed. The money was gone.

"So, I was forced to find new avenues of financing. I was approached by someone who wanted to fund the project, so I took the shot without asking questions. Questions I should have asked."

"What was the problem?" I asked.

“It turned out I wasn’t getting straight funding so much as a promotional sponsorship or an investment. The ones with the money had their own plans for how to use the program, beyond military recruiting.”

“What kind of plans? Political, or commercial?”

“Yes,” he said. That’s the answer my mother once gave when I asked if a tomato was a fruit or a vegetable.

“There was tremendous pressure on me to do what they wanted. They wanted results. They didn’t want duty and honor taught through hypnosis, they wanted to see how far we could take it. This was late in the game, though, you were already in your teens, only a few years from completion. Still, they wanted results or the money would disappear.”

“What did they want, then? You said you changed the program, what did you change it to?”

“You,” he said. “Exactly what you are now. A ruthless, unquestioning, mechanical delivery system of death. ‘What is the point of having an advanced training platform if you only teach what can be learned in a few months of training?’ they asked me. They wanted the product of years of service and training. They wanted Special Forces. They wanted kites, shadow men, wet workers, black ops. They wanted Navy Seals coming off of an assembly line.”

“And that’s what you gave them,” I said through grinding teeth.

“I had them change your training schedule, brought in some of our SF instructors to write a new ‘curriculum’ for you. Battlefield ethics and squad formations were out, knife fighting and improvised explosives were in.”

So that’s what it was. I wasn’t supposed to be the perfect soldier, I was supposed to be the perfect killer. It explained everything I’d been able to do, it explained the fleeting grasp I had on myself.

“Who are these people? Who’s paying the bills now?” I asked.

Schumer leveled his gaze at me. “People with more power than they should have. People who stand to gain from having people like you on staff.”

“You said this was all about that, the program change?”

He nodded. “In essence, when I changed your training program, I placed the roof on a house of cards. Something messed up your hypnotic compartmentalizing, and the training started leaking out, as you’ve discovered. Stress, fear, whatever it was, it shouldn’t have happened. It wouldn’t have if we’d stuck to the original program.”

“That *stress* was from my father being killed!” I barked.

“Well,” Schumer said, “house of cards.”

I pulled back the slide of the pistol with my left hand, chambering a round. “Explain please.”

“I didn’t think he’d like the idea of the new specialty we were preparing you for, so I tried to keep it from him. He had, after all, agreed to have you taught about discipline and all that ‘The few, the proud, the Marines.’ I tried to keep him in the dark about your new training regimen. When he found out, he didn’t take it very well.”

“It was illegal, unethical. He tried to report it to the FBI.”

“We couldn’t have that,” Schumer said in a disgustingly coy tone.

“I tried to talk him out of it. Told him we could undo the training once it was proven to work, told him it was under control, even offered him more money since there was a newfound surplus of it. He wouldn’t take.”

“So you killed him.”

“Not myself, no.”

“Just because he was going to shed light on your secret project?”

“As I said, there was tremendous pressure to keep it running. I might give you a moment to process that but I know it would be useless, you were taught to suppress your emotions. Box them up, drive yourself crazy later, just get the job done now. You can’t even make yourself care now, can you? Knowing why your father died. A normal person would care. A normal person would have shot me by now.”

My mind did seem rather blank. I knew Schumer was responsible for my father’s death, but hearing him admit to it should have affected me somehow. More than this.

“Shut up—” I started.

“As for your other question,” he began before I could finish. “As for when exactly the training was conducted, I’m not entirely sure. That was all Nathan’s job, I figured you would have asked him that before you killed him.”

“What are you talking about, *you* had him killed!”

“Is that how you’re painting it for the police? If you can pull it off, I guess.”

What was he talking about? I killed Comstock? No, I didn’t. I would have remembered that. Like how I’d remember being trained as a killer in the first place. Could he be right? Could I be doing things still without realizing?

“That box,” I said, glancing for a moment behind me and toward the parking area. “What was that?”

Schumer chuckled again, “That? Files. Everything that’s left of the program. I shut it down, Chris. It’s over. I figured that since you’ve started shooting FBI agents now, there would be no way to keep the heat away from this thing anymore. I destroyed most of it tonight, I thought I’d bring the rest home for one last hurrah, you know?”

More nonsense, he’s still trying to kick me off balance. I called Amy’s name and she appeared from the stairwell behind me.

“Over by the car there’s a cardboard box, bring it here,” I said, keeping my eye on Schumer who seemed very surprised to see Amy.

When the sound of her footprints vanished out of range, Schumer stopped following her with his eyes and looked back to me.

“Either she’s gone rogue or you’re one hell of an idiot,” he said.

“What?” I asked.

Schumer’s smile returned. “Do you think Nathan Comstock was our only means of keeping an eye on you? Hah, how old did she say she is? I’ve heard her go as low as sixteen.”

Shaking my head slowly, I said, “What are you talking about?”

“Please,” he said. “When did she first start talking to you? How do you think we always knew where you were? To be honest, I didn’t think she’d last this long without you finding out.”

“No,” I muttered, “What are you—” and I trailed off in thought. Amy first showed up in my life right after my dad died and she took an unusual interest.

She was there in Lorton, when Dingan somehow tracked me down in a city nearly an hour away from home. It was her plan to go there in the first place. She was the only person who knew I was going to Austria, and she was the only person who knew when I was supposed to return, which was exactly when the guys showed up at my house, which she was there for. She was the only one who knew I was on my way to Comstock’s house, where I showed up just after he’d been killed. She was surprisingly good at deceiving people over the phone or in person, and she was the only justification I’d had that my fourth hour study hall couldn’t have been when I was being hypnotized.

God. No, wait. I’d met her father, though he was involved with the Marines as well. I’d remembered Amy from long before she actually started talking to me, though. Right, that.

“She was around a long time before my dad was killed, though,” I said, “I remember her.”

Schumer’s face became oddly sympathetic. “You remember her, or you...” he tapped his forehead twice, “*remember* her?”

My hand wavered a bit. It could have been a distraction, but it made so much sense. As an administrator, Comstock could have fudged the paperwork to transfer her into school to watch me or make sure I did the right things or didn’t figure out the wrong things. I couldn’t remember her ever being too scared whenever I, or “we” were in danger.

Amy walked back into the corridor, carrying the cardboard box with both hands. I turned sharply to look at her, then back at Schumer.

“Here,” she said. “It’s full of file folders.”

“I—” my voice stuttered, “What’s in the folders?”

She sat the box down on the floor and knelt beside it, Schumer watched with a satisfied smirk. “Looks like...” Amy started, “orders, more orders, logs, charts. Some of the folders have names and words on the tabs some don’t. Here’s one with your name on it.”

“Nothing in there links me to your father,” Schumer said to me.

“Oh, I’m not planning on bringing this to trial,” I said.

“Right. You just want to shoot me,” he said, crossing his arms.

He stood there, saying nothing for half a minute, as if waiting for something. “For killing your father,” he said, as if a prompt.

If he was banking that I couldn’t summon the rage, he was wrong. His distractions had worked well enough, I’d lost the train of thought I’d been riding earlier, but the fact still remained that Schumer killed my father, who had done nothing wrong. Who tried to do the right thing. Who knew he might die, and wanted to make sure that if he *did* die that I wouldn’t be put out.

I’d wanted to kill Schumer for days now.

This was my chance.

I straightened my right arm, centering the reticule in the middle of Schumer’s chest. I told my heart to slow down, my breath to steady, the thoughts and feelings in my mind to silence. I tightened my grip on the pistol. I felt Amy’s presence just a few feet behind me. I put my finger on the trigger, and told my hand to squeeze.

Nothing happened. I tried to pull the trigger again, nothing. I couldn’t. My hand wouldn’t move. Then, the more I thought about it, the sillier the idea of killing that man had seemed. He was so friendly.

“What is it?” Amy asked.

Schumer smiled, then broke out into a laugh. I lowered the gun and shook my head slowly.

“I can’t kill *him*,” I said, turning to Amy.

“Of course not,” Schumer said. “I’m so *friendly*.”

I turned back at him, heard Amy go back to flicking through the folders and rustling pages.

It was odd, Schumer saying ‘friendly’ after I’d thought it. Looking at it again, it seemed odd that I’d thought it in the first place. It seemed like a foreign concept, something surreptitiously slipped into my mind.

“What did you do?” I asked.

Schumer held his smile. “I’m not an idiot,” he said. “I’m not about to let loose a rabid dog without making sure he knows who his master is.”

“Ummm...” Amy said, from the sound of her voice I could tell she was looking down, still looking through the box. I ignored her.

“What do you mean?” I said, lowering the gun.

“Safe words,” he said, simply. “I couldn’t teach someone to kill so easily without a safety mechanism. A specific verb, adjective, and noun that, used together, trigger a stand-down order. ‘Dance, pale, bravado.’ Those are yours. I had to look them up. I wasn’t entirely sure if it would work on you, since you weren’t officially activated, but it seems to have worked out just fine.”

I clenched my teeth again, raised the gun again. I couldn’t make myself do it. The whole idea of it seemed wrong, like smashing a puppy with a brick. I practically growled at my uselessness, and then stopped suddenly.

“Chris...” Amy said behind me. I ignored her again.

“Wait,” I said to Schumer, “What do you mean look *mine* up?”

Schumer smiled that dreadful smile.

“Your file isn’t the only one in here...” Amy said, continuing to thumb through the folders.

I looked back at Schumer, a new flavor of rage in my mouth.

“There are more, aren’t there?”

He kept smiling.

I raised the gun again, realizing still that it was probably pointless.

“How many are there?!” I screamed for the first time.

Schumer took a step away from the wall. “It’s not like building guns, where you go from spec to production in a few months. This is building and programming people, I couldn’t wait eighteen years between prototypes.”

My mouth went dry, my head started to pound. It was too much, I couldn’t process any more. I thought I was the only one. I thought this was all about me.

“How many?” I asked weakly, my whole throat seemed dry. “Five? Fifty? Hundreds?”

“Oh my God,” Amy said quietly, to herself. She dropped most of the folders she was holding and stood up.

“A few,” Schumer said, taking another short step. “Each in different stages, we started a new subject every year or so, adjusting the program as we found errors. Did you think you were special, Chris. You were just the pilot program, kiddo.”

“Chr–Chris?” Amy said, I still wasn’t paying attention to her.

Kiddo. My dad called me kiddo.

My heart picked up its pace, started trying to escape my chest. My stomach and lungs tried to join it. I felt slightly dizzy, the room and my head starting to spin. Where Amy was standing, it looked like she was reaching for something shiny stuck into her pants. Where Schumer was standing, it looked like he was moving forward and pulling something shiny from the front pocket of his coat. I was stumbling backwards, unsure of where I was or what was going on, but I knew I saw a gun. Hell, it could have been mine. Still, an instinct took over and I pointed my gun in the direction of the gun I thought I might have seen as my body wearily stepped backwards. I held my breath, closed my eyes, and tried my best to pull the trigger knowing full well that I probably couldn’t and that even if I did, I was probably already dead.

A lone gunshot cut through the silence of the darkened corridor.

CHAPTER 61

I remember my hand, my left hand, groping against the smooth-painted brick wall, my fingertips in a groove between the bricks. The world spun around me, buzzing, blurry, all except for my hand against that wall.

And in an instant, everything was fine.

I stood up straight and looked at the gun in my hand. No smoke. No recoil pounding through my fist. So, I was dead.

I let go of the wall and brought my left hand to my chest, my stomach, my neck and my head. All dry. So, I was alive.

A few feet in front of me, Lieutenant Colonel Chuck Schumer was slumped on the floor, leaning slightly against the wall behind him. His eyes were wet, glossy, scanning slowly from left to right. His mouth was drawn on one side to a tight point, the other side hanging slack. His arms were down at his side, on the floor; his right hand empty, his hand open, his index finger still hooked around the trigger guard of a small revolver.

There was a fresh hole through his gut, his overcoat sure to be ruined by the free flowing blood.

To my right, just a few feet, Amy was still holding that silver Beretta I pulled off a Marine guardsman. She held it out, straight toward where Schumer would have been standing. Her hands shook, her eyes were wide, her breathing sharp. A few feet to her right I could see light reflecting from a brass 9mm casing on the floor. I could smell gunpowder; I could still hear the echo of the gunshot through the ringing in my ears.

She wasn't moving. Just standing there, arms outstretched, cradling the pistol with both hands in what something told me was called an isosceles stance.

Nothing is ever going to be the same, I knew.

Gathering my thoughts, I took a long breath and spoke, quite slowly, "What did you do?"

As soon as the last syllable was completed, Amy replied in one breath, "Idon'tknow."

She was still looking forward, at the wall at the end of the corridor. I looked down at Schumer. He was breathing, slowly. His eyes were as unfocused as Amy's.

I slowly held out my left hand toward the gun in Amy's hands, to lower it. When my hand was a few inches from hers, she sucked in an unsteady breath and suddenly turned sharply toward me, pointing the gun at me now.

The instructions were sent from my brain as clear as could be. Duck the left shoulder down, push left leg against floor, move to the right. I ignored them, though. I just stood there. Amy stood there, nothing between us but a loaded gun.

"Is it true?" I asked, just as deliberately. "You're part of this?"

Her eyes were unchanging, like a spooked animal.

"Idon'tknow," she repeated.

Dozens of documents, photos, and file folder were scattered across the floor around the box Schumer had brought. On top of them all was a folder lying open, its contents spilled to the side. I could see

pages and pages of typed text, some handwritten notes, and a few photographs. I saw a little girl smiling against a blue patterned background, a school portrait. The girl had brown hair, and as she smiled her eyes narrowed in a familiar way. They were eyes I knew, eyes now staring at me.

It was a photograph of Amy, taken years ago. Around it were other photographs, some of her younger, some older.

There was a pain in the back of my throat. The pain came after the realization, the only explanation for why there would be a file full of documents and photos of Amy in a series of files about Schumer's program. I breathed slowly, letting the implications branch out in my mind. Schumer had just been trying to distract and disorient me. I hadn't killed Comstock and Amy wasn't working for anybody.

I grabbed the gun from Amy's hand, just as I had from the Irishman in Comstock's house. One quick arm movement and a turn of the wrist and she was disarmed. I stripped the gun and dropped it on the floor, stuck my own gun back under my belt, and snapped my fingers in front of Amy's face a few times until her eyes refocused and the color seemed to return to her face. It was shock.

"You didn't know?" I asked as Amy began slowly looking around, rubbing her head.

"I..." she began, and then seemed to lose focus.

I repeated the question, louder this time, trying to break through the mental barriers our brains put up when we can't process any more information.

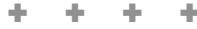
"I..." she repeated, "No. I just saw a folder. My name was on it, there were pictures of me, logs, names, and I..." She looked over at Schumer on the floor, no longer breathing. "He had a gun," she said, looking back at me.

I nodded, and then just stood in silence for a while. Amy did the same, and the silence began to fill up the room and hammer at my skull. There was a body in the floor, a pile of evidence. We had to get out of there. I had to go somewhere and let my brain explode.

"That should be enough," I said to nobody in particular. Then I lifted the front of my shirt, pulled the strips of medical tape from my

skin, and freed the long wire running from my back pocket, around my side, and up my chest. I pulled Rubino's recorder from the pocket, turned it off, and stuck it and the bundled-up microphone wire back into my pocket.

“That should be enough,” I repeated.



Schumer's near-meticulous records painted a clear enough picture of the truth.

In the case of myself, it turned out, most of what he said was true. I was the first in a series of experiments to test the possibility of using hypnosis as a training platform where a subject doesn't know he's being trained. This was all shoehorned in with another project in in-vitro fertilization and, most likely, genetic engineering. The files didn't detail anything on the genetic side of the program, but the logs and notes made consistent reference to things like reflexes, vision, hearing, and critical-thinking skills.

Amy's file told, with a cold disconnection, the story of her entire life. Erik Westbourne, her father, was approached because his Marine Corps profile listed personal financial trouble and problems with his wife conceiving. He was told that by volunteering for a new project he could solve both problems. His wife could receive an in-vitro fertilization without cost, and he would receive an initial payment of \$63,000 and a conditional bonus of \$15,000 when the child turns eighteen.

The “catch” was of course clearly explained.

And so Amy was born and raised, at first, on base in Quantico. Her training was done on-site at the project headquarters within the Marine Corps University until her father withdrew himself from the Corps and they moved to Fredericksburg so that she could attend my school and her training could be orchestrated by Comstock as well. Every day, she and I would report to an empty classroom for what we thought was study hall. A hypnotist would put us under quickly, using phrases we had already been programmed to respond to, and the schooling began. Different instructors were brought in to cover different

topics for around an hour, and then the hypnotist repeated the necessary prompts to keep us from actively remembering the whole process, and then told us to remember sitting quietly at our desks for an hour, reading or daydreaming.

The day before my fight at school was the last entry in both of our logs. The day of the fight, when the imaginary wall holding back a lifetime of training finally broke, I left school before my fourth hour study hall and, I found out, Amy did too. The next day was when we tried to get into Comstock's bank account. I didn't attend any classes that day, and Amy skipped fourth hour to perform the phone scam with me. After that, I never went back to school and Amy started leaving at lunch so she could join me on my inane adventures.

With the benefit of hindsight, the events of the past few weeks became perfectly clear to me. It was that we both started missing our daily training sessions that got people worried. Comstock feared that we had somehow found out, and that Schumer was angry with him. He hired Dingan, Schumer's apparent go-to guy, to track us down and see what we were up to. Dingan took the job a little too seriously, and made the mistake of threatening my life. After I killed him, Comstock really got nervous, and apparently tried to flee to Austria, where he'd stowed away most of the insane amounts of money Schumer was paying him. After our little encounter in his hotel room, he assumed that I was a messenger from Schumer and that I hadn't killed him must have meant that Schumer wasn't too angry.

After that, though, things get a little unclear. Schumer must have found out that I was working with the FBI and feared that I had found out the truth and would help them raise a case against him. He must have sent the men to my house, and he must have had Comstock killed and put the hit on me that almost killed Amy. It wasn't as clear-cut, but it was the only thing that makes sense.

The biggest surprise was that it wasn't just me. I had a stack of nameless folders of kids, ages ranging from barely seventeen to just over six. Children, who, like me, were designed at a genetic level and taught the art of soldiering daily.

To find out that one's entire life is a lie is not an easy thing to just deal with. I, it seemed, was taught to suppress trauma and distractions as part of my specialty. People who pull triggers for political gain need to be

able to wash themselves of the guilt, they need to be able to see their friends slaughtered and still pull that trigger. They need to march over a field of butchered innocents to get within range of the warlord whose proclamations ended those lives. Mental compartmentalization was a part of my programming and, ironically, was the only way I could handle learning of it.

Amy wasn't so fortunate. She seemed to take most of it in stride, until she figured out that the reason her mother had left was because she'd found out somehow. She couldn't be around Amy or her father knowing what he had done and what Amy really was.

I didn't see much of Amy after that.

When Rubino gave me the recorder and microphone, he had been expecting some kind of confession out of Schumer to tie him to my father's killing, not a giant box of evidence. All of it was enough to open a formal case within the FBI to investigate the entire history of Schumer's program and hopefully bring charges against others responsible.

Like all government bodies, though, the FBI moves slowly.

In all likelihood, the entire operation would be swept under the rug and forgotten about until anybody could be brought to answer for it. With Schumer gone, those who had been taking orders from him would disband and wander aimlessly until finding new jobs. There would be no way to guess what would happen to those kids who had been in the middle of their programs. Would their hypnotists and instructors be there when they showed up for their nonexistent classes? Would their unconscious training stay buried without daily intervention to keep it so?

Dead men couldn't be convicted, and for this, I suppose, Carl Dingan, Chuck Schumer, and the Irishman, later identified as Thomas McMahan, got off easy. It was likely that one of those three had killed my father for trying to expose Schumer.

In the end, I'm left with too many unanswered questions. There was no evidence at all to suggest who Schumer's new sponsor was. Nothing connected me with deaths in Austria. There was no telling who those people were who'd come to my house and, ostensibly, blew it up. None of Schumer's records actually outline, detail, or even mention the specifics of my altered training program.

It almost seemed if Schumer wasn't the top dog he made himself out to be. Everybody takes orders from somebody, they say. I once thought this was all about Comstock and was quickly proven wrong. How long until my belief that this ends with Schumer seems just as laughable.

Confronted by confusion, the best thing to do is to look at facts. Nothing I could learn will bring back my father. No amount of revenge would justify his death, or that of Bremer or everybody else who. My mind was very nearly lost to one invented for me, the mind of an unquestioning killer. Everybody said I acted different after Schumer died. I never smiled.

I hoped, above all, that there would be a way to free myself from the weapon inside me. Perhaps time would wash him away. Perhaps, after a lifetime of solitude, he would simply die of atrophy. Perhaps, whatever happens, he'll always be in there. Perhaps I like being him better than I liked being myself. Perhaps I'd be of better use to the world as an agent of chaos than as a simple kid who just wants his life to be normal again.

What say should I have in my own destiny, after all, if I was built to be a weapon?

Built, all that I am.

Mind, and body.

EPILOGUE

Time, like water, flows on.

Also like water, time acts as a diluting agent. Given enough time, even the most serious of issues can seem mundane.

As time pulls us away from the events by which we measure our lives, all we can do is look back and observe them as we inch further and farther away. When time draws us apart from these events, our view of them fades, the edges go fuzzy, and fine details are lost entirely.

The only way to combat this is to kick against the current. You can try to stay in the past, refusing to let go or to allow time to carry you beyond it. Like fighting a river, fighting time is an active process. To move on you need only let go and let the waters carry you, but to remain still you have to fight. It's tiring, and the longer you keep it up the harder and harder it becomes.

You can only learn to let it go, or die from the struggle.

It was a month after my eighteenth birthday, three weeks since the last time I'd talked to Special Agent Rubino, two and a half since I'd talked to Amy, just over a week after my mom and I decided on a smaller

house around Argyle Heights, and three days after I'd received my school diploma in the mail when I'd decided to let go.

Before then, I'd repeated the events over and over in my head and obsessed over the details I hadn't yet understood. I'd made dozens of crude flow charts trying to demonstrate the chains of events and command. I'd called Rubino every day for updates; he'd begun to ignore my calls. I grilled my mother on anything my father had ever said before he died, when I was born, before I was conceived, and when I was young. I pulled any event from my early memory I could reach my fingers around and tried to insinuate some meaning, some relevance.

Did my dad refuse to introduce me to any sports because he simply feared I might be hurt or because he always knew that high stress and my fight-or-flight response might break down the walls between my two personalities?

Did he simply take the fact that I was to become a government guinea pig as the price of having a child, or did he see it as a bonus?

His gravestone didn't answer my questions.

I went into the FBI building in DC twice to make statements. Once, a brief written statement for Rubino's benefit; the second time, a formal inquiry in front of a review board of five people whose names and ranks I purposely did not observe. The FBI wasn't interested in satisfying my toxic need for satisfaction, however; they just wanted to waste time and look as if they were doing their job.

I'd nearly driven myself mad before that day when I finally let it all go. It was the beginning of summer, there was green all around, the air was warm but not uncomfortable. I got in my car for the first time without feeling anxious or that I needed to go shoot someone or do anything illegal; the first time I hadn't considered whether or not I should bring my gun and the first time I hadn't looked at myself in the rear-view mirror for a few seconds and wondering who was looking back.

I drove with the windows and the t-tops from my car down, felt the air on my face, found a foreign serenity in it.

I was halfway up the sidewalk to Amy's front door when she opened her bedroom window upstairs and called out, telling me not to ring the doorbell. My last conversation with her father hadn't ended well; she probably didn't want him to know I was there. While I waited for her

to come down I looked at the trees I'd never noticed and watched the clouds cascade through the sky.

Amy came out the front door and followed the sidewalk to where I stood. Her hair had grown out a bit and was pulled back behind her ears, no stray locks in her face. She'd also stopped using eyeliner under her lids. She looked her age, for once.

She stopped a few feet from me and crossed her arms. "What are you up to now?" she asked, her voice betraying the annoyance her face hid.

"Just going out for a drive," I said. "You want to come?"

She glanced at my car in the driveway. "Where?" she asked, her voice flat.

"North."

She let out a quick breath and shook her head. "I'm not going to the FBI with you and I'm not going to Quantico again, why can't you just—"

I cut her off, "I'm done with that. No more adventures, no more banging down doors. Just a relaxing drive," I paused, "to clear our heads."

She looked up at me for a few seconds with cautious eyes, then said she'd tell her dad she was going out.

After I'd navigated my way out of suburbia and onto I-95, I glanced at the silent girl in my passenger seat and asked, "So how are you doing now, with the thing?"

Amy looked out the window, "Fine, I guess."

"It doesn't bother you, knowing what's up there?"

"I don't know," she started, "it's different than with you, because it's all staying put. Nothing's leaking out. I guess sometimes when I think of something, I'll wonder how I know it and try to remember when I learned it. I don't remember exactly when I learned how many feet are in a mile, though, but I know it. I guess I'll always have to deal with that."

"Your training was just basic training type stuff. You don't have to worry about knowing or doing things you'd regret," I said.

She turned away from the window and looked at me. “Do you regret any of the things you did?”

I watched the road for a bit.

I asked, “If you could get rid of it, though, or even have it all activated so you’d remember it all, would you want to?”

She thought for a moment. “Get rid of it, like, have it all wiped from my memory, so it would be like it was never there?”

“Right.”

“Or have it activated, so everything I was taught under hypnosis, I’d remember and be able to use?”

“Yeah. In a few minutes, know everything you’d know after a few months worth of boot camp.”

She was quiet for a bit longer. “I suppose either would be better than this,” she said. “Just having that stuff in my brain, but not being able to use it and not knowing what it is. Getting rid of it would be fine, I guess. Though if it’s just boot camp stuff like, what, cleaning a rifle and the difference between a sergeant and a staff sergeant? I suppose that wouldn’t be too bad, unless it’d change who I am.”

“Your personality, you mean?”

“Right. Aren’t people who finish boot camp supposed to have this kind of somber, subservient attitude from all the brow-beating? If that’s part of the package, I don’t know if I’d want that. I could learn how to clean a rifle from a book if I wanted to.”

“But if you could know the answer to that, and even if not, you’d definitely rather have it activated or have it removed than just having it sit there?” I asked.

“I guess so. Yeah.”

“All right then,” I said.

“So just *where* are we going?” Amy asked.

“You’ll see.”

The drive north was becoming rather familiar for me. Interstate 95 went through Stafford than right through Quantico, then through Woodbridge, then Lorton and Fort Belvoir, and then turned into 395 and

straight through to Washington DC. Northwest of the city center was Georgetown University, right on the edge of the western branch of the Potomac. Around the university were blocks of tightly packed, ages-old townhouses. I parked on one particular street in front of one particular house, which I explained to Amy was the home of William Secomb, professor and head of the psychology department at Georgetown.

I'd found his name in some of the earliest of Schumer's files and from online archives of the university's website found that he'd taught a few classes on hypnosis theory back in the 1980s but now stuck mostly to abnormal psychology. From his personal page on the psych department's site I found his work and class schedule and determined that he would most likely be home at this exact hour.

Amy and I went up the short sidewalk and handful of stairs to the front door, and I knocked. In a few moments a taller gentleman of about sixty opened the door. He was balding, thin, and dressed in a white shirt and gray pants that looked to have been through the wash a few too many times. He wore wide-framed, thick-lensed glasses.

"Professor Secomb?" I asked when the door was opened.

"Yes?" he said, squinting as if trying to recognize me, then trying the same with Amy.

"Did you ever know, or work with, a Charles Schumer over in Quantico?" I asked.

Professor Secomb squinted again, but looking past my head, as if trying to remember the name. "Are you students of mine?" he asked.

"No," I said. "This would have been a while ago. Eighteen years or so."

"Oh, right," he said, scratching his head. "I think I remember. Just some contract work. He tried to hire me, as I recall."

"I don't suppose you worked with him on some kind of platform for training a child from birth to teen years using hypnosis so as for him not to remember the training?"

"Him *or* her," Amy said.

Secomb looked between the two of us for a moment. I smiled awkwardly.

“Oh dear,” Secomb said, mostly to himself, after letting both of us in and we’d sat down on a small, old couch over which a brown and white afghan was tossed. “Oh dear, oh dear,” he repeated, taking a seat in an old recliner opposite the couch.

“I never thought it was a practical exercise,” he said. “Mr. Schumer just brought me in and asked me to determine whether it would be possible, and if so, to design a system to do it. To train or educate somebody without them remembering it. I thought it was hypothetical. I even told him that...that it may be possible but it was clearly an ethical and practical quagmire.”

“But you developed the platform for him?” I asked. “One that should have worked.”

“Well, yes. In the same way that in the 1940s somebody could have developed a platform for sending a man to the moon, but it wouldn’t be possible or practical for another twenty years.”

“Apparently it was both practical and possible,” Amy said.

“Oh dear,” Secomb said once more.

“Understand,” he began after a moment, “that hypnosis has been around in one form or another since the eighteenth century, but advancements in understanding it come slowly and after long gaps. In the 1980s it, along with most conventional forms of psychology, had become en vogue again. The CIA, FBI, and military started to bring in experts to see if it was possible to use it for interrogation, memory restoration, contacting the spirits of dead people, anything. Most of my colleagues in psychological study were contracted for one program or another, developing the means to do any number of purely hypothetical feats.

“I remember a fellow in Army intelligence that was convinced a person could be trained to kill another man just with his mind. They poured money at anybody who said it could be done, paid people to sit in a room and stare at a goat, trying to kill it through telepathy. A bunch of new-age nonsense, of course, but this was the climate after Vietnam. Any ridiculous, unconventional idea was fair game.

“Compared to some of the other nonsense I’d read about, Schumer’s job didn’t seem too far from the ordinary. Hypnosis has been shown to be a useful tool for education for decades, but using it long-term and for children was the hard part.”

“So you had no idea that he was going to actually do it?” I asked.

“Heavens, no,” he said.

“But for him to pull it off, then,” I said, “would your... report have been enough?”

He thought for a moment. “I suppose so,” he said. “In the hands of a trained psychologist or hypnotist, at least. What I outlined was just the mechanics for training a person. What was actually to be taught was left open-ended. The platform could be used to teach somebody foreign languages or how to take apart and rebuild a car’s engine.”

“But it could easily be used to teach somebody military strategies?” I asked.

“Sure, given the pace was slow enough.”

“How does it all work?” I asked.

“I should have my notes and documents from the project here in my filing cabinet, so I could look up exactly what the process was, but the essence of it all is that, while in a hypnotic state, a person’s subconscious is fully exposed and open to suggestion. The subconscious is the part of the mind that actually does the heavy lifting, coordinating the flow of information between the senses, the memory, and the conscious. Your five senses are consistently giving an extreme amount of information to the subconscious, and the subconscious actively decides how much of it to forward to your conscious.”

“What does that mean?” Amy asked.

Secomb took in a breath, and then began explaining. “Have you ever been in a crowded room where many groups of people are having their own conversations, like a restaurant or a party, and you’re having a conversation with your own group but you overhear someone in another group mentioning your name or a word that holds some significance to you, and your attention suddenly snaps over to that other conversation? Not only that, but you can somehow remember the last few words before your name or word was said, even though you weren’t listening.”

Amy furrowed her brow for a moment. “I think so.”

“That happens,” Secomb said, “because your ears are actually picking up every conversation within earshot, but your subconscious is only picking out the voices from the conversation you’re having. It would

be too much work for your mind to have to process every voice heard in a crowded room, so it picks out the important thing and sends the rest into your brain's version of the trash bin. But as your subconscious is filtering this out, if it hears a word that's important to you, it decides to send it to your conscious along with anything it can pick from that trash bin to go along with it."

"The Cocktail Party Phenomenon," I said.

Secomb looked over to me, a bit surprised. "Exactly," he said.

"That's also why you sometimes get a headache if people around you are speaking to each other in a foreign language," I said, "Your mind is trying to process the words to decide if it's important, but gets stuck on every word."

"Right," Secomb said. "The subconscious acts as the messenger between your memory, your senses, and your conscious. When you're being taught something in class, or you're reading a book, there are a million other processes going on inside your mind that have to compete with each other. If a teacher tells you a new mathematical formula, for instance, that new information has to overcome the fact that you're also thinking about history class and the fact that your shirt is uncomfortable, and that your desk is tan and your pencil is yellow and the person next to you is chewing gum.

"When you're in a hypnotic state, however, all those other inputs can be dismissed or set aside, and you can send information straight to the subconscious, so that when you're told that math formula it's sent straight to the part of your brain that stores information to your memory while you sleep that night. The main problem with this is that most people learn by doing, not just hearing. To deal with that, I made a script where the subject could be instructed to actually perform whatever action and, if the instructor determines it was done correctly, the process is learned that way."

"How is the person kept from remembering all of this once he wakes up, and how does the process of 'unlocking' all that knowledge handled at the end?" I asked.

Secomb scratched his cheek and thought for a bit. "I'll have to check my notes to see the specifics for how I dealt with that," he said, standing up and heading down a hall and turning into another room.

“This is weird,” Amy said quietly.

“Yes it is,” I replied.

A few minutes later, Secomb came back with a paper accordion file in his hands. He sat back down and started pulling pages and notebooks out. He spent a few minutes sorting documents reading a few things to himself, before looking up at us and asking, “What was the question again?”

“How does a person not remember being trained under hypnosis daily, and how does activation work?” I said.

“Ah, yes, right,” Secomb said. “Well, the memory is a tricky thing. It isn’t like a big bucket where everything is dumped and can be poured out and reviewed. The best analogy I’ve heard is that memories are like tennis balls floating around in a vacuum. The tennis balls are all connected by strings, each one connected to different ones a number of different ways. A memory of the first time you tied your own shoes might be tied to a ball of ‘accomplishments’ and another called ‘shoes’ as well as several other, much more arbitrary connections. These string connections are created when the memories are first stored, but our subconscious is able to alter them at will. A person with a traumatic experience such as being raped or witnessing a violent crime, for instance, may just have that tennis ball dropped anywhere without any connections made. The mind does this as a way of self-preservation, repressing a memory that’s too painful to process. A person could live his whole life without ever acknowledging or being aware of that memory, but most times as that tennis ball floats around it will ‘bump’ into a similar memory.

“If the event happened at a certain location or the day after something important like a birthday, it might try to make spontaneous connections to memories of that location or to birthdays. This is one way for people in therapy to recall these events. The other way is under hypnosis.

“With hypnosis, the subconscious can be instructed to dive into that vacuum and start grabbing tennis balls, regardless of connections, and then the subconscious can be told to invent new connections so that the conscious mind can recall the event freely. In the same fashion, the subconscious can be told, with some restrictions, to sever connections.

This can be done for entertainment in stage hypnosis where a person is made to temporarily forget his own name, or forget about the number seven, but using the correct procedure, the ‘forgetting’ can be made much more long-lasting. Under hypnosis, a person could be trained in whatever way, and then made to disconnect those new memories with anything else.

“This is how the ‘activation’ is handled, at the end of the training. If the subject wishes to be made to remember everything he learns, his subconscious can be instructed to find all those tennis balls he was told to disconnect over the years and re-connect them. Or, if he chooses to reject the training, the memories can be, more or less, thrown out.”

“You said that if somebody forgets something that it isn’t really gone, just disconnected. If the training tennis balls are already disconnected, how can they be removed forever?” I asked.

“That’s the most complicated aspect of this whole procedure,” Secomb said. “It’s the thing I had to work hardest to sort out, but it’s something I insisted that I include. I didn’t think it would be right to, even in theory, give somebody training they weren’t aware of without giving him the option of completely removing it, be it cupcake recipes or bomb making.”

“So how did you do it?” I asked.

“I had to do a bit of theoretical mind-hacking,” he said. “When you’re sleeping, your subconscious is working with your memory to take all of the information you gathered that day and deciding whether it’s something you should hang onto forever or just discard it. This is, effectively, what dreams are all about. Your mind is basically experiencing a vivid hallucination, a literal drug trip, but it’s told to recall everything you experienced that day and go off on tangents. Important things, like things you actually did or important sensations, are sent off to your long-term memory. Things that serve no purpose, like sounds, smells, or sights you experienced that had no significance, are just flat-out removed from memory. This is why I tell my students to make sure they get plenty of rest before an exam instead of staying up all night studying. Your brain doesn’t actually remember something until you’ve slept and it’s had a chance to sort it out. Until you’ve slept, everything kind of swims around your short-term memory waiting to be dealt with.”

“Okay...”

“Right. Well, I had to identify the actual process of the brain that does the permanent removal of useless information, and then I had to find a way to channel old memories into this process for them to be deleted. In a sense, if a person chooses to have his unconscious training removed forever, I found a way for the subconscious to grab all of those tennis balls and sneak them into that trash bin so that when the person goes to sleep, the brain just dumps it all out. That explanation kind of trivializes the size of that accomplishment, but for all I knew it was just hypothetical so I didn’t care to spend any more time thinking about it.”

“Let me make sure I have this straight,” I said. “To permanently remove the training, you basically trick the subconscious into thinking that all training is useless and sneak it into the short-term memory’s trash bin so it can be removed the next time the person sleeps.”

“That’s basically it, yes,” Secomb said.

“Then, wouldn’t the person be able to remember it all, until he was able to sleep. You said everything swims around up there until it’s been sorted out in sleep. If eighteen years of training was swimming around where there’s usually only a day’s worth of stuff, wouldn’t you notice?”

“That’s true. For that, the person should be given a sedative and made to sleep immediately after the process; otherwise for the rest of the day he would... well, I’m not sure. He might feel like he’d been awake for years, or he might go insane. It’s hard to estimate what would happen, which is why immediately going to sleep is required. The subject should be kept asleep for at least twenty-four hours, as well, to allow for all that information to be processed.”

I let that settle in for a bit.

“Another question,” I said. “Suppose a person had all this training, the tennis balls are floating around with no connections, could anything spontaneously create connections as needed. Say a person was taught how to tackle a bear but isn’t supposed to remember, and there’s a bear about to eat him...”

“Fight or flight,” Secomb said, knowingly.

“Right.”

“The whole notion of tennis balls floating around with no connections only applies in an ideal scenario. Given the right stresses, or the overwhelmingly powerful reach of the FOF response, it was always entirely likely that such a situation might cause the mind to reach in and pull out anything it could use. This is demonstrated in reality, when some people are able to remember first aid or survival techniques they read about or saw on TV years ago in a life-or-death situation. The mind will do anything it can to keep itself alive, it will respect no arbitrary rules, even its own. If it thinks passing out will save you, you’ll pass out. If it thinks repressing the memory will save you, you’ll repress the memory. If it thinks creating a whole new personality to handle the stressing event while your original personality takes a nap in the back of your mind will help, it will do that. In the same way, if your brain knows how to escape a situation but isn’t ‘supposed’ to remember, it will veto its restriction.”

There it was. There was my answer. I then explained to Professor Secomb everything that had happened to me, that I had been in my first fight after a lifetime of avoiding confrontation, and I felt something snap and was able to fight. After that, I was in more and more life-or-death situations and each time, more and more of my training had become available. Each time, I felt more and more of myself slipping away.

“It’s interesting, and completely understandable,” Secomb said after I’d finished. “When you were in danger in a physical assault, your mind retrieved its information on how to handle that. When you were in danger in a car, the car training became available, then gun training as you needed it.”

“I would have thought, knowing all this, that from the first time the sanctity of the tennis ball connections was broken, that I would be able to remember all of it,” I said.

“No, what happened sounds about right. The training you received doesn’t represent one giant memory; it’s thousands of memories and skills. It wouldn’t all rush out like poking a hole in a dam; it would only become available as needed, something like a reflex. If you were to be officially activated, all of the training would be moved to your active memory. Until then, it remains available on a need-to-use basis. If you tried to tell someone how to tie shoelaces without thinking about it, you might have trouble, but if your shoe is untied you can reach down and perform a complicated manipulation of two strings with two hands

without applying any thought whatsoever. The motions and techniques of lace-tying just come to you as you subconsciously ask for it. Do you understand?”

“I think so,” I said.

It made enough sense. I knew how to treat strychnine poisoning because I needed to, and I knew how to shoot when I needed to. When I tried shooting at the range in Lorton, I wasn’t an expert when I first tried. It wasn’t until I stopped thinking about it and treated it like a reflex that I was able to shoot so well. Each time I had to pull from the training, though, it seemed like more and more baggage came with it.

“You said you wrote scripts for everything, right?” I asked.

Secomb nodded.

“You have the script to remove the training?”

He blinked a few times then said, “Yes, I believe I could do it.”

“Would you?” I asked.

“On you?”

I nodded.

Secomb opened his mouth to speak, then hesitated, then finally said, “It would take a while. And like I said, you’d have to sleep right afterwards. It would be dangerous, and I’d have to review my notes and do some research to make sure all the information and techniques are current.”

“What about activating?” Amy asked.

Secomb thought some more. “That would be easier. Much easier. I could do that in an hour.”

Amy looked at me. “What do you think?” she asked. “If you got rid of it, you would be you again.”

“Yeah,” I said. “And if you got rid of yours, you wouldn’t have to worry about being something you’re not.”

“Or,” Amy said, “We could make of ourselves whatever we want. We could do it, to hell with the consequences.”

“You can do whatever you want to do,” I said. “You don’t have to base it on what I do.”

“I think we should go through it together, whatever it is,” she said.

My heart began beating faster. Amy’s eyes were sincere. Her hand, I’d just noticed, was on mine. I remembered saying to her once, “When this is over with.” It felt like ages ago, of course, but I had known so clearly what I meant then. I also remembered the scar on my back, probably a remnant of an accident during knife training. I thought of what it represented, the lifetime of knife fights and gun battles I could get myself into and out of, the scars I might bear.

I had an option here. I could opt for a simple life, a safe life, a life with somebody who might care enough to live it with me; or, I could opt for a life that would probably get me killed far before my time, but might just be more worth living, a road less traveled. If my training was as inclusive as Schumer made it seem, I could probably get any kind of position I wanted. “When this is over with.”

“Well? Which will it be?” Secomb asked, cutting through the silence. “I’ll have to prepare, whichever it is.”

I looked up at Amy once more, and then turned back to Secomb.

The decision was easier than I thought.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF SELF

The basic premise of this story comes from many late-night ponderings of the concept of “the self.” Whichever philosopher you subscribe to, there is almost always a consensus in that whatever makes you *you* is some kind of balance between your mind and your body. When you die, they will say that you cease to exist, even though your body will still be there – where ever you were the moment you died. You refer to it as “your body,” as if it is simply something you own. If you catch the flu, however, you’ll probably find yourself saying, “I’m sick.”

There may never be an answer to the question of self. It may just be a contrivance of spoken language or a representation of the feebleness of our minds, but it’s certainly worth considering.

I wondered how this debate would be affected if there was a person whose mind and body were ostensibly not his own. If your body was designed by somebody else, and your mind was formed by somebody else, what would there be left to be your own?

In the story, when Chris and Amy discuss this concept (on the way to Costco), they altogether take the positions of three very prominent philosophical figures.

Chris begins by echoing the words of René Descartes, “I think, therefore I am.” Descartes boiled down the essence of reality to one simple fact. The only thing anybody can ever know for certain is that they can think. Anything we see, touch, hear, smell, or taste could be a hallucination or a trick upon our senses, so basically anything we experience might as well be a dream. Thought is the only universal constant, he insinuates, so anything beside it is peripheral. Following that reasoning, we might not even have bodies – at least there’s no way to really prove it.

Amy first takes the position of Aristotle, that the soul of something is defined by its purpose. It is from him that the allegory of the knife comes. If the purpose of a knife is to cut, then cutting is the soul of the knife. A person, being able to control what he does, is then defined by his actions.

Amy then switches to the conclusion of David Hume, that your mind, body, and experiences basically exist in an intangible bundle and that a person is whoever he thinks he is. If you think of yourself as a body with a mind inside,

that's what you are. If you think of yourself as a mind using a body as a mode of transportation, that's what you are.

This is the theory that Chris prefers, as it is independent of such problems of mind/body ownership. He can be whatever he chooses to think of himself as, be it a teenager or a killer.

If I had to choose a theory, I would like to think that we all exist as our minds and that our bodies are simply avatars of our selves that we can use to interact with the world.

Pulling away from philosophy, the sad fact is that we are all just animals roaming the surface of the planet we developed on. Our minds are just something we've developed to protect ourselves and to allow us to better appreciate and dominate our environment. That is, if you believe the things you see, hear, feel, smell, and taste.

ON THE SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY OF MIND+BODY

I feel it is important to note that nearly everything in this story is possible. As a connoisseur of technology, nothing bothers me more in any type of fiction than when the function and capabilities of computers and other gadgets are altered for the sake of a plot.

Anything done with a computer in the story is possible, and can be done with off-the-shelf equipment. I happen to own a Linksys wireless web-camera that can do everything mentioned in the story, and the USB drive used by Chris to copy files from another computer is often referred to as a "USB Switchblade." Though they're usually made to install a hidden mail server onto a computer so keystrokes or files can be recorded and secretly emailed to you, it would certainly be possible to script a program to just search for files and copy them onto the drive.

To prevent this from happening to your own computer, make sure Auto-Run is disabled for any type of media inserted. Alternatively, holding down the Shift key after inserting a CD or USB device will usually prevent it from automatically launching a program, if you're using Windows.

Also, the "phishing" trick used to get Nathan Comstock's email password is very possible and it happens daily to hundreds of people who are duped into giving away passwords, banking info, and credit card numbers.

Whether or not the various social engineering methods used by Chris throughout the story are likely to work is anybody's guess. Remember, though, that people are very likely to believe anything that they think is coming from somebody who *should* know it. If your bank called you to verify your personal details, would you really stop and wonder if the caller is who he says he is?

Hypnosis is presented within the story as accurately as possible. The realities of hypnosis are often stretched (or mutilated) in fiction and I strove to maintain as much realism as I could. It is not possible to hypnotize somebody and instruct him to kill a person or do anything they don't want to; it isn't brainwashing. Training and education via hypnosis are certainly possible, and by establishing code words and by using subconscious memory control, it could be performed as described herein.

The only area where I took liberties was with the genetic engineering elements of the story. While in-vitro fertilization is real and the human genome has been mapped, there's still no reliable way to switch on and off certain attributes.

Austrian Sparbuch accounts do exist as described, though they are now impossible to open with complete anonymity. Obtaining an already-opened account is possible, and there are a few online firms that sell them (though their legitimacy is certainly in question).

Strychnine affects the body as described, assuming the dosage is reasonably low. In a series of rhythmic spasms, motor control is lost as every skeletal muscle in the body contracts at once. Death is usually caused by one breaking his own spine with the convulsions or suffocating from the loss of diaphragm control. Treatment should also be given as described; activated carbon to absorb the remaining poison in the stomach and tranquilizers to reduce the muscle spasm. A victim should be placed on the ground and held still to prevent any blunt traumatic injury, and a victim should **not** be moved as movement is what typically triggers the spasms. Get medical help immediately. They'll probably do exactly what happened in this book.

I hope you enjoyed this story, that you learned something, and maybe laughed a few times too. I'd love to hear any feedback from readers, good or bad. You can contact me and find out about myself and my other projects at www.aarondunlap.com

AARON DUNLAP

