

SABEL SECURITY #13
A JACOB STEARNE THRILLER

LIES

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CHAPTER 1

JACOB STEARNE

EVERY COP IN LATVIA IS searching for me. I peer through the gap between a stack of splintery lumber and a cold brick wall in time to see a Riga police cruiser rolling down the street like a shark stalking a tasty dolphin. An officer in the passenger seat shines a sun-bright beam down my alley. I snap back behind the stacked wood and control my just-sprinted-two-miles breathing. Their voices float across the pre-dawn silence, pumping each other up in Latvian to hunt down the bastard who overpowered their comrade. Not that I speak the language, but the tone of voice, dripping with revenge, is a dead giveaway.

In my defense, they left me no other option. Things didn't go well after four young and eager officers spilled into the townhouse where I knelt above a college boy, my hands steeped in his spilt blood. They didn't speak English. I don't speak Latvian. I said, "I found him like this and tried to stop the bleeding." But they heard, "I'm a homicidal maniac here to slash the throat of every stinking Latvian I can find!"

With shoves, shouts, and sneers they booked me into a small suburban police station, took all my stuff—my clothes, my pistols, sound suppressors, spare magazines, tactical knife, belt with backup blade hidden in the buckle, a length of garrote wire, half a dozen Sabel Darts, three passports issued by different nations with different names under identical portraits of me, a questionable-looking satellite phone, and a significant number of five-hundred-euro notes crisp and fresh from the bank—and tossed me into a dank holding cell.

It seems, I failed to present myself as Jacob Stearne, the decorated

veteran from Donnellson, Iowa, currently a special agent for Sabel Security.

Sometime after three in the morning, they made their first mistake: they assigned a lone patrolman to transfer me downtown, where they expected their grizzled elders to mete out justice in the old Soviet tradition.

Then they made their second mistake: the nice, baby-faced young man had me sit in the back seat of a car without a barrier between us. That's all the mistakes I allow. We got as far as Old Town Riga. At a stoplight, I pressed my fingers hard on either side of his neck, cutting off the blood flow in his carotid and jugular while pinching his nerve.

In seconds, the hapless patrolman passed out. I took his keys and gun and had him gagged and restrained before he regained consciousness. When he came around, I tried to explain how sorry I was for resorting to violence but, since I didn't have time to deal with courts and lawyers, it was all I could think of. I went on about how I was on an important mission on behalf of the President of the United States—and Pia Sabel, my billionaire boss—so I had to run. For a moment, I considered rephrasing all that in Arabic or Pashto, the only other languages I know, having learned them in the wars, but it didn't seem likely to help.

He definitely didn't speak English. He turned pale and clammy as I spoke. I emptied his magazine, hurled the bullets in a broad arc, slapped the mag back in his weapon and slid it back in his holster. I chucked the car keys a short distance away. I intended to show him I meant no harm, wasn't armed and dangerous, and just needed a head start.

The poor cop, desperate to escape my imminent and deranged onslaught, scrambled off his heels and pushed backwards across the console.

I held up my palms, resigned to being lost in translation, shook my head, and ran into the chilly summer night. I had more important things to worry about than a scared lawman. I had to get back to the coastal suburb of Jurmala—at night, wearing a jailhouse jumpsuit in Atomic Tangerine, without maps or a phone.

Before I'd been sidetracked by a murder investigation that barreled toward a hasty conclusion, I'd been inches from the first goal in my

quest: to locate the missing movie star—and quantum electrodynamics physicist—Betty Bardon.

Um. Full disclosure: I did have a brief and passionate fling with the blonde genius deep in the Canadian Rockies a couple weeks ago—but I will not let that interfere with my assignment.

Why am I even on this mission? I've been asking myself that for the last week, ever since meeting with President Williams and Pia Sabel, where they asked me to be their pawn. They dressed it up with fancy words I had to look up later, but they meant pawn. A pawn in a battle over the future of civilization.

I don't mind being a pawn. I'm damn good at it. For years, I served in the 75th Rangers as a pawn. It's an ancient art and honorable tradition.

Knowing you're a pawn is the first step to spiritual enlightenment. It requires a metaphysical breakthrough: we may control our actions, but others control our lives. First, we must acknowledge the lies we tell ourselves to make our endeavors worthwhile. Lies like: Management will recognize my contribution soon; I'm going to get the next promotion, for sure; I work for the best, most honest human beings in the world. The fact is, we lie to ourselves so we can be pawns in the daily struggle we call life.

This mission is different. It's not nation against nation. It's not Conquistadors versus Natives. It's not Greeks versus Trojans. I'm a pawn in a battle between billionaires.

I'm not so sure being a pawn is honorable anymore. We can't achieve illumination when lies are presented with such boldness they look like the truth. I'm questioning my orders. I'm doubting the lies I need to convince myself that my billionaire would be any better a steward of the future than any other billionaire.

But. All that existential angst will have to wait. I have more immediate problems.

The entire Riga division of the Latvian Police is combing the city looking for me.

Beyond the stacked wood giving me cover, the cruiser stops. Car doors slam. The voices of two men echo in the empty streets thirty yards away. Their volume rises and falls as they twist in different directions,

deciding where to begin their search.

They decide to start with my lane. Their boots clomp on the cobblestones, their lights flash around the timber, illuminating the alley's dead-end. A ten-foot, vine-covered fence shields a construction site just beyond. They turn their beams away from my hiding place to examine the boarded-up warehouse forming one side of the narrow space.

While they're occupied, I toss a small stone overhead as far behind me as possible. It tinkles off the roof of their car. As they bolt toward the sound, I run for the chain link in the opposite direction. Their pounding feet drown out my noise. I scale it and take a glance at a chasm of darkness below.

I can't make out what's down there. Behind me, the cops return their attention to the alley. I face an unpredictable future with zero visibility in front of me and an all-too-predictable future behind me. I opt for the unknown. I fling myself over and jump to the ground on the other side.

Only it isn't ground. I fall into a giant dumpster filled with detritus from the construction site that smells of sawdust and plaster. I pull myself up the side in time to see a truck bearing down on me, iron arms outstretched to embrace my sanctuary. Not wanting to be seen by the driver, I drop back into the broken glass, nails, and splintered wood.

Scraping clanks and groans surround me and I feel the steel box lift off the ground. What I know about waste management could fill a thimble, but I think this whole crate is going over the cab in an arc that will tip it upside down, spilling everything into the yawning maw of a backend filled with more broken glass, nails, and splintered wood.

Unfortunately, I'm right. We travel in a simple curve, twelve feet high at the apex. I grab the metal edge of the dumpster as the floor I'm standing on goes vertical and the debris beneath my feet slips into the dark. Everything crashes with a sound like breaking bones. My legs lose their purchase and swing over the dark abyss. I'm the only thing left, and my fingers are slipping free.

For a split-second, everything freezes. I hang suspended in midair. I'm good.

Then the machine gives a shake, banging the dumpster against steel stops to make extra-special-sure nothing gets stuck. My grip dissolves

and I fall.

Only, I don't land on the same junk I stood on earlier. I'm standing on a large steel plate. That's when the compactor's hydraulics engage.

Making the greatest leap of my life, I grab the lip of the truck's overhead opening with two fingers. I barely manage to drag my feet above the compactor long enough to bring my other hand up. With both hands engaged, I get my chest up and flop over. I cling to the steel top of the growling machine by digging my fingernails under rivets.

Looking around for a way off this diesel beast, I spy a ladder on the side.

Police lights sweep across that side of the truck. Voices shout in Latvian over the car's public address system. The driver leans out of his window. Cops hop out and approach the driver's door. Pleasantries are exchanged, the garbageman answers questions, the patrolmen are satisfied. They drop back in their car. We back up, beeping loudly. We turn and rumble across ancient streets, heading out of Old Town, southeast toward the landfill. Not northwest toward my preferred destination: Jurmala.

I'm about to climb down and make a leap the next time the truck slows when the cruiser comes around the corner and follows us. Its headlamps light us up.

CHAPTER 2

BETTY BARDON

BETTY BARDON COMPARES THE PHOTO on her phone to the man sipping tea at one of the Future Café's sidewalk tables. Luxurious dark curls surround high-fashion sunglasses on a tanned face with high cheekbones and a strong chin. That's him, Joe Rouleau. He should be the movie star, not her.

Checking her outfit as she passes the café window, she sees her honey-colored mane bouncing with a hint of seduction that's muted by her banker's suit. Her pride swells. It's a beautiful June day in Riga, she looks professionally alluring, and her game plan is committed to memory. Makeup is light and summery. Sandalwood perfume sets the right tone. Betty thanks the gods she was able to coax two drops from the empty bottle. She's going to win over this investor and land the funding. She has to.

Striding straight toward him, her confidence builds with every step.

As she nears, he rises with a broad smile. He wears a white linen shirt untucked over drawstring pants. The jeweled watch on his wrist speaks to generations of conservative wealth. Sockless sneakers say the opposite. Something grips her center mass and pulls her toward him. Gravity?

With arms outstretched and a light French accent, he says, "Ah, Betty Bardon! You are more beautiful in person than on the big screen. Your hair is as spun gold and your fashion—impeccable."

Leaning in to prevent a whole-body hug, she lets him kiss both her cheeks. She savors his musky cologne. "Thank you. It's a pleasure to

meet you, Mr. Rouleau. If we—”

“Please, it is Joe.” He waves an admonishing finger with a laugh burbling in his voice. “No matter what we decide today, it will never be more than Joe for you. Let the others call me monsieur or even Your Highness, but never you.”

With his perfect, sparkling teeth illuminating his face, he gestures to the empty chair. She takes her seat. He scrapes his closer to her and drops into it.

He doffs his sunglasses, tosses them on the table, crosses one leg over the other, slaps his thighs, inhales deeply while looking her over, then laughs. “I cannot believe I am sitting with such a famous movie star. Pardon me if I bask in my good fortune and act like a mad fan.” He purposely waits for the awkward moment to stretch. As she’s about to reply, he leans forward and covers her hand with his. “Tell me, what do you prefer, Betty Bardon: Should we get to know each other first, a little small talk about where we grew up and how we survived our lousy childhoods? Or shall we dive into business straight away?”

Off balance, unsettled by his brashness, she checks out his meaty shoulders before gazing into his vibrant brown eyes. There are flakes of gold in there.

With an inhale, she reins herself in. She’s starving both financially and literally; she must stay on task.

“Let’s start with business.” She lets a flirtatious smile spread across her face. “If that works, we might explore more later.”

“Ah,” he leans back, satisfied, “I love how you think. It is possible we could ascend the highest peaks and achieve great things together.”

After another breathless pause he says, “Your email explained much but allow me to summarize: You believe you are close to creating the Holy Grail of green energy: an advanced battery technology. And this solves the biggest problem of the future, how to store and transport solar, wind, or fusion energy. This is interesting—”

“Sorry to interrupt,” she says, holding up her hand, “but it’s not ‘advanced.’ We’re talking about a quantum leap forward from where we are today. We use the term battery for simplicity. Technically, it’s a metacapacitor a thousand times more efficient than a battery. Imagine a

laptop that runs for years on a single charge. An electric car that can drive 300,000 miles. Remember the Texas power outage of 2021? Five million people went without electricity for nearly two weeks. Think about a few trailer-sized metacapacitors shipped from California to solve the problem overnight.”

She hops off her soapbox as a flush of embarrassment warms her cheeks. She should never correct a potential investor.

His brows arch.

“Your passion is impressive,” he says. “This is most admirable. Then it serves a larger market than green energy alone. This is a dynamic invention indeed. Remarkable.”

She folds her hands in her lap and nods.

“And you worked on this in Russia?” he asks.

“No, here in Riga, at the University of Latvia. The Russians financed the *Chaac Project*, but the research was performed here.”

He settles back with a curious expression. “You pronounce ‘Chaac’ as ‘shock?’ Pardon me, but I’ve only seen it in print. This is the same word in English as our French *choc électrique*? That is, the electric shock?”

“Nerd humor.” She smiles nervously. “A little play on words by the man who did the original research. Chaac is the Mayan god of lightning.”

“Ah, oui.” Ripping his gaze from her, he laughs. “Clever.”

For a moment, she’s off her game plan. She’s not sure where to take the conversation next.

His eyes wander the table as he rubs his hands. “Oh, but where are my manners? First, you must want something. Coffee and a croissant, perhaps? Allow me to—”

Hoping he hasn’t heard her stomach growling, she says, “Nothing, thank you.”

“You are certain?”

He waits for her to nod before continuing. “Your work at the university gives you an advantage over any competitors. And all your research is in your possession?”

This is the sticky part she hoped to avoid. If he invests his grandmother’s money, telling him everything won’t be a problem. If she tells him everything, but he doesn’t invest, he’ll know too much. That

could make him as dangerous as the Chinese, Russians, or OPEC—all of them are ready to kill her for her research.

She explains, “There are three pieces to the puzzle: the *Chaac Project*, the outline for everything involved—is now in the hands of Pia Sabel. But I don’t need that because I memorized it during my studies.” She taps the side of her head with a finger. “Rafael Tum, a Guatemalan professor has the *Chaac Equation*—a thousand pages of physics theory which is the heart of the system. And then there is the *Edison Data*, ten terabytes of data from my experiments. My research represents 80 percent of the work needed to bring a viable product to market. I keep the *Edison Data* in a secure location until I can work out a deal with Professor Tum for the all-important *Equation*. Then I will have everything I need to finish the project.”

He nods knowingly. “I see. So your value proposition is that you are closer to solving the problem than anyone else. All you need is capital to buy out this Rafael character?”

Truth be told, she needs capital for rent and groceries, not old man Rafael. The former guerrilla leader, who only recently came in from the jungles to take a professor’s role, will never sell. The only way to pry the *Equation* out of his hands is to bash him over the head and steal it.

She answers, “Exactly, buy him out.”

Joe purses his lips and frowns. “You mentioned Pia Sabel is involved in this as well. I did not know this before. Are we talking about Pia Sabel, the athlete-billionaire who killed her father for the inheritance?”

The ridiculous theories swirling around Pia Sabel came from the same cesspool of clickbait conspiracy sites as many an ugly rumor about Betty Bardon. She hates to give them credence, but answers, “Yes, *that* Pia Sabel.”

“Why does she care?”

“Her birth father invented it. Assassins killed him and stole his work when she was four. She’s been after it ever since. Now that she’s inherited her adopted father’s money, she can fund her adventure with unlimited resources.”

“Have you contacted her about collaborating?”

“Uh ... well,” Betty hesitates. How did she let the conversation turn

to Sabel? Big mistake. “We had a few discussions. They didn’t go well.”

“Oh?” He turns his teacup absentmindedly as he waits for her answer.

“See,” Betty says and leans forward, “Sabel feels entitled to the whole thing. Gets a bit psycho about it, actually. Claims it’s her birthright, Russians murdered her parents, it was stolen, and ... all that.” Betty finds her fist clenched. She relaxes and looks away. “So. Um, yeah. We couldn’t come to terms.”

He studies her, his stare making her nervous.

“Sabel’s not the only one,” she blurts out, her excitement rising with her volume. “This thing is huge. Whoever makes it work will blow right past Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos to become the first trillionaire. People would do anything for that much money. Do you want to live in a world where one person—Pia Sabel or Mikhail Yeschenko or Deng Zhipeng, or whoever—becomes so rich and powerful they achieve omnipotence? That’s why we must complete the project quickly and make it public. Once everything is open-source, there will be nothing to fight over. We’ll give the world a future that is not monopolized. Let the people have green energy without ultra-rich overlords charging us for the privilege.”

Taking a deep breath, she calms herself again and reminds herself outbursts won’t win the day. She must focus on the goal: make Joe Rouleau beg for a chance to invest.

“Are you sure you won’t have a bite to eat?” he asks, sensing her embarrassment and attempting to change the subject. “I feel a poor host finishing a delicious tea while you have nothing.”

“I’m fine, really.” She hasn’t eaten since breakfast yesterday. She’s hangry and that’s driving her eruptions. Sipping something might steady her nerves, calm her down. Too late now.

“So be it.” He nods. “Let me come back to something you said earlier. You memorized the basis for this project. How does a movie star become so passionate about science?”

“Well.” Betty flips her hair over her shoulder while she thinks for a moment. How much should she tell him? “It’s kind of you to say that, but I had the lead in three box office bombs, and bit parts in a few other movies. I’m hardly a ‘movie star.’ Acting was merely a means to fund

my education. My true calling is particle physics. I have a masters in quantum electrodynamics. QED for short. I came to Riga to read for my PhD when—”

“Quantum what? Masters? PhD?” His brows rise so high and fast he nearly rises from his chair. “This is not in your IMDB bio.”

“Well, if a woman wants to work in Hollywood, she leads with boobs, not brains. Look what happened to Hedy Lamar. She pioneered spread-spectrum radio encryption, the foundation for secure communications to this day—and she only landed roles in B-movies after that. Well. Not to imply I ever rose above B-movies.”

Betty’s stomach clenches. She’s blowing it. She’s far too assertive for a woman seeking an investor. She should seduce him into the opportunity, not lecture him about the challenges of women in physics.

Joe Rouleau claps his hands and roars with laughter. “You are a woman of many talents, Betty Bardon. I like you! Graduate degrees in something I cannot even pronounce, much less understand. And you keep it a secret so men will not be intimidated. That is extraordinary. Quite extraordinary.”

A wave of relief flows through her that quickly turns to excitement. She wonders why this man affects her so much. She imagined him as nothing more than another privileged Euroboy with a tenuous claim to Russian royalty. She needs him for his money, not his charm and looks. But is getting everything in one place so bad?

She chastises herself. She shouldn’t let his electrifying presence distract her from her goal. Stick to the cash; anything else would just complicate matters. He can make her dream come true, it’s time to close the deal. What was next in her script? Her research showed he seeks fame over fortune.

“Whoever brings this project to the public domain,” she says, sitting up straight and staring into his gold-flecked eyes, “will be heralded like Jonas Salk. Joe Rouleau could be associated with the great philanthropists like Gates, Buffett, and Carnegie. We could call it the Rouleau Capacitor.”

His eyes narrow. She’s brownnosing shamelessly and he knows. She spreads a beguiling smile across her face. Acting comes in handy at

times.

“My name would be synonymous with the man who made the polio vaccine free?” he asks. “A grand statement, indeed. But why would I associate with your rag-tag ‘army’ of ... what is the name?”

“Electric Liberation Army. The ELA.”

“It sounds like one of those revolutionary movements from the seventies.” His lip curls.

“Well ... It was a group decision. I’m sure we could—”

“Let us file that under ‘future consideration.’” His smile returns along with the sparkle in his eye. “You have the research, the *Edison Data*, and you have a plan to acquire the *Chaac Equation*. Where do you keep this data? Where is the secure location?”

Betty recoils. He should know better than to ask such a sensitive question before they have an agreement in place. As charming as he is, trusting him could be a fatal mistake. The temptation *Chaac* represents could turn any honest man into a thief—or worse. People have killed in pursuit of this project—and hers is a critical piece. After carefully considering her answer, she says, “For security reasons, naturally, I cannot—”

She hears her name shouted from a distance. Locating the source, she sees the ELA’s hacker, Logan Taylor, running toward her at full gallop, one arm waving madly. He shouts again.

His awkward, gangly frame reaches them. He takes a second to catch his breath, his hand held up to hold conversation. “Betty, Betty!” His breathing forces a pause. “It’s Kevin. Kevin Winn ... Kevin was ... he was murdered last night.”

CHAPTER 3

JACOB STEARNE

PLYWOOD FROM THE EAST-FACING WINDOW has peeled back far enough for the morning sun to smack my face like a fist. Unspooling my body from the fetal position in which I snatched a little shut-eye, I stretch, rub my eyes, and come face to face with a man in a toga who resembles Chris Rock. Mercury, a forgotten god left over from the collapse of Rome's pagan era, stands before me. The ridiculous little bronze wings on his silver helmet and a redundant pair on his sandals flap like hummingbird wings.

Go away, I tell him.

Mercury says, *How'm I gonna get a big-ass temple built in my honor when all I gots is a lazy muthafucka like you proselytizing for me?*

I say, I just need a little more sleep, OK?

Get yo ass up, homie. You done slept a hour already.

One more, I say. That's all. One more hour.

You don't want that, brotha, he says as a grin spreads across his face. *How you gonna get away from all the po-po on the street? From the color of your new threads, Ima guessing you need help running from the man—like always.*

Yeah, had a misunderstanding last night. I sneak up to the window and slink an eye to the warped plywood. Two cops stand on the cross street, asking citizens if they've seen a crazed American in a prison-orange jumpsuit.

I face Mercury and say, *I need a phone to call HQ so I can get lawyers, guns, and money. Where can I get a phone?*

Oh, dude. He turns his back on me. You think us gods gonna smile on you and tell you shit when you act like you just done? I wake you up, save you from the cops, and right off you be asking for favors. Not a single thank-you. Not a word of worship. No adoration. You might as well be a ungrateful teenager telling your moms, I don't need you no more—but can I has the car keys tonight? Ya feel me?

My psychiatrist thinks I suffer from PTSD-induced schizophrenia just because I see and talk to an ex-god. What does he know? He just wanted me on meds and out of his office with my wild stories. They aren't stories.

Mercury once had the biggest temple in Rome. He guided many an emperor in the ways of commerce and eloquence. He carried messages for the people. According to him, Julius was a nobody until they hooked up. Cicero was a dropout before he found Mercury. He was the one who clued Shakespeare in on all the Roman history. He believes if he makes me into a world-famous hero, I'll tell everyone about my religion. He thinks I can get him back into Prime Time, fill stadiums with worshippers, have people preaching his word on street corners with megaphones. He wants to get even with Jesus for kicking him and his pantheon to the curb. So, he helps me out now and then, gives me a heads-up when death lurks around the next corner.

It works.

But like all gods, he insists on being worshipped—constantly. Believe me, that gets old.

I must admit, there have been many times when he's saved my life. None of my brothers in arms ever argued with his divine intervention when taking enemy fire. In fact, in the heat of battle, they often begged me to summon his help. They didn't use ugly psychiatrist-words like "delusional" or "paraphrenia." They didn't tell me to take meds. They offered to sacrifice doves and goats if it would get them out of the line of fire. Dodging bullets will cure the most cynical of atheists.

The only thing that makes me question that he is the Roman god of eloquence is his insistence that the future of rhetoric lies in the voice of inner-city youth. He points to words that came from the African American community such as cool, jazz, hip, bad, bling, chill, funky, and

the list goes on. He has a point. And he can channel Shakespeare, John F. Kennedy, or Cato the Elder if I call him on it.

Voices in the street drift up to me. The cops are coming.

I take a deep breath and mentally prepare to worship a figment of my imagination that produces physically verifiable results some would attribute to the actions of an immortal deity.

I'm sorry I didn't give thanks and praise, I tell Mercury. If it weren't for your divine guidance and holy intervention, Riga's boys in blue would be pushing their muzzles into my sleeping face right now. You are the greatest. You are the best. You are my favorite ... um.

I hear the scuffing of boots on the dusty floorboards a level below me.

Mercury says, *Holy Diana! You mortals distract easy.*

I'm in a two-story abandoned commercial building built when the Tsar still held sway in these parts. It smells of ancient dust and neglect. Riga was one strangle away from being deserted before they broke free from the Soviet dictatorship. Like a ghost town over a gold mine, prosperity flooded back, but every third block is a reminder of its past. My refuge is one of those reminders.

Mercury points to a corner of the ceiling, where I spy a chunk of fallen plaster revealing a small attic. The ceiling is low enough to jump to a crossbeam. I pull myself into a tight space and back away from the opening just as the voices enter the room below.

A dormer window gives me a slice of light.

The cops talk in bored tones and tromp across the room below me to the next one over. They'll need to come back this way to leave, so I hold my breath.

Beneath me, the plaster ceiling bows downward. My toes barely reach the nearest crossbeam on that end of my body. My elbows support my weight on another. I'll have to plank until the cops leave.

Then I smell the acrid scent of marijuana. The freaking officers chose this moment to smoke a joint. Great.

As quietly as possible, I reposition myself for better weight distribution. I wind up facing the dormer window. It gives me a fair view of the building's exit onto the street. I can wait here until I see the police leave. Perfect.

Across the narrow lane is a house with four windows facing me. In one of the windows is a woman. She's staring at me. Blankly. I'm not sure she can see me with the morning glare in the glass. Pushing her brown hair out of her eyes, she reveals a youthful, attractive face. No makeup. A tight, paper-thin t-shirt barely conceals her body. She waves.

Oh, she can see you alright, homes. Mercury cackles. *She can see you staring at her nipples.*

I am not. I ... there's nowhere else to look at the moment.

Yeah, rrrriiggghhttt. He punches my shoulder. *She'd be a bit young for you.*

Doesn't matter, I'm not interested. The girl's wave turns into a strange hand movement.

Oh, that's right! He cackles again. *You be all over that Betty Bardon business, huh?*

No. She's on my task list to locate and monitor.

Mercury says, *Yeah, you be monitoring that shit all night long, dawg.*

I am not going there with Betty. Um. This time. Yeah. It's strictly business.

I watch the girl do the strange wave again. She holds her hand up flat, palm facing me, thumb tucked in. Then she folds her four fingers over her thumb. She repeats the motion while staring into my eyes from thirty yards away.

I never studied sign language, but I know that sign. It means something. Something about danger. For her? Or me? Is she going to turn me in? No. She's trapping her thumb under her fingers. Because ... damn. What is it? Is she the thumb? Meaning: she's trapped. Oh, right. It's the signal for abused women. It means she needs help.

Whazzat now? Mercury looks confused. *You think she needs help? Where'd you get that?*

I give her a thumbs-up. She looks relieved. Then I hold up a finger to wait. She looks perplexed.

I turn to Mercury, *Read about it in Vogue. It's for abuse victims to use during video calls. It became a thing in the pandemic when everyone was locked down. The isolation drove some people mad and domestic violence exploded.*

When did you start reading Vogue, bro? Mercury looks at me like I'm spoiled meat.

I skim it so I can converse with women about things that interest them. But I can't tell my used god that. His pantheon ruled back in the day when toxic masculinity was for wimps. Instead, I tell him, *The same day I met a god who tries to look more like an inner city rapper than any of the statues of him in Rome.*

Hey now, Mercury says. We been over this a million times. As the Book-of-Myths y'all call a 'Holy Bible' says: the Creator done up man in his image. And where do anthropologists claim homo sapiens evolved theyselves right off the chimpanzee family tree?

With a sigh, I reply the same way I always do: *Southeast Africa.*

He asks in a taunting voice, *And what kind of skin tone be the fashion choice in those parts?*

Then how come the Roman artists made all their statues look Italian? How many black artists do you know? he asks.

Uh. I stutter a moment before coming up with, *That guy. The one who did the painting ... of the guy.*

Uh huh. Mercury slides in front of me. *I suppose you be talking about Kehinde Wiley and his portrait of the president? OK. And what color does Mr. Wiley use when he painting a god?*

Um, well, I dunno.

Y'all see god in the mirror, you never see god in someone else. And yet we be in everybody you meet. Every. Body.

The patrolmen shuffle through the room below me, still smoking their joint. They lumber down the stairs to ground level and kick at the sheet of plywood covering the exit. A few seconds later, I see them walking down the street.

Beyond the dormer window, the girl waves at me again. I nod back, crawl back to the hole, drop down, and head for the exit.

Oh, so you gonna be her hero now? Mercury asks. *Save the day for some hot young babe in the hopes she's gonna shower you with her affections in return?*

I say, *No. I figured out where I can steal a phone.*

CHAPTER 4

CAPTAIN REDGRAVE

CAPTAIN MARISA REDGRAVE'S BLOOD BOILS as she paces the office of Municipal Police Chief Dubra. The Chief looks like a parody of Winston Churchill with his pot-bellied privilege, while his assistant is as willowy as a reed. Both men wear their dress uniforms with all the medals they could find. She's glad she did the same. Tempering herself while considering everything from the briefing, she carefully considers her response. Muni police don't ask for help often. But this time, Chief Dubra went directly to the top to request assistance.

"Do I have this correctly?" she asks in Latvian. "Your officers arrested Jacob Stearne for murder at one this morning. Instead of notifying the American Embassy, they tried to transfer him downtown. At three this morning, before reaching his destination, they let him escape from—"

"They certainly did not 'let' him escape," Chief Dubra snorts.

"Oh? Is it now standard procedure to use an unmarked executive vehicle for jail transfers?" Her short auburn hair sweeps her collar when she snaps a look at the man. She crosses her arms over her single-breasted jacket. "Is it standard procedure to seat a prisoner directly behind the driver with no protective barrier between them with his wrists cuffed in front of him?"

"No, but—" the Chief's assistant starts to speak but stops and touches his fingers to his lips when Marisa fixes her steely gaze on him.

"At what time did your men identify him?" she asks.

"Right away," Chief Dubra says. "We're not stupid."

“Your men knew they had a battle-hardened veteran who now runs special operations for the American oligarch, Pia Sabel, and they put him in a car with only one officer?”

“They knew they had a man decorated by the President of France for stopping a massacre at a cathedral in Paris. They knew they had a man decorated by the Chancellor of Germany for saving three international finance ministers from—”

“Yes, yes, a hero. Or so the Sabel Security marketing department would have you believe. Like everyone else, I watched *Le Héros de Paris*. But don’t forget what the American Army Rangers trained him to do: kill. Is there anyone in the world better at it than the Rangers? And Jacob Stearne was one of the best Rangers in history, making him—the best murderer in the world.” She pauses a beat. “Remind me, Chief Dubra, on what charge did your men arrest him?”

Lifting his gaze to the ceiling, he turns away as he mutters, “Murder.”

His assistant stage-whispers to his boss, “We don’t need the English detective.”

“My father may have been English,” Marisa says, “but all he left me was my surname. I was born and raised here in Riga, same as you. You may address me as Captain Redgrave.”

The assistant turns away, head bowed. The Chief’s gaze works its way down to the floor, as far from her as he can keep it.

Marisa takes a deep breath, realizing she needs to get this meeting back on a cooperative level. Still, what they’re doing chafes her to no end. In a softer voice, she says, “Tell me about the search.”

The assistant points to the map resting on an easel next to the Chief’s desk. “After the initial sweep of Old Town, we set up search quadrants and divided officers into groups of eight pairs—”

“What time was this?” she asks.

“At nine this morning.”

“Six hours after losing him?”

The assistant shrugs.

She steams. “He could be in Helsinki, Stockholm, or Warsaw by now.”

The Chief faces her. “We had sightings and reports. We had every

reason to believe we would catch him at any moment.”

“What reason?”

“Well, for one, uh, he was on foot,” Chief Dubra says.

“And he was wearing our orange jumper,” the assistant chimes in hopefully. “Very distinctive.”

“Distinctive?” Marisa scoffs at the taller men. “Your plan was to spot him in a city where one of ten buildings is abandoned and boarded up? A man who once evaded the Taliban for a week without ever leaving their headquarters?”

The men look away in opposite directions from each other.

“And where are you now in your search?” she asks.

Chief Dubra straightens and faces her. “We have determined he is no longer in the city.”

It’s all Marisa can do not to shout at the man. She manages to get her next question out in a normal, if not slightly strained, tone of voice. “And what do you need from me?”

“Well, it’s perfectly obvious,” Dubra says. “We want you to search the rest of the country for him. He is now outside my jurisdiction.”

Marisa holds his gaze for a long, uncomfortable beat. “I know what you are doing, Chief Dubra. It won’t work.” She wags an accusatory finger in his face. “I will not be your scapegoat for losing a murder suspect. Why? Because I will make sure everyone knows what I know: that Jacob Stearne has not left the city. He is here. Right under your nose. How do I know this? Because I read his profile. He operates like a ghost, using the late-night hours when your most junior staff are on duty, going where you least expect him, moving in directions that make no sense, staying close to you until you let your guard down. He once hid in the sewer of Brest, Belarus directly beneath police headquarters because no one wanted the disgusting task of looking there. He might be on the roof of this building. Maybe in the basement.” She stops to take a breath. “Not only do I know this, but you do too.”

“Are you shirking your duty?” Dubra’s voice rises with outrage. “Are you refusing to search the countryside for this escaped suspect?”

“Oh, no, Chief Dubra. I am taking this assignment. You see, I know why you asked for me. You believe the case is hopeless. You believe he

can't be found. And you don't want your men—and they are all men—to have that stain on their records.” She points to the neat row of 5x7 portraits of his top lieutenants that stretches across one wall. “You asked for me because you wanted a woman to take the blame. You think women don't pursue serious careers in this department. You think I have nothing to lose by failing. But you're wrong. I will find him. As good as Jacob Stearne is at killing, I am better at apprehending the guilty.”

The assistant's mouth falls open. She looks him up and down with contempt.

“Now, I am commandeering your search,” she says as she takes her phone out of her jacket pocket. “We will scour the areas you've already searched because he will believe those areas are safe.”

“What? I didn't give permission for you to—”

“Before I agreed to fix your problem, I told Interior Minister Anna Krasnova what tools I would need to succeed. She agreed with my assessment and gave me full authority to take control of any resources required.” Marisa thrusts her phone toward Dubra. “Would you like to confirm her decision directly?”