

CHAPTER 8

Monday, December 2

By the time Decker got back to Georgetown, the police had already arrived. So had the fire department and bomb squad. He had alerted them, as well as the local FBI office, as soon as the connection with El Aqrab had been broken. The entire street had been blocked off, from Congress Court to Corcoran.

Decker left his Z8 on Thirty-first, flashed his ID at the cop by the tape, and made his way at a run toward his townhouse. As he neared the building, he could see a great gouge ripped out of the rear of the structure, where Becca's bedroom had been. It looked like a crane had simply torn it away. Bricks were strewn about the post office parking lot. A fire truck was parked in the alley beside the old Federal Customs House. The ladder was up and a solitary firefighter was still hosing the area down. It didn't appear to be burning but Decker could still smell smoke in the air. The charred aroma of wood, of plastic and flesh. He'd smelled it before.

And, for the briefest of moments, he flashed back on his childhood car accident and the way that his parents had simply melted before him, trapped in the wreckage of their Chevy Biscayne as it crackled and burned. It crackled and burned and he hadn't been able to do a damned thing about it . . . except watch.

When he reached the front door of his house, a metropolitan police officer stopped him. Decker flashed his ID but the cop still prevented him from going inside.

"I live here," said Decker, growing more and more angry.

"Says he lives here," the cop shouted over his shoulder. He was a kid, just a rookie, Decker realized. Hispanic. Ramirez. "Another FBI agent."

"It's a ten thirty-three," someone answered from inside the house. "Is he working the case?"

"There was a young girl," Decker said. He took a deep breath. "I just want to find out—"

"Two victims," the Hispanic cop answered, interrupting him. "A woman and girl. You can't come in, sir. There's still a threat of explosives."

"Did anyone—"

"One survivor." A second policeman appeared at the door. A black sergeant. Portly. With a wide, sensitive face. "Who wants to know?"

"Special Agent Decker. FBI." He held up his creds. "One survivor? Can you tell me who? Which one?"

The sergeant checked his ID. "Right, Decker. OK. Sorry about that. The Assistant Special Agent in Charge is expecting you. Second floor. Paul Wolinsky."

"What happened to my daughter? Is she okay? Is she still in the house?" He looked at the policeman's badge. "Sergeant Plummer."

"I think you'd better talk with Wolinsky."

"Jesus Christ," Decker said with growing frustration. "Can't you just answer my question? Where the fuck is my daughter?"

"Hey, don't get pissy with me," Plummer said. "They took her to the hospital. The other one too. The housekeeper. Although why, I don't know. Lost both her arms and a leg in the blast. They were both badly burned. George Washington University Hospital. That's where they went. Look, the ay-SAC's inside, like I said. Paul Wolinsky. He told me to bring you right up when you got here."

Decker turned from the door.

"Hold on a second," said Plummer. "What about the ay-SAC? Hey, Special Agent Decker."

Decker was already several feet away when he felt a hand on his shoulder. "Sergeant's talking to you."

Without even thinking, Decker reached back, grabbed the fingers, and twisted the arm back in a wrist hold.

The Hispanic cop dropped to his knees. "You're breaking my arm," he shrieked, trying to grab Decker's leg, but Decker kept applying more pressure. "Let go of me!"

Plummer jumped in to assist him. Without releasing his grip, Decker turned, swept his leg out and the sergeant went flying.

“Hold it,” another cop said, drawing his weapon. In seconds, three other metropolitan policemen had surrounded Decker, their guns aimed at his chest.

Decker raised his hands. He took a deep breath.

“I told you to stay where you were,” Plummer said, climbing back to his feet. “I told you.” He was out of breath and obviously furious. “You Feds think you’re so fucking special.”

Just then, Rex McCullough showed up. “Excuse me. Just a minute there, Sergeant,” he said, holding his badge high in the air. A tall, well-built black man, with a shaved head and owl-like brown eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses, McCullough worked with Decker at the NCTC, a fellow cryptanalyst.

Plummer turned to face him, his hand on his gun. Then, he saw McCullough’s ID. “Oh, great. Another member of the First Bunch of Idiots. Are you going to take a swing at me too?”

“I never took a swing at him,” Decker said, suddenly sober. He could feel his heart pound in his chest. He looked at the cops all around him, as if seeing them for the first time. The Hispanic policeman was still on his knees, nursing his wrist. “He shouldn’t have touched me,” said Decker, but even to him the words sounded ridiculous. The truth was, he had simply reacted. An autonomic response.

Plummer took a step forward. He looked up at Decker, he puffed up his chest. “And I thought you were some kind of hero,” he sneered. “When we heard it was your place got bombed, every cop in the house wanted to come down and help. The guy who stopped the mega-tsunami.” He laughed. “Some fucking hero. And this isn’t the first time, is it? Is it, Decker? I read your sheet. Like going ape, do you?”

“I don’t go looking for trouble.”

“Maybe not. But it sure seems to find you.”

McCullough drew nearer. “Look, Sergeant,” he said. “How about a little professional courtesy here? This man’s house just got bombed and his daughter’s been injured. He isn’t himself. The ay-SAC knows where to find him. They can always talk later. How about it, huh? One cop to another?”

Plummer lifted his hand. “Okay, okay,” he said, looking back at his men. He nodded and they lowered their weapons. The young Hispanic cop finally rolled to his feet. He threw Decker a venomous gaze.

Plummer turned back to McCullough. “Take your friend and get out of here. And make sure he contacts Wolinsky or it’s you I’ll come looking for.”

“Thanks, Sergeant,” McCullough said, pulling Decker away. “I appreciate it. We both do.”

Decker looked back at his house, at the shattered rear corner where Becca’s bedroom had been, at the fire truck and other emergency vehicles. The flashing red and blue lights gave the scene a surreal feel, like some Hollywood set. Not quite real. And, high in the air, rising higher, he could see them: small pieces of ash and debris floating up toward the heavens. Like confetti.