

***Death
AND
CONSPIRACY***

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CHAPTER 1

BRADY BLED OUT RIGHT WHERE he dropped, slumped against the bed with his knees bent and his feet against the wall of the tiny room. Ace stared at the blood. On the other side of Brady, Diego did the same. More blood poured out than Ace had ever seen before. It flowed down Brady's chest and onto the floor where it pooled around his butt. They kept watching as his face faded to lifeless gray. Then they couldn't look anymore.

Ace wiped the razor on Brady's shirt, folded it, and slipped it back in his pocket.

"Had to be done," Ace said.

"Si," his partner replied.

Ace looked up at the small window, canted into the attic roof. He pulled the thin curtain and peered through the gap. Four feet of sheet-metal roofing separated them from their nearest neighbor. In Paris, cheap hotels huddled together like homeless people around a barrel fire.

He checked their surroundings. Nothing moved. No lights. No sounds.

"Clear." Ace nodded. "Nobody's up at this hour."

Diego nodded. Their eyes dropped to Brady again.

"Hell." Ace tugged at his beard. "We'll deal with it. How much did he tell them?"

Diego fished Brady's phone out of the mess, wiped it with his shirttail, and checked. In his thick Spanish accent, he said, "He say not knowing *destino*, ehm, destination."

"Turn that thing off. They could trace it."

Diego checked the nightstand and found a sewing kit. Using the needle, he pushed the SIM card out.

They looked at Brady again. Then at each other.

"Should we abort?" Ace asked. "What am I thinking. Everyone's counting on us. We recalibrate, that's all. We got this."

"Si, we got this." Diego nodded. "We walk instead. Much traffic anyway."

"We use the alternate. We can make it work."

"No difference. We die before hour of lunch anyway."

"Don't be saying that shit." Ace pushed Diego's shoulder. "We go in, spray some lead, run for the river. On foot, that's all. Extra thirty seconds. We got this."

Diego looked down at Brady's blood splattered down his shirt and pants. "I shower."

He handed the phone and SIM card to Ace and slid into the tiny bathroom.

"Yeah, I'll put it on a delivery truck," Ace said to himself. "They'll chase it all over town."

Ace grabbed the duffle bag of their old clothes.

"Hey, give me your stuff." He knocked on the bathroom door and opened it. Diego stood staring at a pocket-sized picture of a pretty girl with short hair. Ace said, "Hey, gimme that too. No trace, remember?"

Diego kissed the girl's picture, then handed it and his clothes to his partner. He said, "Go fast. They find us. Day terminate, eh, before we commence."

"Just get in the damn shower." Ace regretted his sharp tone the instant he said it. With only hours to go, this was a time for unity. "For ROSGEO."

He held out his fist.

Diego observed him for a moment, apparently forgiving him as he did. Then he bumped Ace's fist. "*Para el ROSGEO.*"

Ace marched through the hall and creaked down the worn, ancient stairway to the lobby. Outside, he started looking for an unlocked delivery vehicle. The streets were empty. The scent of baking pastries wafted his way. So did the smell of garbage as he passed trashcans set out for pickup. Which meant there had to be a garbage truck somewhere nearby. He kept walking.

The tension in the back of his mind came to the fore as he strode down the cobblestones. He couldn't believe Brady was a snitch. How had that gotten past everyone? Maybe someone in the leadership knew about him. Maybe there was another traitor in their ranks who'd protected Brady. He pushed it out of his mind. Useless to ponder that question at this point. When he and Diego returned, hailed as heroes, they'd ask questions then. And there would be hell to pay.

He concentrated on the task at hand. Everyone was counting on them to put things in motion. They had a contingency plan in case Brady didn't show. They always knew the car would be risky. Cops. Blockades. Breakdowns. They'd just do it on foot. No problem.

He visualized their secondary route. He could see the scene as if he were a bird just over their shoulders. They walk into the narthex, calm and easy. They shed the tan overcoats. Now they're raising their rifles, flipping the switch to full auto, down the center aisle, firing left and right and behind. All the time, keeping a wary eye out for hero-wannabes. Put people down quickly. The magazines run dry. Toss the empty rifles. They shout their phrases for the survivors to remember and fear. They run out through the north transept. Dumping the second overcoat, the black one, they run hard across the sidewalk. A right on Rue Saint-Sulpice, left on Rue Mabillon, through the little mall, walking now, crossing Boulevard Saint Germain, to Rue de Seine. From there, five hundred yards to the river on a sunny spring morning. Their man waits in a red boat. They step aboard. Done.

Should they save time by skipping the overcoat ruse? Nah. People see men in tan come in, they see men in black do the shooting, they see men in t-shirts leaving. The key to survival is not looking like the guys who killed a hundred people.

A hundred people. Ace liked that. They'd be at the top of the list. Above Oslo. Above Christchurch.

Ace came out of his meditation and looked around. No garbage trucks. A street sweeper the size of a Mini Cooper rounded the corner ahead of him. It moved as slowly as an old lady with a walker.

He put the SIM card back in Brady's phone and turned it back on. He lifted the flap on the back of the sweeper as he rounded it. Without breaking stride, he tossed in Brady's phone and watched it drive away. Two blocks later, he dumped the duffel full of their old clothes and their phones in a dumpster. He took a circuitous route, checking for anyone following or watching. He was clean by the time he got back.

Diego leaned against the window. He had his gear on. His rifle was neatly concealed inside the tan overcoat, the black coat underneath that. He fingered a string of beads and mumbled to himself in Spanish.

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Ace's overcoats and rifle lay on the bed. Diego had set it all out for him. Nice, but with six hours to go, he didn't feel like suiting up.

"Where'd you think we're going, huh?" Ace waved his hands in the air. "You think we're gonna walk around like that until it's time?"

Diego nodded at the gear. "No stay here." Then he looked at Brady and sniffed.

Ace checked out the corpse. Brady smelled like shit. Literally. He'd forgotten, dead people crap their pants when they die.

Diego held out his fist. "ROSGEO *por siempre*."

Ace knew his partner was right. If they were committed to the cause, staying in the room was a risk that could jeopardize the mission. He bumped Diego's fist. "ROSGEO forever."

CHAPTER 2

SOMETHING WENT WRONG WITH MY girlfriend.

I trudged along the stone-paved streets at dawn wearing my blue jeans and black leather jacket over a t-shirt that read, “That which does not kill me—should run.” I was thinking things over. There were no real indicators I could put my finger on, but when I said we should step out for coffee, Jenny offered to join me “later.” Something in her tone of voice. Something in her distant gaze.

What happened? Last night we were thirsty for each other. I did my Julius Caesar impression, *Vini, Vidi, Vici*. She channeled the Whore of Babylon. Laughter and romping ensued.

This morning, she was different.

A shop lady dragged a stand filled with bouquets onto the sidewalk in front of her store. Figuring flowers might perk Jenny up, I picked one. The lady took one look at my face, smiled, and told me they were free for lovers. At least, I think that’s what she said. I studied Arabic and Pashto to get through my eight tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. French never came up. I thanked her, sniffed the bouquet, and kept strolling.

We’d had a storybook romance, the kind you read about in romance novels. If you read that kind of thing. Which I don’t. So, I guess it was how I imagined a storybook romance goes. I’d saved her mother’s life, which led to Jenny getting a pardon. As soon as she got out of prison, she came to my house to say thank you in person. Come to think of it, that doesn’t sound like a storybook romance at all. Anyway. One thing led to another. Two weeks later, I invited her for a getaway weekend. I was thinking something like a bed-and-breakfast in the Shenandoah Valley. Cozy and affordable and nearby.

Then I made the mistake of telling my boss, Pia Sabel, about my plans. She thought Jenny Jenkins would prefer Paris. After all, Jenny’s the daughter of Bobby Jenkins, the billionaire drug lord—I mean, founder of Jenkins Pharmaceuticals. Since no one can say no to Ms. Sabel, especially when she insists on paying and providing a private jet, the next thing I knew we were in Paris, staying in the Hotel Lutetia on the Left Bank.

It turned out Jenny had been to Paris so many times it was like going to Walgreens. Her dad rented out Napoleon’s Tomb for her ninth birthday. For my ninth, Dad filled a barn bin with dried soybeans so we could jump in them. Things are different for farm boys in Iowa.

There was an upside. Instead of going to see the fire damage at Notre Dame or visiting the Louvre, she wanted to spend the entire trip in bed. I was fine with that.

Then this morning happened.

My brain came back to the street in front of me. Two men hauled tables and chairs out of a café and placed them on the sidewalk. I put my flowers on a table and dropped into a wicker chair. One of the men said something about not being open yet, but the other guy pulled him away.

I said, *What did I do wrong? I made sure she was satisfied several times over. Wait. She wasn’t*

faking it, was she?

Mercury, winged messenger of the Roman gods, pulled up a chair next to me. *If she be faking an orgasm when you're going downtown like a Detroit rapper, who is she cheating?*

Sometimes it's nice to have a god you can chat with. Most of them are invisible and mute. I enjoy our little chats. Sometimes. But every now and then, the diagnosis of my Army psychiatrists rolls through my head like a thunderstorm. "PTSD-induced schizophrenia," they said. Yeah. Well. What do they know? The guys who served with me in combat considered me divinely inspired.

Mercury first came to my aid in a battle where a company of Iraqi Republican Guards had pinned down a Marine platoon. I'd been separated from my Army Ranger unit and had snuck through the combat zone lost, scared, and confused. Then, with Mercury whispering in my ear, telling me where to aim, I took out half the Iraqis attacking the Marines and scattered the rest. The Marines loved me. I got medals. From then on, my heavenly powers on the battlefield made me the soldier's soldier. Everybody wanted to transfer to my platoon.

All Mercury wanted was to return to his former glory. Just kick Christianity to the curb and reinstate the whole Roman pantheon. No problem. After fifteen hundred years, he and his buddies were done with living on food stamps and desperate for a reunion tour.

I said, *Is it me? Too much of a socio-economic divide?*

Mercury leaned in. *You want a woman like that, brutha? Really want a woman like that? Then you gotta think like a Caesar.*

I said, *I'm her master and commander in the bedroom.*

Sheeyit, dawg. Mercury rolled his eyes and leaned back. (Did I mention he's black? He cites the Judeo-Christian Bible, where it says God made man in His image. Mercury points out that the Great Leap Forward happened in Southern Africa. There were no white people in Southern Africa in the days of Adam and Eve. Therefore, all gods are black. Yeah, took me a while too—but facts are facts.) *I'm talking real Caesar, not just another white dude whipping out some cheap leather gear in a hotel room. I'm talking invading nations, burning villages, raping, pillaging...*

And that's where I tune him out. Certain aspects of civilized behavior have changed a good deal since he whispered in the ears of the rich and powerful.

I texted Jenny that I was waiting for her at the *Café de la Mairie*. She didn't reply.

Ever listen to some old guy go on about winning the state championship back in high school? Try spending an hour listening to a used god talk about the good ol' days when Julius Caesar defeated the official Roman Army under Pompey—not because he should but because he could.

Mercury said, *And that's how Julius Caesar became emperor. The lesson here is: Kill everyone who defies you.*

I said, *How'd that work out for ol' Julius in the end?*

The streets began to fill with enough vehicles to start the rhythmic honking cycles peculiar to big cities. It sounded a lot like that Broadway tune by George Gershwin. What was it called? "An American in ..." somewhere.

There were no texts from Jenny on my phone when I checked for the three hundredth time. I sent her a picture of the menu and asked if she wanted me to order for her. No response.

Mercury said, *There they go again. Those two clowns been circling the block all morning, dressed like Siberians.*

I had a croissant with jam and a coffee. Alone.

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Are you listening to me, homie?

Mercury's supposed to be the god of eloquence, but tutoring William Shakespeare four hundred years ago didn't work out for his resurrection, so he tried channeling inner-city kids. He thinks he sounds like Dr. Dre, but he comes off more like Eminem will in forty years. Desperately dated.

I'm telling you, Mercury said, those two are your ticket to fame. You kill them, and the press will love you. Glory will be ours!

Having lost track of which two people he wanted me to kill, I said, *Jenny doesn't care about glory.*

The sun rose higher in the sky. The waiter brought more coffee. People going places began to fill the sidewalk. Singles, couples, families. It was Sunday, and many of them were filing into one big-ass church across the street.

Mercury said, *What's the big deal about this here girl has you so distracted, brutha?*

I said, *Remember when I rescued her mom from the assassins? Back when she was an admiral. The brass tends to expect a concierge rescue. But not Admiral Wilkes. She fought and ran and knocked out bad guys like a superhero. That woman was determined to get out of there. I was impressed. When Jenny showed up, I realized the apple didn't fall far from the tree. She was just as determined and driven as her mom. A woman like that, you can build a life together. A real partnership. We could grow old without the flame dying out.*

Mercury said, *Determined? Driven? You really want a woman like that, dude? Nothing but trouble if you ask me. In my day, women didn't read, they didn't vote, they didn't talk back. We had a good thing going and y'all messed it up.*

My phone's screen was blank. Still no word from Jenny.

I said, *Maybe she needs something more than just sex?*

Mercury said, *What else is there?*

I dunno, I said. Like therapy or something. She had a traumatic year. Maybe she needs help with her mental health.

Mercury said, *What would you know about mental health?*

The waiter brought a vase for my bouquet. It was wilting. I gave him a nod. *"Merci."*

Pretty much the extent of my French vocabulary.

I was stuck. If I went back now, I'd look insecure, worried. If I kept my cool, acted unconcerned, maybe she'd come around. Maybe she'd text me back.

Ugh. I hate playing games. Unless I win.

See here now, bro. You need to take down those terrorists with the two coats. Mercury nodded at the men he'd pointed out earlier. *You can be a hero again.*

I said, *What makes you think they're terrorists?*

Mercury said, *They radiate hate.*

Across the lane was a large, open plaza. In the center stood a massive chunk of marble with statues of ancient Frenchmen in niches surrounded by water splashing from a central fountain. The Frenchmen were probably important at some point in the history of the area, but now they were just a backdrop for selfies.

Two guys stood next to the fountain. They stole glances at the cathedral doors. They had black hair and beards. One had a swarthy, Mediterranean look. The other looked distinctly American. They kept their heads down, their hands shoved in their coat pockets. Their overcoats were heavy enough

for winter, but it was a sunny spring day.

Maybe Jenny was worried about the paparazzi. We'd been swarmed outside our hotel. Again later when we went out to dinner. Neither of us is a celebrity, but her divorced parents are minor tabloid material. Jenkins Pharma sold a questionable number of opiates, and her mom is now the Vice President of the United States. Which is why there'd been plenty of controversy over Jenny's pardon.

The paparazzi couldn't be it. I'd shared Ms. Sabel's advice for dealing with tabloid photographers with Jenny. Ms. Sabel told me to smile for the cameras because (a) they hate that, and (b) they'll print it anyway so you may as well look good. Jenny still hated them.

I thought about going to church. I checked the name of the one across the street. *Église Saint-Sulpice*. I invited Jenny in a text. We hadn't discussed religion, and she didn't seem the type, but if she was mad at me, where better to work things out? She was the kind of woman worth working things out for. The kind worth having an intimate relationship with. Someone you could tell all your secrets to. Or is it, someone to whom you could tell all your secrets? I never get that stuff right. Maybe she didn't like my grammar.

Mercury grabbed my hair and pulled my head up out of my phone. He pointed at the two guys. *Quit thinking about getting laid and ask yourself the million-dollar question: why two coats?*

Shoplifters wear overcoats. It gives them room for all their stolen merchandise. So do mass shooters. Coats cover weapons.

The shorter guy fiddled with a string of beads. Sweat dripped from his forehead. He mumbled to himself. The American looked calmer, yet significantly more agitated than your average churchgoer. My military training included a good deal about recognizing terrorists. They often say prayers. They're often quite nervous. They often sulk to avoid notice.

Either these two were sinners in desperate need of redemption ... or they were terrorists.

I found myself crossing the street, heading for the fountain. At the same time, the two men headed for the church. As he pushed off, the short guy tossed his beads into the water.

It was a wide plaza, and they had a shorter distance. I changed course to intercept them. Being unarmed put me at a disadvantage. But they had the terrorist's tunnel vision. Their eyes remained glued to the entrance. Nothing around them mattered anymore.

A few people in nice clothes funneled up the steps and filed through the massive front door, each taking a bulletin from the greeters. None of them wore more than a light sport coat.

The overcoat guys slowed and hung back. When the funnel cleared, the greeters at the door waited. The overcoat guys trotted up the steps and entered without taking the offered bulletin. Without a bulletin, they would have no idea which hymns to sing. Definitely terrorists.

I bounded up the steps, full throttle.

CHAPTER 3

THEY WERE SHEDDING THEIR COATS as I transitioned from the bright daylight to the dark interior. My vision was off, but I could sense they had rifles out and raised. I jumped and tackled the shorter guy. My arms wrapped around his back and slammed his elbows to his chest. The move drove the rifle stock under his arm and jerked the muzzle of his weapon upward just as he fired on full auto. His bullets hit the ceiling.

He yelled a loud curse that ended when his face hit the marble floor. Our combined body weight drove him in hard enough to leave a dent.

His partner wheeled around and leveled a Beretta AR70/90 at my head. An automatic rifle used by the Italian military that's capable of firing over 600 NATO rounds per minute. NATO bullets are high-velocity rounds that tumble on impact, destroying all bone and tissue on their way through the human body. They're designed to kill an enemy without requiring a direct hit.

I stuck my knee in my victim's butt, grabbed his shirt collar, and yanked him back hard. His backbone cracked as it bent backward. The man's body shielded mine. His partner froze for a second.

Rapid, panicked exits weren't a high priority for seventeenth century church builders. Worse, the nave didn't have fixed pews like modern churches. It had wooden chairs. When everyone started screaming and scrambling for the exits, they turned over chairs and crushed into each other. They gridlocked the space in seconds.

The guy in my grip tried to shake me off. I held firm. He pulled the trigger again, sending a spray tinkling through a stained-glass window high in the vaulted ceiling. He yelled, "*Allahu akbar!*"

He tried to fire again. I fought and managed to wrestle the barrel under his chin. He panted and squirmed.

"Let him go," the other guy shouted in perfect English.

I said, "Drop your weapon or die."

The guy in my grip tried to repeat *God is the greatest* in Arabic again. His accent was terrible. I pulled harder on his collar, cranking his backbone farther to maximize his pain. He stopped.

The American's eyes shot around the room. The crowd had stumbled and fallen, people and chairs sprawled in every direction. Some folks desperately reached for the elderly and the children, compounding the problem by blocking the narrow aisles for the quick.

The American's eyes came back to me, filled with hate and anger. "Turn him loose, or I let you both have it."

"I'm a former Ranger. I can kill you before you can blink. Drop the weapon. NOW."

I could see the gears in his head turning while he thought it over. He came to the wrong conclusion. He turned to the crowd pinned against the stone walls. A third of them found protection behind the thick stone arches. The rest were exposed. He raised his rifle.

With an extra-hard yank on my victim's collar, I freed the muzzle and wrapped my hand around his. His finger was still inside the trigger guard. I squeezed. Three poorly aimed bullets fired off. My worst fear, hitting an innocent civilian, didn't happen. My best hope, killing the American, didn't happen either. Instead, the bullets clanged off the organ pipes at the far end of the church. The metal vibrated with dissonance.

Shrieks and screams reached a fever pitch. Worshippers squeezed behind the pillars. The children's piercing cries rose like a descant to the adult howls.

The American's furious eyes swung back to me over the iron sights of his Beretta. The muzzle pointed directly at me; his finger squeezed. I pressed my victim's finger and tried to roll. Rounds spewed from both weapons. The American's bullets struck my human shield with a wet slap, exiting with the crunch of broken ribs.

My aim had improved—considering I wasn't the one holding the rifle. A couple of my rounds missed but three of them hit and put the American on the ground.

Dropping the carcass in my grip, I pried his Beretta from his dying hands. I staggered to my feet and trained the AR70/90 at the American. He didn't move, but he held his weapon close. I approached cautiously, expecting a trick.

The congregation had stopped screaming. There were plenty of kids still crying. Their wails reverberated in the stone chamber. Parents huddled over, shielding the little ones with their bodies. No one wanted to face the danger or see a bullet coming.

I kicked the rifle away from the American. He made no attempt to hold on. I stepped closer and saw the back of his skull lying ten feet down the center aisle.

I flipped the Beretta's safety on. I turned to the people on the left. "It's OK. You're safe. No more danger."

Slowly, people began to peep around the stone pillars. What just happened wasn't clear to them. They looked at me, then at the gore, and then back at me, and back at the gore.

Mercury twisted his head to examine the American. *Whoeee, dawg! We're gonna be famous now. You saved a whole bunch of Christians from these ... these ... what are these guys?*

I said, I don't know. That guy was trying to speak Arabic but it's not his first language.

Whatever they are, I can't wait to tell Jesus about this. Oh brutha, he's gonna owe me big time.

You mean He isn't here? I looked around the ancient church filled with sacred art.

Mercury looked at me like I'd farted. *You serious right now, homie? You think he hangs in a place like this? He's all about lepers and hookers and homeless people. Mercury looked to the ceiling. I had me nicer places than this back in Rome, y'know. And I stayed in them all the time, too. None of this associating-with-losers bullshit. Gotta be available to your peeps, right?*

An angry official shouted behind me. His tone caught me by surprise. I didn't need to speak the language to realize what was going down. The AR70/90 was still in my hands. To the first responders, I had every appearance of being an active shooter. The shouts continued, two or three guys yelling at me simultaneously. The faithful started wailing again. With any luck, some of them would defuse the situation by explaining my heroic acts. If they saw anything from behind the stone arches.

It occurred to me that I could explain things in a reasonable tone. The police might understand, lift me on their shoulders, and carry me outside to a hero's welcome.

Or, none of them spoke English and I could get shot by a nervous cop.

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Surrendering has its advantages. Like, living until lunchtime.

I spread my arms out wide, lowered my knees until the rifle butt touched the marble, then gently laid down the weapon. I raised my hands slowly, knitted my fingers, and put them on top of my head. My knees touched the floor as many booted footsteps rushed in behind me.

The police were not gentle. They tackled me, forcing my face to the floor. My hands were yanked behind me. Cuffs snapped on my wrists. Shackles clicked around my ankles. Someone grabbed me by the hair and yanked my head up. An angry face met mine, shouting French insults and swear words. Spittle flew from his lips, landing in my eye and covering my cheek.

A well-dressed, handsome lady ran to my aid. She spewed what sounded to me like a lengthy rebuke at the officer.

Then she spat on me.

At first, I thought she must have been spitting on the other American and missed. Then she kicked me. She shouted, "*Va te faire foutre!*"

It was a phrase I wasn't familiar with, but given her tone and delivery, I figured it meant, *Go fuck yourself.*

Swearing in church. What has the world come to? Then I realized, the worshippers had huddled together, seeking cover behind the supports and shielding each other. Not the best vantage point for observing what was going on in the nave. They misunderstood what had transpired.

A young couple came to my defense. I think. They appeared to be arguing with some of the cops and the old lady. They were all pushed back to the sides.

The cop dropped my head on the marble like a melon. Only a thin layer of blood cushioned my fall.

Mercury got on his hands and knees and lowered his face to the floor. *How did you manage to mess this one up, dawg? Couldn't drop the rifle before the cops showed up?*

I said, *I secured the area.*

All she saw was you and a weapon. Mercury stood and dusted his hands. *Well, they're gonna give you the Marie Antoinette treatment, so I gotta find someone else to evangelize for me. Good luck, homie. It's been nice.*

WAIT! Aren't you going to help me? Can't you get me out of this?

"Américain?" the cop asked. "Get you out? Most certainly."

Two guys grabbed my arms and yanked me to my feet. A fist landed on my right cheek.

I made no move to defend myself. More punches landed in my breadbasket. After the man in charge finished with me, they swung me around and dragged me outside. Other officers pushed the so-called Christians back and taped off the area around the bodies. As we exited the building, I looked up at a clock over the front door. A video camera sat on top of it.

I said, "Tell me that thing's on."

CHAPTER 4

THEY SHOVED ME INTO THE sliding door of an ambulance. A medic approached. I stole a glance at the *Café de la Mairie* across the street. I'd left my phone and bouquet over there, not to mention a small bill for breakfast. I wondered if Jenny had arrived. A quick scan of the guests told me no. With my luck, she probably texted me while I was busy doing my hero-not-hero schtick.

The cop in charge blasted a few questions my way. I could tell they were questions because his voice went higher at the end of each rant, along with his furry eyebrows. He was heavy for a Frenchman with a thick, gray mustache and a paunch. The men around him snickered. The medic pushed them aside, opened his ambulance, and grabbed gloves. He peeled my jacket down to the cuffs.

"I'm not hurt," I said.

"We must check just the same," the medic said with a light accent and a bit of a lilt. He craned over his shoulder at the big cop. "Major Pavard, our suspect speaks English, you know."

Major Pavard, my inquisitor, grunted.

The medic lifted my t-shirt and raised his brow, the way women do, when he saw my abs. "*Quoi*. We are working out most regular, no?"

"Thanks. My boss was a world-class athlete. She insists we stay in shape. What's with Major Pavard?"

He said, "Pavard speaks the English—when he wants to. He thinks only of French dominance. Turn around."

I complied and lifted my cuffed hands.

After a second, he dropped my shirt and turned me back to face him. "All the bullets flying, yet you are not wounded?"

"Aside from Pavard throwing a few punches, no."

"We must check for the internal injuries."

"I don't have any. I'm fine."

The guy leaned in close enough for me to smell his fancy cologne. "We are stalling. Pavard's superior comes this way soon. A more civilized man."

When I'm in France, I can never tell which guys are gay. Not that I care. I'd rather not waste their time. I'm a friendly Midwesterner from a small town, an attitude that is sometimes mistaken for interest. I've ended up in a couple of awkward situations.

"Would you mind wiping the blood off my face?" I asked. "My girlfriend is supposed to meet me in a few. I don't want to look like a serial killer."

His attitude changed dramatically at the reference to Jenny. He sounded a bit huffy when he said, "Of course. Right away."

Mercury looked over the medic's shoulder. *Aw, dawg. Rude to brush the guy off like that. Benoît*

here dances at the Moulin Rouge on his days off. You might want to catch his act.

Not my style, I said. I thought you dumped me. Again.

That was before Lieutenant Colonel Hugo took an interest in our exploits. Mercury slapped my shoulder and nodded at a newly arrived officer who was making a grand entrance. Guy like him might turn your fortunes around, get things going. With the right presentation, we could put you on a path to Caesar-hood.

The ranks of cops surrounding me broke their shoulder-to-shoulder formation. Two guys walked through the line. One was a thin, middle-aged Frenchman wearing a military uniform with the bearing of a king. The other was a short, wiry, bald guy with a piercing gaze, business casual khakis, and a blue button-down. The king-guy held a tablet under his arm.

Pavard met them with a scowl. The king-guy made a formal introduction in French. The only part I recognized was *Lieutenant Colonel*. The king-guy held out his tablet, but Pavard waved it away. Pavard stroked his mustache as he drooped an inch. He backed up and said something to his men. One of them trotted to me and removed my cuffs and shackles.

Benoît wiped the last traces of blood off my forehead, dried it, brushed my short hair back, and looked me over. He broke a smile. "Well. Are you not the most important of men?"

"Most of the time, I'm the only one who thinks so."

"If your girlfriend does not think so, I can show you the best side of Paris."

"I'll keep that in mind." I shook his hand. "Thanks for your help, Benoît."

After the shock that I knew his name wore off, he tucked a card in my pocket and pushed me out of his ambulance.

The king-guy stood directly in front of me. The short, bald guy kept back a yard, his piercing eyes never leaving mine. Pavard's officers kept a loose circle around us, as much to keep the press and onlookers away as to keep me from running.

"You are in France for what purpose?" the king-guy asked.

"To kill bad guys," I said.

"You are going to IDC, yes?" the Hugo asked.

"Sorry, Hugo, I don't know what IDC means." I stole another glance at the *Café de la Mairie*. No Jenny.

He ignored my use of his name. "You have been in contact with IBÖ?"

He and the bald guy leaned in forming a tight triangle with me.

I said, "No idea what you're talking about."

"Come now, Mr. Stearne. We know you are connected with *Identitäre Bewegung Österreich*."

"That German or something?"

"Austrian. Perhaps you know them in English as *Identitarian Movement Austria*."

I tossed my hands up. "You looked me up. You know my record. You've reviewed the church video, which means you know I saved fifty lives in there." I pointed at the cathedral. "You're testing me for some reason. Why not just talk to me?"

The bald guy turned away to hide a smile growing across his face.

"I am asking questions," Hugo said in a commanding voice. "You are answering. Are you contacting Free Origins, Birth Right, or Fair Heritage while you are in Paris?"

"I'm done answering questions." I used my commanding voice. "I want a lawyer."

Uh. Dude. Mercury leaned around the Frenchman. *This is France, not the USA. There is no 'I*

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wanna lawyer' trick. They can question you for three days before giving you food and water. And this guy is ready to go there.

"You are working for Sabel Security, yes?" Hugo asked. He and his sidekick backed up a step, giving us all a little air.

"I'm on vacation," I answered.

"And you are the specialist of security for Pia Sabel, correct?"

"Yes."

"And she sends you to Europe for the Identity Defense Conference, oui?" His slip into French indicated his annoyance with my reluctant answers.

"No."

He crossed his arms and leaned back. "Do enlighten me, Mr. Stearne. Why did Ms. Sabel send her chief of operations special to Paris?"

His accent was getting thicker. He pronounced special as *spess-ee-ahl* and Paris as *Par-ee*. Must have been very annoyed with me.

"She liked how I handled a recent operation and gifted me a little romantic getaway with my girlfriend."

"Girlfriend?" His eyes narrowed. "Her name is ...?"

"Jenny Jenkins." I scanned the café for her again. No Jenny. I sighed.

"Jenny Jenkins? A most familiar name." Hugo looked pensive and scratched his chin. Then he wagged his finger at me. "Ah. The recent controversy of the American president? She murdered a man, oui? She is the woman pardoned under questionable circumstances. This Jenny Jenkins?"

"Yeah." I ran my fingers through my hair. It didn't feel good when people brought up her past. I mean, ever since she stuck a pistol in a guy's eye socket and pulled the trigger, everybody thinks she's gone bad.

Hugo turned to the bald guy, who shrugged.

"Look, if you're not going to give me a medal, then I'm outta here."

I hooked a finger in my jacket and tossed it over my shoulder. With a push off my back foot, I started forward.

And stepped directly into Hugo's hand.

"Why do you make assumptions that we have reviewed your record?" he asked.

"You're a high-ranking GIGN officer, or something close to it. You brought a CIA guy from the embassy with you." I gave the bald guy a nod; he scowled right back at me. "You have the video on that tablet in your hand. You offered to show Pavard, but he refused to question you because of your rank. Pavard had me released right away. That means you know what went down in the church. If I cared, I'd ask about your interest in all those things you asked me about. But I don't. So, may I go—sir?"

Hugo stared at me, still pressing his hand in my chest while he thought about what I'd said. "How do you know *Groupe d'intervention de la Gendarmerie nationale*, GIGN?"

"You guys handle terrorist attacks like this one and the intelligence on the groups that sponsor them," I said to impress him. It didn't work. He waited for an answer to his question. "We studied your handling of the Air France 8969 hijacking in Ranger School. Takes some balls to mount an operation like that and stick the landing."

Confusion twisted Hugo's face. He turned to the bald guy and said something in French. The bald

guy answered him in flawless French. Hugo faced me again.

“Ah, ‘stick the landing’ is a good thing.” He gave me the faintest smile of all time. “We are releasing you into the custody of your embassy representative. You are not to leave Paris until our investigation is complete.”

“What?” My voice goes high when I’m pissed. “Turning me over to the CIA instead of thanking me? What is this?”

“This—” he moved his hand to my shoulder and squeezed the way my dad does when he’s proud of me “—is a favor you will do for France. And it is your only alternative to being Pavard’s guest for several days. Your embassy’s representative will explain.”

With a more genuine smile and a twinkle in his eye, he walked away, leaving me face-to-face with a pissed-off bald guy.

CHAPTER 5

“I’M ZACK AMES, AGRICULTURAL ATTACHÉ for the Foreign Agriculture Service.” He put out a hand while trying to drill a hole in my head with his gaze.

“Agriculture? Really?” I looked at his hand without reciprocating. His name brought a memory of him back to the surface. Even though we’d never met, I knew about Zack Ames. “You’re CIA. Why are you here?”

He tightened up his eyes and mouth and spoke through clenched teeth. “Agricultural attaché.”

“Sticking with it, huh? OK, test question. I take the corn head off my combine and put on the draper. Why?” I leaned over him. At six-one, I had enough height to cast a shadow on his face. The physical menace didn’t intimidate him in the least.

But the question did. He stammered.

“I’ll give you a hint,” I said. “It’s late September when I change the heads.”

He stuttered but couldn’t come up with anything.

“Time’s up.” I stuck a finger in his chest and pushed him back a step. “Corn heads are used to harvest corn. Drapers are used for wheat. If you’d ever set foot on a farm, you’d know that. Agricultural attaché, my ass. You analyze terrorist threats as a liaison to the GIGN. You knew this shooting was about to happen, and were supposed to stop it, but you blew it.”

“What makes you say that?” His face betrayed him. I’d nailed it.

“Not ready to level with me? Want to debate Case versus Deere?” I waited while he considered bluffing his way through. “They’re the Chevy and Ford of farm equipment.”

“Look.” Ames huffed and glanced away. “Your record’s impressive. You’ve got a Distinguished Service Cross and a bunch of Bronze Stars from your time with the Rangers, so I’m going to tell you the truth. But this goes nowhere. Nowhere. Not to Pia Sabel. Not even Jenny Jenkins. Got me?”

I glanced at the café. My waiter stood by my table, looking at the things I’d left behind. “Talk to me while we walk.”

“Wait a second.” He lifted his chin as if daring me to punch him. “You’re in my custody. We’re going where I want.”

“You want a cup of coffee, Zack.” I crossed the street. My memory of Zack Ames returned to me in bits and pieces until I stitched it all together.

“First, you have to level with me.” He trotted to catch up. “Have you heard of the Identitarian Movement?”

“No.” I waved to the waiter. He spotted me and smiled.

Ames stopped talking as we neared my old table. I ordered coffees and croissants for both of us. God only knows how the French live on a single pastry for breakfast. Maybe that’s why they’re all thin. I looked around. No one nearby had a belly hanging over their belt. Huh.

I sat down and checked my phone. Nothing from Jenny.

I looked at Ames. "Tell me about this identity thing, or I jump bail on you."

There was a text from Ms. Sabel. She asked what happened. It was five in the morning back in Washington, DC. I guessed her life-long insomnia had not improved in my absence. Her sixth sense for trouble hadn't dulled, either. I texted back about taking down a couple terrorists before breakfast. I put the phone down and rolled my hand for the short guy to start talking.

Zack Ames said, "There are a bunch of small, right-wing political parties in the European Union. They've been moving ever further to the right over the last three to four years. They're xenophobes who want to retreat into a Balkanized economy circa 1912. Brexit is the mainstream version. All of that is just political opinion, neither right nor wrong.

"But a more sinister side developed around the immigration issue. There are legitimate arguments one can make about immigration based on how many new people a society can absorb. Racist views often creep into the arguments. Anti-immigration is not automatically racist. It's often a concern about unemployment rates and financial burden. But the controversy gives cover to the more vehement racists. Some splinter groups gave up on democracy and openly advocate violence. The political parties distanced themselves from the violent factions a while back, stranding and isolating the outliers.

"Not long ago, some of the more radical groups reached out to each other. But it's been a shaky marriage because they hate everyone. The Greek splinter groups denigrated the Jews, Muslims, Asians, Blacks, and Italians. The Italians hate the same groups and include the French. The French include the Germans, and the Germans include the Spanish. And so it goes. About a year ago, they realized there was strength in a united front. They decided to form a union. The irony that they were advocating leaving the EU to form an EU of their own was lost on them."

"Idiots are a dime a dozen," I said. "How's that my problem?"

"I'm getting to that." Zack looked around to check for eavesdroppers.

When he was satisfied, he said, "The danger began when they banded together to advocate violence against their common enemies. They attracted donations and amassed a significant fund from wealthy backers. A large meeting of the leaders and activists took place last year in Kraków. People came from all over the world. One guy left the meeting and shot up a synagogue. Another guy left and defaced a mosque."

"Sounds like some guys who need to be in jail. What's Europol doing about it?"

"They don't have anything actionable." Zack gave me an impatient glance. "Let me finish."

Our coffees and croissants arrived. Zack stopped talking while the waiter was near.

When his idea of danger passed, Ames went on. "We didn't get much intel on the meeting in Kraków. The new regime in Poland is not friendly to the US intel community. We know the Identitarians fought over strategy and split into three distinct groups. They were antagonistic toward each other. They fought in the streets and several young men were arrested. One attendee came to the authorities in Slovakia, disgusted with the more violent direction the groups were taking, and told them what was going on. But he'd left the sessions early and didn't know the details. The Slovaks came to believe a large-scale attack had been planned at that meeting. They think it's coming down soon. Maybe this month. Trouble is, we have no visibility into that community."

"You don't know where to focus." I finished my coffee. "Why do you believe the Slovaks?"

"Because a large number of attendees went dark after Kraków." Zack gave me a grave look. "Diego and Ace, the codenames used by the two guys you took down, were at that meeting. Those

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names won't be released publicly. Keep them to yourself. After they left Poland, we tracked them for a while. Ace went back to his home in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. Diego went back to Málaga, Spain. They dropped off the grid a couple weeks later. We think today was a test run for the main event. Ace and Diego are the tip of the iceberg. We think there's an international group of radicalized racists out there hiding in plain sight. Ace and Diego weren't the only ones to disappear last year—a total of sixty-eight of them from Kraków are smoke in the wind."

"You didn't know these two guys left home until they resurfaced last week in Paris." I put some jam on my croissant and took a big bite. Delicious.

"Worse." Zack sipped his coffee. "Facial recognition didn't catch Ace until he reached Heathrow yesterday morning. He took the Chunnel to Paris in the afternoon. Diego showed up at Orly Airport about the same time."

"You knew they were in town. Why not arrest them?"

"For what?" he asked. "We raised the alarm but didn't know the target. And these guys were good. They arrived in Paris at rush hour, changed looks and clothes, walked in crowds with their heads down, and—"

"You lost them quicker than Osama bin Laden."

"Hey, we found bin Laden."

"Ten years later."

He clenched his coffee mug and let out an angry breath. "What do you have against the Company, Stearne?"

"Nine dead soldiers from botched intel." I leaned in to make sure he felt my heat. "When you torture prisoners, they tell you whatever you want to hear. But that's your problem. When you send men into battle based on your unconfirmed fiction, it becomes a crime."

He put his hands up in surrender and shook his head several times while he gathered the guts to reply. "I didn't have anything to do with that."

I leaned back. "Let's pretend the Zack Ames I traced seven years ago was a different guy. You were never at the CIA's Cat's Eye prison in Thailand. You didn't transfer to Cobalt prison in Afghanistan. You weren't the Zack Ames who provided intelligence gleaned from torture for the Battle of Wanat in Nuristan. You're a different guy. OK. Let's play your game that way. What do you want from me, Zack?"

He composed himself. Enough time had passed to justify his war crimes in his head. He could probably pass a polygraph. He sipped his coffee and leaned back in his chair. "We need to find out where the other sixty-five radicals went."

I turned over his words for the real meaning. Tracking terrorists was his job. Killing them was Hugo's. I came along and saw something going down. I acted. Right place, right time. Hugo and Ames benefitted from my actions. But. How did that bring me into Ames's world?

"Why does the CIA want me?" I asked. "Don't you have your own guys for that kind of work?"

"We're in a tight spot." He shook his head with exasperation. "The last administration blew a lot of relationships and devalued the Company. Lots of good people left. We're low on personnel and low on international relationships. You have a Distinguished Service Cross, which speaks volumes about your qualifications. You're our best hope, Jacob."

"Hope for what?" I asked.

Zack drank his coffee.

Mercury pulled up a chair and straddled it. *You don't get it, brutha? He wants you on the inside.*

"Holy shit ... You want me to infiltrate these guys?"

Ames said, "A soldier like you could get into their inner circle."

Mercury said, *What could possibly go wrong with a CIA undercover operation? Think of the institutional brilliance they bring to the party: The Bay of Pigs, the Shah of Iran, Allende in Chile, Noriega in Panama, the Chinese Embassy in Kosovo ...*

"How the hell would I get into their inner circle?" I asked.

"There's a conference coming up. The one Hugo mentioned, the Identity Defense Conference. All three suspected groups from Kraków will be there along with a thousand ordinary European and American citizens. There are probably twenty splinter groups among them, but the big three are Free Origins, Birth Right, and Fair Heritage. One of those groups is the one we're interested in; we just don't know which one. Our intel leads us to believe they're in dire need of expertise. You get to know a couple of the leaders and sweet-talk—"

"Whoa!" I nearly fell off my stool. "Expertise? The only thing I'm good at is killing people. You want me to teach potential terrorists how to kill innocent women and children?"

"You don't need to actually teach them." He swirled his coffee in the cup and drained it. "Just get close enough to find out which ones are simply racists and which ones are bent on violence. Hugo's GIGN, acting with local authorities, will move in and take them all down. We need you to uncover three things: which group is planning it, who's in charge, and who or what Ross Gio is."

"No."

"That's not the answer we want, Jacob."

We glared at each other. I gave him my soldier-stare, the one soldiers get after they've been in combat so many times they're not sure if they're dead or alive—and they don't care. Usually, it puts a little fear in people, causes them to back off. Not Ames. He'd experienced his share of high-tension events in the clandestine world and held my gaze. But after a minute, he folded. He dropped his eyes to his croissant.

"We hoped you would sense the importance of this mission," he said. "Hugo didn't want to play hardball. I warned him it would come to this."

"What, you're going to toss me in jail?"

"Worse. Some of the parishioners at Saint-Sulpice had the wrong impression of your actions. You and I know what went down, but they saw an assault rifle in your hand and two dead men. The ones who think you're the monster will be released shortly. They'll be allowed to address the press if they want. The others will be detained for further questioning. The press will not be kind to you, Jacob. You might even lose your job."

Mercury said, *Nice guy, this Zack Ames. You should kick his ass into the street and push him under the first truck that comes along. No. On second thought, grab a 9-mil off one of those cops across the road and shoot him.*

I pulled my phone up and dialed Bianca. I said, *If he wants to play games, I can oblige.*

Bianca Dominguez was an MIT graduate and star at the NSA before Ms. Sabel tapped her for president of Sabel Technologies. Despite having twenty thousand employees reporting to her, she always took my calls. Even when I called before dawn in DC. Because she owed me.

I was the guy who introduced her to her wife a couple years ago.

She answered in a hazy voice. "Jacob, what is it this time?"

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I looked over at my CIA buddy. “Can you hack the video system at *Église Saint-Sulpice* in Paris and give it to Emily?”

Bianca’s wife, Emily, was a star reporter for the *Post* who once saved my life by shooting a guy in the face. I owed her. She’s one of those instinctive journalists. Emily would watch the video and know exactly how to present my case to the public. Bianca promised to have it done in an hour.

I rose and picked up my bouquet for Jenny. “Nice try, Zack. You forgot to mention what happened to the last guy you had inside.”

“What’re you talking about? What guy inside?”

“I never work with people who lie to me.” I leaned down, grabbed his throat hard, and squeezed. “Don’t mess with me, Zack Ames. You tracked sixty-eight guys going off the grid after Kraków. I took down two. But you’re only looking for sixty-five. That’s one man short. Zack.” I kept squeezing as I lifted him out of the chair. “He was your undercover guy. He’s dead. That’s why you didn’t know the target. Yet you were only minutes away. If you’d been honest with me, told me you had a problem, I would’ve been glad to help.”

