

CHAPTER 9

Monday, December 2

Decker and McCullough made their way down the street to McCullough's silver Accord. Moments later, they were cruising southeast on Pennsylvania toward George Washington University Hospital. McCullough's bubble was fixed to the roof and the siren was wailing.

"She's going to be alright, John," he said, taking a peek at his friend. Decker looked pale, his eyes glassy, unfocused. "I called on the way over. I figured they'd bring her to George Washington. It's the closest."

Decker didn't respond. He simply stared out the windshield.

"She's in surgery. They say it could go either way. Marisol didn't make it. I'm sorry."

Decker still didn't say anything. It was as if he were sitting alone in the back seat, looking on at himself and McCullough in the front. Looking on at the world as it whirled past the windows.

"What was that about, John, back there at the house? John? They were just doing their jobs." McCullough paused. "John? John, answer me."

"I know, I know," Decker said, finally. He stared at the traffic choking the avenue. It felt like it was taking forever, as if the cars were moving in slow motion. The whole world seemed to be underwater.

"Still seeing that counselor?"

Decker bristled. "You sound just like Hellard. I'm fine, Rex," he snapped. Then he softened and said, "Look, it's just that . . . I'm worried about Becca is all."

"Of course you are. You're a parent. It's our fucking job to be worried. We're professional worriers. But she's a tough cookie. Survived a plane crash for crying out loud. A bombing is nothing. Becca's resilient."

A space finally opened up and McCullough put his foot to the floor. The Accord shot up the avenue. People were finally beginning to pull off to the side of the road.

"It was him, Rex," said Decker. "El Aqrab."

"What?" McCullough glanced over at Decker. "What are you saying? El Aqrab's dead, John. You know that. He died on La Palma."

"His body was never recovered."

"What body? He died in a nuclear explosion."

"Are you sure?" Decker shook his head. "I'm telling you. He called me up at the Crypt, Rex. On the red phone. He told me to pull up a particular URL." Decker filled his partner in on everything that had happened.

"I heard your house had been bombed," said McCullough when Decker was finally finished. "That's why I rushed over. But . . . You actually saw him?"

"It sure looked like him. And that voice. It was his voice, Rex, I'm one hundred percent certain. I'll never forget that voice. Never."

"But if it was him, why would he re-emerge now, after all this time? What's he planning?"

"It looks like the Brotherhood of the Crimson Scimitar may be behind the logic bombs I found in the Westlake Defense Systems software. Maybe they're looking to disable defense systems around some particular event or location. Some attack somewhere. I don't know."

"Then why blow up your house, burn your daughter? It doesn't make sense. He's just drawing attention to himself. No, this is different. It's like a personal attack against you. Like a challenge."

"Or a feint," Decker said. "A distraction."

"From what?"

"I don't know."

They finally arrived at the hospital. While McCullough looked for parking, Decker ran to the Emergency Room. Minutes later, he was ushered upstairs. Becca was still in surgery. No word yet, the attending nurse told him. But she had third degree burns around both of her arms and her legs.

Decker tried not to imagine it. It was too painful to see in his head. It's where El Aqrab had wrapped

her up with magnesium ribbon and then set fire to her.

Eventually, McCullough came upstairs and they waited together in the lounge, drinking coffee.

Several hours passed by. They barely said a word to each other. Decker sat there without speaking, trying to turn off his brain, as McCullough read magazines or tapped at his smartphone.

After what seemed like an eternity, a surgeon finally appeared at the door. Decker leapt to his feet. The surgeon approached them, looking grim. "Mr. Decker?" he said.

"Yes."

"You're Rebecca's father?"

"Becca. Yes, that's me."

"It was a difficult surgery but she's going to pull through. Frankly, it's a miracle she survived. I saw the other victim, what was left of her. If your daughter hadn't been nestled beside her when the explosion went off . . . There's been extensive damage, however. She's suffered third degree burns."

"Yes, they told me. The nurse did."

"I see. Well," said the doctor. "You're going to need to prepare yourself. She's going to be here for a while in the burn unit. And then you'll have to take care of her, or have an attendant at home, to make sure she recovers. This is only the first of her surgeries, I'm afraid. She'll require several more skin grafts."

Decker didn't say anything. He stared at the doctor. He could hear the words but they didn't seem to make any sense. It was as if he had forgotten the code.

"Yes, well," the doctor continued. He was a young surgeon, an Indian, Decker noticed. Dr. Naini. It said so right there on his scrubs.

"Can I see her?" asked Decker.

"I'm afraid not. She's in recovery now, in a bacteria-controlled nursing unit. It's vital to keep her isolated for a while to stave off infection. What she needs most now is sleep."

Decker stared at the physician. He knew that he should be asking him something but he couldn't for the life of him think what it was.

"I suggest you go home, Mr. Decker. Come back tomorrow. Someone will call you if there's a change in her condition. Yes, well." Dr. Naini started to back away slowly, started to turn toward the door. "Until tomorrow." And then he was gone.

Decker stood by the coffee machine, a puzzled expression pinned to his face.

"Could be worse," said McCullough. "Marisol wasn't so lucky."

"Yes, Marisol," Decker said. He turned toward McCullough.

His friend took a step back. Decker's features were twisted and drawn.

"I'm going to kill him," said Decker, his voice icy, bereft of emotion. "I'm going to hunt him down, find him and kill him, Rex."

McCullough issued a sigh. "I was afraid you were going to say that. You're not alone, man. He went after your family, bombed your house. There isn't a brick agent anywhere who's not going to bust his hump to track El Agrab down. But if you make this thing personal . . . Well, it's what he wants, John. He's just trying to fuck with your head. He wants you to come after him."

"I know." Decker turned and started down the hall toward the elevators. He pressed the button. "But it's like the old Chinese curse," he said, without turning.

"Be careful of what you ask for . . ." McCullough began.

"Because I'm going to give it to him."