

Prologue

“Get in the closet!” my mother whispered harshly, rummaging through one of her drawers, her hands shaking violently.

“What are you going to do?” asked Anja, the most calm of the three of us, yet still so white she looked like a ghost.

My mother pulled something long and shiny out of the drawer and looked up at Anja. “Go to the closet. Now.”

My sister nodded and grabbed my arm. She pushed me into the closet and climbed in over me, accidentally kicking me in the face. She then reached out and slowly closed the door, barely making a sound.

My mother’s footsteps were quick on the stairs, and I was able to hear the shouting coming from below. My mother was begging for something. There was a loud scream.

I didn’t remember the words. I didn’t understand what it meant for my future. But as the seven-year-old son of a father who had committed suicide, there was one thing that in that moment, I understood completely. One thing that I would remember until the day I died: The gunshot that ended my mother’s life.

Anja later explained that she somehow had kept me from wriggling out of the closet. All I wanted at the time was to go downstairs. I had wanted to be with my mother. But downstairs was where the killer was. Anja had kept me there, softly comforting me, terrified that the person who had killed our mother would hear her, but aware that it was the only thing that would keep me from screaming out loud.

Anja eventually climbed out of the closet to go check if it was safe for us to emerge. She went downstairs, and I heard her emit a cry of loss, terror, and loneliness. I crept slowly out of

the closet. What was it that had made her cry out? I cautiously made my way down the stairs, clutching the railing so hard that my knuckles were white. I peeked my head around the corner and my heart stopped and my life changed. There, laying on the ground, was our mother.

Anja called the police. One tall, black officer took me aside. “You’re Jan, right?”

I nodded. “I can’t imagine what this might be like,” he said. “But you can come with me. We’re going to make sure you’re safe.”

“Can I stay with my sister?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said. “We’re here to help you in every way that we can.”

At the funeral, a week later, we were told that we would be living with our aunt and uncle.

I went to therapy for years. From then on, I was closed down. I wouldn’t talk to anyone at lunch or recess. I didn’t participate in class. I had hardly any friends.

At the age of ten, it was suggested that I find a way to channel my pain and fear and anger into something else. I started playing soccer. I spent hours and hours on the training ground. This turned out to be the best therapy of all.

Chapter 1

Water hit the top of my head as I stood under the shower’s cool cascade. Damn, that had been a good game.

I was 29 years old and I played left wing for the Dutch national team and for FC Schalke 04 in Germany. I’d played in England and Spain earlier in my career and had just finished playing a friendly against the US national team in California, where we had cut them to pieces in our 7-0 win.

I had scored three times, including one off of a penalty. I smiled ruefully. I was surprised that coach even let me take penalties any more. In the previous World Cup, it had been my penalty attempt that had been saved in glorious style by the Uruguayan goalie, sending us home in the semifinals.

I turned off the water and proceeded to towel myself off. I wondered what my sister's thoughts would be on the game. She was a novelist in the San Francisco area, and we were going to dinner as soon as I could make myself somewhat presentable.

Anja and I weren't siblings who called each other every few months and saw each other once every other year for Christmas. Losing both of our parents made us recognize the importance of close relationships. For me, she was the only person that I had any kind of close connection to anymore. We would see each other at least every month and we would call each other every week or so, usually after each of my games. We managed to keep that up for years, despite my games, her book tours, and the ocean between us.

I stood up from the bench where I had been sitting and almost fell over again. Dang, my ankle hurt like a bitch. Ten minutes before the final whistle, I had been dribbling the ball down the side of the pitch, skipping past fullback Brett Lawrence. Then a slide tackle from center defensive midfielder Johnny Fredericks had taken me out from behind.

I tried to put weight on my ankle again, but I again groaned in pain. I called over a trainer and he wrapped my ankle for me. I tested it out gingerly, and my teeth gritted. I was still in a considerable amount of pain. I took a few steps. At least I could still walk.

I hobbled out of the stadium to where Anja was leaning against her car. She ran towards me and gave me a big hug, nearly knocking me off my feet. She saw me wince as my ankle turned, and she stepped back to allow me to steady myself.

“Great game!” she said. “That Fredericks tackle should have been a red card. He came at you from behind and totally got you and not the ball.”

“Yep,” I said. “And the thing is that he probably didn’t even need to make the tackle. I used to play against their center back when I lived in England, and he’s not someone that’s easy to beat one-on-one.”

I opened the trunk and heaved my suitcase into the car. I hopped in and closed the door. There was a brief minute of silence as Anja turned the wheel and made her way out of the parking lot.

“So on a different subject, we’re going to meet one of my friends for dinner. He’s a soccer fan and said that he wants to meet you,” she said.

“Who is he?”

“He’s editing my new book.”

“What happened with Steven?” I asked. Her old editor had been with her for the last three years.

“This book is pretty different from the last couple. Steven turned it down. He doesn’t really have a ton of experience in this realm. But Ralph jumped on the job pretty quickly.”

We headed off to Jerry’s Subs and Pizza to eat the best food anywhere and to meet Ralph Peterson.

Ralph turned out to be a short, muscular man who looked to be about 40 years old. He had brown hair and a very long face. He seemed kind of beaten down. Tough. A little rough around the edges. He didn’t look like most of the editors I had met. In fact I probably would have felt nervous, but he had a large smile and seemed eager to meet me.

We ordered several large cheese and pepperoni pizzas. We laughed, talked about soccer

and books, and ate greasy American pizza. “You thought your win was good?” Ralph asked laughing. “Cameroon beat Australia 12-1 yesterday. Shame Australia didn’t even make it into the World Cup this year. They would have been an easier beat than even England.”

“But Australia made it into their second game last World Cup without losing by more than five points,” Anja laughed.

“Then they played us and lost by eight. I got my first World Cup hat trick in that game,” I replied.

Ralph slid along the bench right over to my sister and reached over to grab the parmesan cheese that was on her end of the table, but I couldn’t help noticing that he didn’t move back. I tried my best not to think much of it.

I turned my attention back to the conversation. “England is a famous team,” Anja was saying, “not a good team.”

“Have you seen any of their games this year?” Ralph asked incredulously.

“Yeah. I saw them lose.”

“But you can’t say that they haven’t played good soccer,” he responded.

On the way out, I was the first to leave the restaurant. Anja and Ralph were walking next to each other, still talking. Both of them reached for the door at the same time and their hands brushed against each other. He grinned and held the door open for her.

“See you tomorrow,” he said, waving her off.

On the way back to Anja’s house, I noticed myself thinking about Ralph quite a lot; the random brush of his hand with Anja’s, him sitting close to her. He had seemed very close to my sister. I realized there had been other times that their hands had brushed. Did that mean that they were not just comfortable talking to each other, but physically comfortable with each other, as

well? She certainly hadn't been this close with Steven, and he was her editor for years. Were they in some kind of ill-defined romantic relationship? I decided not to ask.

Relationships were something that I just didn't understand. I had dated a couple of girls for a while, but nothing ever lasted. I just hadn't seemed to act the same way towards them as other guys had. For a while I had even thought that I was gay. However, the few dates I had gone on with guys were the same way. I just never really liked anyone that way.

I didn't have many friends, either. I was close with one or two of my sister's friends, but nothing more than that. I would go out for a beer every now and then with the guys from the team, but I had never formed a connection with my teammates in the way other players did. I changed teams several times in the years and never felt bad about leaving the guys.

That was the thing about having a messed up childhood. You were always cagey and alert. You were suspicious of people. You didn't make many friends.

Chapter 2

We arrived back at Anja's house, which was a three-story historical mansion in the middle of a field about half a mile away from anything else, just outside San Francisco. It was always freezing cold due to its draftiness, but in the summer it was very nice. Anja had a friend named Kyle who owned a popular bakery about six or seven miles away. That meant that she was always bringing baked goods home whenever she went out to the shopping center..

Anja, despite having lived in the States for years, had never really adapted to the American custom of buying food every week to last the whole week. She instead took her bike to do some small shopping about three times a week. I biked quite a bit in Holland myself, but all of the hills in San Francisco looked really tiring. The bike ride helped Anja keep her slim,

athletic build. She still ate mountains of sugar and junk food, though.

I tried to take my suitcase up the stairs to the guest bedroom. I only made it a couple of steps before my ankle told me that this was a really bad idea. I wheeled the suitcase into an extra closet so it would be out of the way and, with the help of the railing, got myself up the stairs into the bed, where I promptly collapsed.

I woke up at 7:00 to the sound of a stork emanating from my phone—my wake-up alarm. A stork was the mascot of Ado den Haag, an amateur club team that I was a fan of before I began playing professionally. A 7:00 wake-up time was a habit that was unlikely to ever change. There was hardly any food in the house, and Anja was still asleep, so I grabbed some fruit and cooked an egg, then I waited for her to wake up so we could go buy some real food.

By the time we got back from the store, (we decided to drive instead of bike, due to my ankle) it was about 9:00, but I managed to make myself three eggs, two pieces of toast, four slices of thick-cut bacon, some more fruit, and a protein shake. This was less than I had most mornings, but I wasn't training that day, so it was fine for sustenance until lunch.

Afterwards, I went to the gym, where I stretched my ankle and did light exercises to strengthen the muscles around the injury. Then I decided to do some weightlifting for my arms, just because I was there and I could.

I was vaguely aware that I was the most in-shape person at the gym. I was used to training with the team, where we were all at a close-to-equal fitness range, but here, where there were other people, I was lifting more than anyone around me. When I was on the exercise bike, I was going almost twice the speed of the two men next to me.

I didn't pay much attention to this, instead focusing on my workout. My ankle wasn't starting to feel better, but I knew it would in a few days of the same. I decided that I would get

Anja to drive me back to her house, because I didn't think I could walk.

She was about twenty minutes later than I expected, which was a bit awkward. One kid going into the gym recognized me, so I had to give him an autograph.

Finally, my sister showed up. I looked at her questioningly. She sighed. "Yeah. I'm sorry that I'm late," she said. "I was out with Ralph, talking about the book."

I nodded, not quite forgiving her. "What's it called?" I asked.

"When the World Dies," she said.

"Bit dark, don't you think?"

"I know, but I think it's an interesting premise."

"What is the premise?"

"A woman falls in love with a man who works for a powerful politician—a politician who works with corporations, terrorists, and neo-Nazis, creating chaos that fuels his rise to power. There's a lot of death and pain. They marry and have two kids, but neither of them can really handle it."

"Damn."

"I know, but I think this one will sell big. It's based on several true stories." She had a slight catch to her voice when she said that.

I was still slightly miffed, but a growing hunger was beginning to take priority. "Well, I'm hungry," I said, noticing that my voice still betrayed some of my saltiness at the wait.

"I know a good place."

"Do they have beer?" I asked.

"A lot."

"Good?"

“Decent.”

“Good. I need some beer.”

The food was okay, but the beer turned out to be pretty bad.

Chapter 3

On my fourth day staying with Anja, Ralph came over for dinner. Ralph and Anja spent most of the time talking about business and the book. That began to bore me after about half an hour, so I just sat there, completely zoning out, pretending to pay attention.

I was staring out Anja’s giant windows when I heard a vague whirring sound. Anja and Ralph were too deep into their conversation to notice. I saw something orange drop from the sky onto the patio outside. I looked for a moment, wondering what it was.

A flash illuminated the kitchen. The light was so bright that I couldn’t see for several seconds. But I didn’t need to see, to know what happened next. The light was followed by an ear-shattering bang. I heard the crashing of the window as it broke, then the tinkling sound of the pieces of glass falling onto the neat tile floor.

I fell backwards off my chair, unable to orient myself. “Jan!” Anja shouted in my ear; it sounded like a dull echo. “We have to get out.” I didn’t know where she was. She grabbed my arm. She was to my right, also on the floor. “Let’s go,” she said. I nodded, taking several long, ragged breaths. She started running down the hallway, and I staggered after her blindly, my ears ringing, my eyes aching, all my senses totally discombobulated.

As I ran, my vision cleared. I was almost at the back door when I glanced behind me. I was able to count eight men holding large guns, just outside of the house.

I started to run faster. Anja flung open the back door and ran through. I was just seconds behind. Ralph was about fifty yards ahead. We tried to follow his path, keeping our eyes on him,

trying not to focus on the spits of gunfire coming in our direction.

We made it to a large oak tree in the center of the yard. As we ran past it, a bullet hit the tree, an inch from Anja's face. She cried out as a hail of splinters burst from the tree, embedding themselves in her left cheek.

Ralph must have heard the cry. He turned around and, weaving back and forth between the various trees, made his way back to us. He pulled us behind the tree. "Are you alright?" he asked, his eyes focused on the shooters, who were now gaining ground.

"Yeah," she responded shakily, "I think I'm okay."

Ralph pulled a pistol out of his waistband and aimed it at a tall, armed man who was exiting the house through the back door. The gun went off with a loud bang and a pool of red appeared on the man's shirt as he fell to the ground.

"You two," Ralph said in a terse voice. "Run like hell."

We ran straight for the large cove of trees that marked the end of Anja's property. Again, my sister cried out in pain. This time a stray bullet had hit her in the foot, and she was bleeding badly. I knew she wouldn't be able to run.

Anja looked at the wound in her foot, and her eyes rolled back into her head. She collapsed to the ground, completely unconscious.

Shit! What was I going to do now? I froze up. There was nothing to do. I couldn't carry her, that's for sure. I was alone. There was a group of four men coming up on us, and they were coming fast.

I looked around for Ralph. He was crouched next to a windowless part of the house with his pistol out, a small group of dead bodies beside him.

My stomach turned at the sight of the dead men. I threw up, and then I threw up again.

The thought of those lives, snuffed out by bullets; bullets fired from the gun of someone who I knew—it was awful. My brain flashed back to the night my mother was killed, and the loud shot, ringing in my ears.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone raise a gun and aim right at me. I dove under the bullet. I thought for a moment that I had managed to dodge it. That was when I felt a stinging in my leg. Then my eyes rolled back and I felt no more.

Chapter 4

I woke up in a rather scratchy bed with rusty iron posts. I had leather cuffs around my wrists, attached securely to the bed. I looked around, wondering what the hell was going on, where the hell I was, who the hell had put me here, and what the hell I should do. Limited by the restraints, I lifted myself up as high as I could, and I found that no one else was in the room. The room was dark, painted a cold blue. It was empty aside from the TV playing the news.

I stared at the screen blankly, having nothing else to do. I wondered where on earth my sister was, and what was happening. “Well, I am rich,” I thought glumly. “So is Anja. Maybe we can buy our way out of this.”

I looked back up at the TV and noticed that the coverage was coming from Anja’s smashed-up house. I strained to hear what the newscaster was saying.

“This is the site where Tommy Starr heard gunshots when he was walking his dog in the woods. He immediately rushed back to call the police. Upon arrival, the police noticed that the house was almost in ruins, and the occupants missing.

“This is the house belonging to acclaimed novelist Anja VanRijn. Her brother, the world class soccer player Jan VanRijn, is missing as well. They were reportedly having lunch with the

radical political writer turned freelance editor, Ralph Peterson.

“All three are missing and there are no clues as to where any of them are. Police are working hard to see whether they can find any clue as to the location of these missing persons. If you see any of them, please notify the police. The investigation is ongoing.”

I stopped paying attention then. There was simply too much information for my brain to process. Ralph used to be a political writer? Why was he the editor that my sister had chosen? Had he kidnapped me and my sister? If he did, who did those guys that he was killing work for?

My brain was whirling. I started breathing faster and faster. My head was getting light. I had no idea what was going on. I had been shot at. My sister was gone. I had no idea where I was or how I had gotten here.

A large black man came into the room and put a hand on my shoulder, pushing me down.

“Relax,” he said, “you’re hyperventilating.”

His presence did not make me want to relax and I started breathing faster. “Relax!” he told me roughly, pushing me down again.

I pulled harder against the restraints. He gave a long sigh and pulled a black pistol from his belt. I fought even harder, practically ripping my arms off, trying to get out of the leather cuffs. The man turned the gun around and hit me with it square in the head, knocking me out cold.

When I woke up again, the TV was not on and there were other people in the room. I did a quick scan. There were two large men, the guy who had hit me with the pistol, and a white man with his muscles bulging out of his tight T-shirt. There were two young women, one tallish, and one short, both of whom looked like they could kill a man with ease. The last was Ralph, sitting in a chair, wearing a casual suit with a walking stick leaned against his chair.

“The fuck did you do?!”

“Relax,” he told me in a stern voice that I already hated.

“You want me to fucking relax?! Do you know what fucking happened?!”

“Yes, I know what happened, Jan.”

“Then how am I supposed to relax?!”

“Just breathe.”

“And where the fuck is my sister?!”

“Anja is currently being rescued from the men who attacked us, by men under my employ. A call should be coming in in a few minutes.”

“And who the hell were the men who attacked us?”

“Dead men,” Ralph said with a practically emotionless face. “That is,” he continued, “if you help me.”

I took a moment to process what he had said. “You want me to help you kill someone when you have me locked up? Why the hell do you think that would work?”

“Because it’s necessary for the welfare of your sister,” he responded.

“How the hell is any of this for her welfare?” I asked angrily.

“It is. It’s also something that you should do to honor the memory of your mother.”

“My... mother?” I asked slowly, dumbfounded. “How does she come into this?”

“The same people who attacked us killed your mother all those years ago,” he said, expressionless. Upon hearing this, my brain went wild, asking a dozen questions and getting no answers. My anger filled me with energy, but I still felt tired and defeated.

“Tell me,” I said softly.

“You have to agree to help us first,” he said.

I was angry again. “No. You will tell me what is going on now, and what happened to my mother. You will tell me now.”

He nodded like he had expected this. “I will, of course, tell you. But I won’t tell you everything. I’m sure you understand.” I nodded my assent, and it began.

“There is this society,” he started. “They have no name, but here we just call them ‘the Society.’ They are headed by a man whose name I will not tell you until you agree to do the job. He is a high-ranking person in the U.S. government.”

“Why won’t you tell me his name?”

Ralph just glared at me and continued. “They have been operating for decades, under multiple leaders, but the one who has had the longest reign is the aforementioned official.”

“What happened to the other ones?” I asked.

Ralph bothered to answer that question. “Poison,” he said. “And a bullet through the eye and out the back of his skull.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Who killed them, you mean? We did.”

“Should be harder this time, though,” said the tall girl with short brown hair.

Ralph glared at her. I took in what she said. “This time? You’ve got to be joking. You want me to kill off a high-ranking U.S. official?”

“Um ... later,” he responded. “Anyway, your mother was working for me. She would get information from one source and give it to another. That’s why she became a jeweler. You could have a client walk in; tell her something in a kind of code disguised as an order. Someone else picks it up later. She could hide codes, messages or notes in the metal. The Society is none the wiser.”

“And my father,” I asked. “Does he come into this?”

Ralph hesitated slightly and then said, “No. He did some stuff for us unknowingly, but he does not factor into this.”

This was too much. My mom would always tell us how much she loved her job; the fine craftsmanship and skill that others would marvel at. Now Ralph was telling me that she only did that so she could hide codes and messages? My mind was a whirl of confusion.

“Continue,” I said.

“Anyway, she was working on a necklace with an extraordinary significance to our cause. They found out. They hired a common thief to kill her and take the necklace. Told him that they would melt it down once they did something with it and he could have the gold.”

“Told him?”

“Well, he’s dead now, of course.”

It was unnerving and just plain awful that Ralph could talk about death in such a calm, nonchalant way. Did he not realize how it could affect people? All people. I was about to pose this question when Ralph started to talk again.

“They got the info and it set us back a couple years in stopping the Society. Then they hacked us. Then they found out about you and Anja. We had covered up your relationship to Petra. I decided that if I could convince Anja to join us, we could use her writing skills to take down the Society and then we could protect her better.”

Ralph’s phone rang. He took it out very deliberately. “Yes?” he said. “Very good.” He listened for a while longer. “Take her to the base nearest to you. Be more careful in the future. We can never lose an asset. Thank you.”

“It seems we managed to rescue your sister,” he said calmly.

“Is she alright?” I asked.

“Mostly.”

“What do you mean, mostly? Where is she? Is she hurt? When can I see her?”

“I won’t tell you where she is, but I can assure you she’ll live.”

“I can’t see my sister, who just was kidnapped by an official in her own country and is hurt. Why the hell not!?”

“You can’t see her because they might know where we are, and she is shaken up and in pain, so she needs time with the psychiatrist and the doctor. Also, I believe that you’ll agree to do the job we have for you, and if you see her then she might convince you not to do it.”

“Well, if you think that she would try to convince me not to do it, then why do you think I would do it?”

“Because you care about your sister and your mother. You want revenge for the pain that the Society has caused your family. I know that you can channel your pain aggressively. That’s what makes you such a good soccer player. Besides, with the knowledge that you have now, do you honestly want to walk away from this? Can you walk away from this?”

I shook my head numbly.

“Does that mean that you agree?”

“No. But I’m not saying no,” I said, trying to gather my wits. “I will do the job if you let me see Anja.”

Ralph chuckled like he had expected this. “You will do the job and you will not see your sister, because seeing your sister will endanger her, and not doing the job will tear you apart.”

I was getting more and more pissed off by both Ralph’s logic and his contemptuous attitude. I knew that I was being stubborn simply for the sake of being stubborn, but I didn’t even

address what he said. I simply moved on to the next question.

“In what way is Anja hurt?”

“She has superficial cuts to her arms. She has a deeper cut and a stab wound on her left leg. She is getting immediate medical attention. She also has a bullet wound to her foot. There was poison on the bullets, and it seems on some of the knives. That will be the hardest for her to recover from.”

“Will she be okay?” I asked forcefully.

“Yes. Our doctors are good and this is exactly what the Society always does with their prisoners,” Ralph said, his eyes clouding over and his voice filling with disgust. He shook his head and took a lighter tone. “It is standard stuff, but still—we will make sure she is all right. Have no fear.” He seemed for once to be completely genuine. Of course, the fact that he showed a small amount of empathy didn’t make me like him.

His supercilious attitude annoyed me, but beyond that, what made me the least comfortable was the fact that he always seemed convinced that he acted in the right. He talked about death in a carefree way because he believed all death was justified. He spoke without emotion, because he had an excuse to. It seemed that I wouldn’t be able to get through to him, or insult him or do any of the other things I wanted to do to him, because no matter what he said, he was in the right. God, I wanted to tear his head right off.

He stood up and began to limp out of the room. Everyone else exited before him. At the doorway, he turned around and looked me in the eyes. “Sleep on it,” he said. “Remember your mother. We don’t need any more casualties.” The door clicked shut behind him, leaving me alone in the darkness.

We don’t need any more casualties? That was jarring. “You won’t be a casualty, Anja,” I

said quietly in Dutch. "I swear it on my life." My eyes stung with tears. I tried to blink them away, but they still streamed down my cheeks.

That night I made up my mind. I would do whatever job it was that Ralph wanted done. I did not want to become any kind of murderer or assassin. But I would not allow Anja to be hurt in any way. According to Ralph, this group had already taken my mother from me, and they were not about to take my sister, too. My family was the only thing I had left.

Chapter 4

When I woke up the next morning, there were no restraints. I guess Ralph figured that he had won. He was right, of course, which annoyed me. I peered out the door and saw the tall guard who had knocked me out at the door.

I cautiously exited the room to see a dreary, white hallway, and worn wooden plaques with Roman numerals hanging on the walls. There was a long, straight staircase at the end of the hall.

"Oh, it's you," the guard said.

"Where's Ralph?" I asked.

The guard shrugged.

I wandered into a kitchen several turns off the main hallway. I sat there nervously, wondering if I was allowed to eat. Within a couple minutes, Ralph was coming down the stairs, a slightly crazed look in his eye. "The first stage has started," he said. "And I was too late to stop it. The Prime Minister of Japan has been assassinated."

"And?" I asked.

"This is the first stage of *their* plan." Ralph said, his face white with a hard mixture of fear and stress. "You see, it's being blamed on the British and the Americans. This may just start

the war.”

Before I could ask about why they would blame the Americans, Ralph said, “The Society left behind a clear trail straight back here. Next they are going to take out the British Prime Minister and blame it on the Japanese. Their goal is to start World War III.”

“World War III? Why would someone want to start a world war?”

“I’ll explain it to you tonight.”

“Fine,” I said. I knew that arguing with him was pointless. “Will I also have to wait until tonight to hear an explanation as to why, I, of all people, have to kill someone in order to stop a world war? Will I have to wait until later to discover who you want me to rip from their family and friends?”

“Do you agree to do the job?” he asked, deadpan.

I took a deep breath in, and I nodded.

“Fine, then,” he said, assuming a satisfied look. “I’ll give you a hint. Think. If there is a huge war going on and somehow the president dies, who then becomes the most powerful man in the world?”

I took a deep breath. Did he mean what I thought he meant? “You want to take out Bill Schneider,” I asserted. “You want to assassinate the vice president of the United States.”

“Yes, I do. And I can do it, and you have a role.”

“I’m not killing anybody.”

“No, you’re not,” he said. “At least probably not. But even if you don’t do the killing, you have a part to play.”

I started to ask what that role might be, but I was quickly interrupted.

“I won’t explain now. Go with Sophie out to the shooting range. I want you to be able to

shoot straight by the end of the week. I'll clarify later.”

Oh, shit. I was right. And he was serious. This was real. How the hell had I been talked into this? I knew the answer to that. I had been talked into it by a master of manipulation who knew my weak points and had exploited them and given me a simple bivariate choice. Be torn apart by regret, pain, and fear, and stay in that bed as a prisoner, or do something horrendous.

Sophie was about 5 feet, 8 inches tall. She had short brown hair and looked like the kind of person who, if you insulted her, would slap or maybe even shoot you. She seemed to be in her early 30s.

We went to the range, and she explained each of the parts of the gun and how to aim properly. She talked about different types of guns and their different functions. As she talked, I felt more and more sick. When she demonstrated shooting, I had to avert my eyes. She said I had to look, but I still couldn't. She shot again and again until I was finally willing to watch her do it.

She then told me to try. I cautiously picked up the short rifle, trying to ignore the tightening knot in my stomach. I almost threw up after firing my first shot. Sophie made me fire another, and then another. I became more comfortable with it, but I was disgusted at myself for that.

That morning, I spent four hours learning how to fire a gun properly. After that first day, I could hit the target almost every time. Ralph better have a good-ass plan. Not to mention a good-ass reason he was so morally superior and a good-ass reason why I should help commit such a horrible crime. I had no idea what I was preparing for, and even the concept of killing someone dropped a weight into my stomach. I tried to ask Sophie some questions, but I was quickly cut off by an order to be “quiet on the range.”

Sophie was next to me, practicing her aim, as well. I was shooting from 40 meters and thought I was doing well, hitting the target. Then I looked to her range, where she had hit the bull's eye five times. She was shooting from 60 meters.

When we got back from the range, there was still more work to be done.

We spent the next two hours practicing with knives. If I ever thought that an hour and a half soccer game was hard, then I had been proved wrong. Nothing was more tiring than sparring for almost two hours with wooden knives. It was clear that Sophie had far more experience than I did. Though I probably outweighed her two to one, she was a lot quicker, and I was covered in bruises by the time the sun set and my day was finally over.

Chapter 5

At about 8:00, Ralph, Sophie, and I sat around a large table for dinner.

“You probably have questions, so feel free to ask them over beef stroganoff. You may ask whatever questions you want, but try to refrain from asking what the plan is,” Ralph said in perfect Dutch.

“And if you were going to ask why not,” Sophie added, “it’s because we are going to answer that question anyway, just later. And we don’t want all the guards knowing our plan.” She, too, was speaking Dutch.

These people knew Dutch? Why? What the hell would they use it for? My head was a swimming cesspool of questions. Ralph jumped right on answering one of them before the words even came out of my mouth.

“Sophie was born in Belgium but traveled all over Europe when she was young. Her father manufactured hunting rifles with a company he created called ‘The Hunt.’ She learned German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, and English during that time. While in Russia, she learned the

atrocities of the other side. When she came to America, our group was made up of people of many different languages with bad communication. As a linguist, she has helped us out a lot in improving that aspect of various plans and making our group far more influential on an international level.”

“You said that I have a role in the death of Schneider. What is that role? What will I be doing, and why on earth am I at all qualified for whatever it is? And between the two of you, who’s in charge of whom? I don’t understand the hierarchy of your ... organization,” I said between bites of beef and noodle. I was flooded with questions, but unsure how to manifest them in complete sentences.

“I’m killing Schneider. You’re ground support, and a type of ... insurance,” Sophie said. “And for your question about our organization, Ralph is in charge of me, not vice versa.”

“What do you mean, insurance? What is my *specific* role here? What did I sign on to do?”

“That’s to be explained later.”

“And why were we attacked? Why was Anja taken?” I asked, irritated by that non-answer to this vital question.

“You were attacked because Anja was doing a very special job for me,” Ralph said. “I don’t suppose that she explained what her most recent book was?”

“She explained the premise to me.”

“Well we have several informants in the government. One has access to special, historical, classified information. Anja was essentially writing a propaganda book for us. It’s a conglomeration of stories of different people who died trying to take down Bill Schneider and his organization. But beyond that, we embedded classified government material in the book. It is

not information that could jeopardize any lives, but it is concerning enough to the government to ring alarm bells. We hoped this would lead the U.S. government to start an investigation. The man who leaked it to us would try to make the investigation go as deep as possible. And that would hopefully create a situation where the government, with a little prompting, finds out the truth and puts an end to his plan.”

I took another bite of the stroganoff that was quickly disappearing from my bowl. I took a deep breath. There were so many questions to ask about that. But I started with the one that I could at least wrap my head around. “How did you convince Anja to do that?”

“Simple. I told her the true story of your mother. I told her about the embedded information in that final necklace and how it was going to be snuck into Buckingham palace, hopefully to be deciphered by either the Queen, a guard, or whomever she gifted it to. I told Anja several stories. Sophie told her some more. And as we talked, I could just see her piecing the book together in her head. No one else could have told these stories in the way she did.”

“I find it hard to believe that my sister would embed classified information into a story so that she could take down a conspiracy. Revenge isn’t her type,” I said.

“Very true. She didn’t embed it. I did. That’s why I insisted on being her editor.”

“You lied to her,” I said, not even pretending to be surprised.

“Yes, I did. She might not be a person who is set to take revenge, but you are. You want these bastards to lose and I know it. You know what I did was necessary.”

“How did they find out about this whole scheme of yours?”

“It seems that despite our best efforts, they hacked my communications with her. They figured it out. They even know who our informant is.”

“So if you had this plan that is potentially still operable considering the fact that my sister

is safe, then why do you need to resort to violence and why do you need my help?"

"You think they only worked this end of it? They wanted to kill you and her just because you could have been helping me and she *was* helping me. On the other end, they got our man transferred to a place where he no longer works with anything classified. Then they simply declassified the documents. Now no one would give a damn and there would be no investigation. It would just be a heart-wrenching story about good people who I know and who need your help to get justice in the world."

There was a long break of silence as I looked at Sophie and I wondered what her story was. What had she told my sister?

"So, was dinner to your satisfaction?" Ralph asked, cutting into the silence. I nodded mutely. "Good," he said. "Now we will go over the plan and what we believe Schneider's plan is. And then you will ask all of your remaining questions."

We walked down a flight of stairs, and my jaw nearly fell off. It was a gigantic basement full of computers, cameras, and other gizmos.

"Don't touch any of the red buttons, please," Ralph called out.

"Why not?"

"Because they set off bombs that we have planted around the house. Just in case. Oh, and try to avoid touching any green buttons, as well. That will blow up our entire basement, which costs more in technological money than the worth of several small corporations."

Ralph walked over to a tall, black man who had thin wire glasses and was seated behind a computer. "We need both plans, non-revised."

"Okay," the man answered. "Do you want it on the computer or old-fashioned paper?"

"Old-fashioned paper will do just fine."

“Okay, it’ll be at the ‘classified’ printer in two minutes.”

“He is our head of classification here in California,” said Ralph, seeing the questioning look in my eyes. “He keeps all the classified files safe from hackers. He was the one who managed to keep the hackers that found your sister out of other, very important data that could compromise us all. He keeps all the data and organizes it but does not actually have access to it all. In order to get access, you need one of these,” Ralph said, flipping out an ID that said, “S&R Co.” on it.

I glanced at it curiously.

“It stands for Sam and Ralph Company. Only Ralph has one currently,” Sophie said softly, looking at me. “Sam was found in Germany about a year ago with his own cut off leg tied around his neck. The joint of his knee was squeezing his throat. The foot and thigh were tied together at the back of his head, with a good old-fashioned rope. It choked him, closed his airway, and cut off his blood flow. That, along with him already dying from blood loss, was a pretty effective way to ensure his death and make a spectacle of it at the same time. It was pretty gruesome, and it was very sad for the agency when I found his body. Lots of blood.”

“Thanks for the image,” I said, picturing this bloody mess of a body.

“Well, if you all are done talking about the gruesome death of my colleague, then we could maybe look over the plan,” Ralph cut in sharply, yet in a voice that quavered audibly, glaring at Sophie.

“Sorry, sir,” Sophie said, looking at the floor, clearly embarrassed.

“Let’s start with the other side’s plan,” Ralph said, seeming to forget his anger at us for discussing Sam, which appeared to be a sensitive topic.

He laid the papers out in front of him.

“Their plan is to take out leaders of many powerful countries, Japan’s prime minister today being a good example. Many of the countries are nuclear powers such as Great Britain, France, and the U.S.”

“At some point soon, a trail of documents will be found with the U.S. president and vice president’s signatures that indicate that the U.S. orchestrated the assassination as retaliation for the bombing of the American embassy several months ago. There are documents, forged by the Society, that implicate the Japanese in the bombings. The falsified motives for that are too complicated to get into. Now Aaron, our head of confidentiality who you just met, is also our lead hacker. He’s one of the very best, but even he has been unable to tamper with the documents.

“Soon, the U.S. and the Japanese will be preparing for war. Then the Russians will be pulled in using a similar technique, but they will be against their regional rival China. There are many connections being formed between the various conflicts, and so eventually, WWII will ensue.”

Ralph never once glanced down at the papers laid out in front of him.

“Once the war has officially started, the president will be assassinated. The vice president will come in and be the savior of all the different countries by creating ‘peace.’ The Society, which will have access to stolen nuclear weapons, will carry out terrorist attacks in Britain, Japan, and Russia. Then Schneider, who will be acting as the president by that time, will exact harsh retaliation on the alleged perpetrators.

“Under the guise of economic and political aid, the U.S. will slowly, quietly, but surely take over each of these countries. If any more conflict starts, the U.S. will have too much firepower to be opposed. Any country that does attempt to resist Schneider’s takeover will be

subject to advanced terrorist activities as well as threat of and sometimes use of nuclear weapons.”

“Through torturing certain terrorist leaders, one of Schneider’s associates now has access to large numbers of fanatics who will unknowingly fight for him. He has an unprecedented level of control over crime groups, anarchists, and terrorist networks of all kinds, and his skill in dealing with the upper echelons of society is considerable. Unless we deal with him now, his consolidation of power within the U.S. and throughout the world will be unstoppable.”

Wow. Okay. That was a lot. “Why does he want this?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” said Sophie.

“I mean, why would an American politician want to start a world war and take over the world?”

“It’s a matter of his philosophy,” Ralph said. “He believes the world is supposed to work in a certain way. He believes that everyone must be made entirely equal. That way he can figure out who the weak ones in society are and weed them out. Then only the strong will be left.”

I breathed out slowly. “What’s our plan?” I asked, trying to sound casual, though my heart was pounding against my chest.

“You seem nervous,” Sophie said, smirking at me.

“Yeah, no shit,” I said, rolling my eyes. “We were just talking about nuclear annihilation. Now we are going to be talking about assassinating the vice president of the United States. There is a high chance of death no matter what. So yeah, I’m nervous.”

She nodded. “Fair.”

I realized that I was starting to like her a lot more than I liked Ralph. God, I hated that guy. It was getting to the point where I wanted to punch him every time he opened his mouth.

“Well, this is fun,” Ralph said. “But I am a very busy person, so can we get a move on, or should I leave, giving you two some,” he coughed, “time together?”

If my nerves hadn't been so spiked already, I probably would have just backed down and let it happen, but I was jumpy and I felt like acting bitchy. “Yeah, that would be great,” I said.

“What?” he asked.

“It would be great if you left the room. I don't think I need you in here mouthing away at me. All I need is to do whatever it is that you need me to do, and trust me, Sophie seems more than capable. I don't think I need you right now.”

“You work for me,” he said. “If I say you need me, then you need me.”

“No,” I responded. “I don't work for you. My interests align with yours, and I was forced into this situation. So no, I don't believe that I work for you.”

Sophie shook her head. “Careful, Jan,” she said.

I ignored her and turned back to Ralph. “You are stupid and annoying and unhelpful, and I don't get why a stupid, annoying, unhelpful son of a bitch is in charge.”

Sophie cut in and looked at Ralph. “He clearly doesn't like you. Maybe it would be better if I briefed him, and you went away.”

He turned to her with disdain etched into his every feature. “And how do I know that you're going to do the briefing right?”

Sophie glared a stone-cold glare at him and said, “I've gone over the plan fifty more times than you have. I know everything right down to the second.”

Ralph looked defeated. But more than that, he looked angry. I realized that maybe this was a man I shouldn't push around so much. He turned on his heel to leave and walked out of the room very slowly and decisively.

At the door, he turned around and looked me in the eyes.

“I am the only one fit to run this organization. If you ever question me or my leadership again, I will kill you. You have no idea what I have lost.” Then he left, slamming the door behind him.

I froze, realizing that I had just received my first death threat. Then I thought, *You have no idea what I have lost*. Because how could he?

I noticed that Sophie was talking to me, and that I had just been staring at the closed door. I turned to her. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t quite get that.”

Chapter 6

“I said thank you.”

“For what?”

“For getting him out of here.”

“Huh? I thought you guys were kind of on the same side here, just that he was a lot more of a dick,” I said.

“Well, we are working together. And he does lead this thing well. And I am on his side. But I also don’t quite feel comfortable with him. He’s a tad ... unhinged. For example, I know that if we fail, he will kill me. Also, we needed to have this talk.”

“What talk?”

“Well,” she said, “we are going to be doing something together. We are going to be doing something dangerous. You have to know me and I have to know you. We need to know how each other thinks. There can be no surprises. I have to tell you this plan in my way so that you understand the plan.”

This day was full of surprises. Information was being dumped on me and it was almost

too much to handle.

“If you don’t feel comfortable around him, then why do you work for him?” I asked.

“This is the only way to take down the Society, which is the only goal that I have in my life right now.”

“But you don’t have to work for him,” I said. “You could—and I’m sure you’ve thought of this—do the same work, not for Ralph, but rather parallel to him.”

“Well, yes, I could do that. But I think it’s better to avoid suspicion and conflict if everyone is under the same organizational umbrella. Besides, we already have a well-structured organization with a clear hierarchy and clear decision-making processes. Despite Ralph being a bit unhinged, this is a well-oiled machine that works, and nothing I could establish would be able to work as efficiently.”

I thought for a moment.

“What about Sam?” I asked.

“What about him?”

“Well as soon as we started to talk about him, Ralph got really mad. Who was Sam to him?”

“Sam was a friend, a colleague, and a writer, and better at it than Ralph was. Though he won’t admit it, they were also lovers. And then Sam got killed and that unhinged him. And then he found out that it was Schneider’s Russian branch—the center of his organization, led by the worst man in history—who did it. The truth is that Ralph craves revenge now.”

I looked at her. Why was she fighting? What was she doing here? Feeling slightly impetuous and acting totally on impulse, I decided to ask.

“And what’s your story?” I asked.

“That is a topic I prefer to avoid.”

“Well, don’t we need to know one another?”

She rolled her eyes and sighed dramatically. She began pacing around the room, looking impatient.

“We need to know each others’ mental processes. We need to understand each other enough that we can avoid dying. We aren’t going to recount tales of past tragedies and commiserate over how the universe has sought to take down our lives.”

I thought for a quick moment. If she didn’t mean that we tell our life stories, then I didn’t really know how we would find out about each other’s mental processes. That was how you were supposed to get to know a person. But I had never liked when people pried into my past. I would give her the same courtesy. “Makes sense,” I said. “So what’s the plan?”

She took a deep breath in. “Through some sleuthing, Aaron managed to take a copy of Schneider’s schedule. He discovered that Schneider plans to visit the White House right before he leaves to speak with the British prime minister regarding Japan. He will be leaving the vice president’s mansion at noon. We will confirm this with Mike, who is acting as lookout.

“Right afterwards, we are going to meet up with a minivan in a secluded location that will provide us with uniforms and badges that will disguise us as FBI. The people stationed in the van will also give us the weapons we need. You will have heavy gear. You are there in case shit really goes down. I will grab the sniper rifle. We are then going to go to an abandoned building at the maximum range of our rifle.

“Mike will use a remote to activate a machine gun. As soon as we hear that, I will shoot Schneider as you provide ground cover. We are hoping that all the counters will be focused on the machine gun and won’t notice a rifle round. We will then leave with all our gear in a van. If

anyone is suspicious of us and we can't talk them out of it, then we will start yelling in Russian and then run like hell.

"We will then get into the van and get the hell out of there, praying that we don't die.

Questions?"

"Yes, of course, I have questions."

"And they are? Don't be cruel. You can't leave me in suspense like this."

I looked at her with an expression that I hoped said that I didn't think that this was the time to be annoying and make jokes. "Why am I here?" I asked.

"What do you mean, why are you here?"

"I mean, why am I going on this mission when I barely can shoot a gun? How is it humanly possible that this giant organization doesn't have someone who can do this twenty times better than I ever could?"

"You are here for several reasons. You speak Russian for the ruse. That's important. But beyond that, after what happened with your sister and Mom, there is no chance that you could be bought."

I sensed that she wanted to say more, but wasn't sure if she should. "And?" I prompted.

"You want me to be completely honest?"

"Of course I want you to be completely honest," I said. "What kind of question is that?"

"Well the truth is that you're here because you could die."

"Care to elaborate?"

"Well, think. What would happen if they only sent me to do this job and I failed and got captured?"

"I don't know."

“Nothing,” she said, answering her own question. “I would be some dumbass who tried to assassinate the vice president and failed. There aren’t any records of me anywhere. It would be chalked down to me being some sort of terrorist or anarchist. If I was found dead it would be the same result.

“But alternatively, imagine that they find international soccer legend Jan VanRijn dead after failing to commit an unspeakable act for reasons that are totally bewildering. They get down into it. They investigate. They do research into what the vice president could have done to get himself almost assassinated by you. Something to do with your sister perhaps. So they investigate it from that angle and suddenly their plan is uncovered for the world.”

“So I’m here to be made a martyr.”

She thought about it for a second.

“Not necessarily,” she said. “Ralph wants us to succeed. And it’s true that out of our organization, you’re not technically the best person to do this mission with me. Trust me, it makes my job harder, as well. But it’s easy to fail at this. And any failure means you die. We don’t want you to be a martyr, but if it comes to it, you’re the most qualified martyr we have.”

“But martyrdom is my only purpose?”

“Like I’ve said, you have the purpose of carrying heavy equipment and being backup. But the potential for death is the reason it’s *you*. All you have to do is succeed—to help me succeed. Then martyrdom won’t need to be considered.”

It took a second for me to take that in. I breathed in deeply then out again. “Ralph is a fairly callous person, it seems.”

“Yes, he is. Kindness is not the most important thing to him. However, it should be noted that he sure as hell knows how to use all of his resources effectively. And that’s what makes him

good at what he does.”

But I couldn't let it go. I went to sleep with more questions than before our conversation had started. But if that was Ralph's plan, then it would work. I *would* do anything to keep my sister safe.

It was as I was thinking this that I knew that though it would have been easier to refuse, I was all the way in. There was no backing out.

Chapter 7

When I woke up the next morning, I went to the kitchen for some breakfast. No one was there. I got myself a bowl of Cheerios and sat down at the table.

I then walked to Ralph's study, hoping someone would be inside. Indeed, someone was. It was the tall, black guard who had knocked me out. “They're waiting for you outside,” he said. “My name is John, by the way. John Kelly. I work as a guard, but I do my share of field work. We all do.”

“What's it like working here?” I asked.

He thought for a moment. “It can be good. I'm doing something that I think is important.”

“It can be good?” I asked.

Again, he took a long pause before answering. “There's always fear that I might be targeted, or I'll have to die for someone else. Or perhaps, worse than that, someone else might have to die for me. Those times of existential fear—those are hard.”

“How do you deal with that?”

“We all have our different ways. I know some people who deal with the fear by using

drugs. Some people pick up art or writing. I personally find that the only way to deal with it is through prayer. But I am almost alone in that. There's not a lot of room for God in a place like this."

I couldn't think what to respond. "Well, it was nice to talk to you," I said. "Thanks for letting me know about Ralph and Sophie."

I went outside and found Sophie waiting for me. "Hey," I said. "Where's Ralph?"

"I don't know. He went inside, saying that he needed to check on something quickly. He looked really nervous."

We sat there for half an hour in silence. I was getting more and more fidgety. What could it be that would keep him up for so long?

"I need to talk to Jan," Ralph's sharp voice came up from behind us. "Now!"

He looked me straight in the eyes. "I'm sorry. It's Anja. She's gone. All of the guards were dead. We think she was taken to Asia. We have everyone available trying to find her."

My whole body became rigid. I couldn't move. I streamed loose with every curse word I could remember in every language I knew: Dutch, English, German, Russian, and Spanish.

"Whoever the fuck did this is going to die! I will kill them, but I will make them hurt a lot first."

Then came the tears. It had not happened for a while, but tears just streamed down my cheeks, and I shouted at the world.

Ralph said nothing except, "Schneider's the one who did it. We lost people, too. I had to take care of all the bodies personally so that the police couldn't find them." Then he walked off.

I stormed to my room filled with a white hot rage. I didn't know for how long I cried. How on earth could this happen? Hadn't Ralph said that Anja had gotten the best protection he

could offer? And I knew that I could have protected her if I was there. It was Ralph's fault that I was unable to protect my sister. And all he cared about anyway was his own men. And revenge.

I heard my door creak open. I turned away, not wanting to talk to anyone. I heard someone's footsteps approaching and then stop. Whoever it was stood there. I stared at the ground hard at the ground for a few moments, then finally I looked up and saw Sophie standing there. "I heard," she told me.

"So which parts did Ralph tell you? Did he tell you the part where his men all died tragically to defend my sister or the part where he just failed at protecting her?"

"He feels really bad about it, you know. And why are you taking this anger out on the people who are trying to defend you, and the ones who tried to defend her?"

How the hell could she try and justify his failures? This was doing nothing to calm me down.

"Defend her?" I asked, nearly shouting. "You were the ones who put her in danger."

"We are also the only people who might be able to get her back, or avenge her if it turns out she's dead. And remember our conversation last night. He might feel a lot worse than you think."

"I don't give a damn how he feels!"

"Jan," she said, looking at me in the eyes. "You are not helping yourself and you are not helping Anja. You need to take a step back and do what's most likely to help her." She said this in Dutch.

I took a deep breath. I opened my mouth to talk, but no words came out. I took another deep breath and then one more. "And what should I do to help her, then?"

"What did you use as a distraction after what happened to your mother?" she asked me,

still speaking Dutch.

“What do you think I did?” I responded in kind. “I played soccer. I focused on being the best. I made that the only thing that I could focus on.”

“Well, find something else to focus on.”

“My sister has been kidnapped.”

“Yes, she has. And I know personally what they will do to her and it’s not good. You need something to focus on. Focus on finding her.

“Now, listen. I know how you’re feeling right now,” said Sophie gently. “But you have to push past this.”

I snorted derisively. Yeah, right. Even though Sophie seemed to have gone through a lot, there was no way she could ever understand the way that I was feeling right now.

I narrowed my eyes. I could feel the anger beginning to take over my body once again.

“Ten days ago I was leading a completely normal life—a pretty great life. I’m an international soccer player, for God’s sake! I travel around the world and kick a ball for a living! The strangest thing that’s ever happened to me is my parents dying, but I still have an amazing sister and an aunt and uncle who love me! Now look what’s happened!”

I realized my voice was rising, but I didn’t care. I had a strong urge to punch something. I rose from the chair and started pacing.

“Anja and I were dragged into something that we didn’t agree to. She was kidnapped. I was taken here, to a place where I was essentially forced into agreeing to try to assassinate the vice president. My sister is getting hurt, and I don’t have the ability to save her.” I glared at her, and whispered, “And I’m supposed to believe that you understand the way I’m feeling right now? Absolutely not.”

Sophie had been looking at the floor during my tirade, but now she looked up. Her green eyes, though gentle before, had become cold and dangerous. Shadows played across her face and her fists were clenched, her muscles tensed.

Oh shit.

“Sit down. Now,” she said quietly.

I sat.

“You know nothing about me. When I was seventeen, my four-year-old brother and my dad were killed in Russia. They took them and they killed them, right in front of me. I watched a little four-year-old boy be whipped until he bled out. They did it in front of me so they could have some amusement. I only got out because I knew how to use my anger—because I was strong and because I had conviction.”

She paused for a moment. She walked towards me and stopped still about a foot from the chair, staring down at me defiantly. Her back was straight and her shoulders were thrown back.

“But you know what, you little dipshit? When all that crap happened to me, I didn’t cry. I didn’t give up. I didn’t blame anybody else for how I was feeling and I didn’t shut out the only people who were willing to help me set things right. I fought back. I’ve been fighting back since I was seventeen years old. I’ve seen more blood and felt more pain than you probably ever will,” she said, her voice hard.

I felt glued to my chair. I’d never met such a hardened or war-torn person in my life. Then she spoke again.

“I know exactly how you feel. You’re broken and hurt and you don’t know what the hell is going on. Your head is spinning and you feel like shit. Get it together. I don’t know about you, but I’m going to fight back. I’m going to help get your sister back and I am going to help to end

Vice President Schneider's life. You have the opportunity to join me, and I think that you will. Because you're a good person. You care about your sister and you hate the people that hurt her."

She stuck out her hand—five long, strong fingers with short, even fingernails.

I looked at it.

"What do you think, VanRijn? Are you going to help me or are you just going to give up?"

I looked at the hand, and then up into Sophie's piercing eyes.

I took the hand and shook it once. Her grip was firm, her hands calloused and rough. She smiled grimly.

"That's what I thought. Now let's get started for real."

Chapter 8

I shouldered the heavy rifle that I was carrying. I would be using it to cover Sophie as she shot Schneider. It had an advanced scope that made aiming and hitting what you were aiming at easy. Though I was at a normal gun range and was thus chambering normal rounds, during the mission I would be shooting incendiary rounds. Any direct hit to a fuel tank of any vehicle would blow the thing to smithereens.

I was doing alright with this. I was hitting the target almost every time, the bullseye about half the time. I had been shooting half the day. I probably would have been doing even better, but every time that I pulled the trigger, I thought about Anja. That was what was motivating me, but sometimes the thoughts of what could be happening to her caused my hands to shake, and I would miss.

Dinners were very solemn, and we rarely spoke. I guessed that we all simply had way too much on our minds. I had to think about Anja, and Sophie had to think about keeping my head

on for me and making sure we succeeded in killing Schneider. Or, as I called him in my mind, that goddamned son of a bitch.

Ralph had even more to contemplate, considering the constant worsening state of international affairs. Japan had officially blamed England for the assassination of the prime minister. England was fiercely denying it, which was not sitting well with the Japanese. Already, countries were taking sides. I could tell that Ralph was getting more and more anxious about the fact that the Society's plan seemed to be working perfectly.

Ralph made Sophie and me work even harder in training, his anxiety becoming more and more evident. I shot hundreds, maybe thousands of rounds every day. I did constant workouts, putting on more muscle than I ever had. I had always been the kind of soccer player who was leaner, faster, and more precise than I was strong.

Ralph had given me specific, official orders about four weeks after I had arrived at the house, a week before the assassination attempt was to go through. I read them immediately, hoping to find out what I was supposed to do *after* we were finished with the mission.

The orders strictly stated that I was to return straight to the house after the mission unless circumstances require otherwise. Though I had different plans for after the mission, I nodded at Ralph to show that I understood.

When I came back to my room, I was surprised to find Sophie waiting there. "Did you read our orders?" she asked. She had not been at dinner.

"The letter said that I had to return here after we kill Schneider. Why can't I go search for Anja? Why won't Ralph even tell me whether he's searching for her himself? Does he even want me to get my sister back?" I hadn't noticed, but my voice had risen while I spoke.

I knew that Sophie noticed, but she pretended not to care. "First, I don't give a crap what

that letter told you or me or both of us to do. I'm going to help you find your sister, no matter what Ralph says. Second—"

"That's another thing," I interrupted. "Why do you care about helping me find my sister? I mean, I appreciate it more than you could possibly imagine. You know that. But why would you care about helping me or Anja?"

"I lost my dad and my baby brother to a man that was ruthless, diabolical, and evil. Even if I hate them, as long as a person is on my side, I will not make them suffer as I have."

"And do you?" I asked.

"Do I what?"

"Hate me?"

"No, I don't. But I don't really like you all that much either. I haven't gotten any kind of impression from you yet. But I agreed to help you, so regardless of what impression I end up getting from you, I will try to help you and to be a good partner."

"Well, I appreciate that. And if I do get Anja back, then I will be as grateful as a person can be. But if someone is bullshitting me, I will kill them."

"Don't be too sure," she replied.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it's not so easy to face a person, look them in the eye, and kill them. You have never killed anyone and no matter what has happened to you, you still might not be able to."

"Don't be too sure," I responded darkly.

When I was in bed, the moments that Anja and I had shared flashed across my mind. Laughing at different parts of the Harry Potter books. Watching soccer games on TV. I felt a tear

slip out the corner of my eye. It was not a loud, harsh cry like when I first found out about Anja being gone. It was a soft, quiet cry.