

CHAPTER ONE

“HOW MANY OTHERS know?”

Jonathan Quinn made no response, his eyes focused across the room as if he were the only one there.

“Answer me! How many?”

Not a blink. Not a flinch.

“Your silence won’t save anyone. I’ll find them like I found you.”

The corner of Quinn’s mouth drifted up as he finally looked back at the man.

“What makes you think *you* found *me*?”

The man’s stare turned into a sneer, and his mouth opened to reply.

“Now,” Quinn whispered.

In an instant, darkness filled the room.

CHAPTER TWO

**EIGHT DAYS EARLIER
AUGUST 26th
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA**

THE E-MAIL SAT unopened in Helen Cho's inbox for nearly thirty minutes.

It wasn't that she was in a meeting or otherwise occupied and hadn't seen it. She had been sitting at her desk when her computer softly dinged, announcing the e-mail's arrival.

There were times when she would ignore incoming messages for hours or even days. But this wasn't one of those. This one she'd been expecting, had even called to make sure she would receive it as scheduled.

She knew much of what was written in the attached report, and had already seen most of the accompanying photos. So why was it so hard to open?

There was only one answer, of course. Acceptance, for reading the report meant she would finally have to acknowledge Peter was dead.

Ironic, she knew. It wasn't like death was something she never had to deal with. In her line of work, it was a common occurrence. As head of a growing network of government security and intelligence agencies, she had long ago hardened herself to the reality that people in the business died. Information gathering, targeted terminations, asset

acquisitions—these were some of the elements that made up her day. So another death should have been just that.

No emotional attachment. Accept and move on.

And yet here she was, her personal feelings affecting her job.

When the e-mail first arrived, she told herself she had more important things to attend to. Which was true, but they were dealt with in a matter of minutes. Everything after that was just busywork.

Except the unopened e-mail.

She stared at her monitor, the cursor positioned over the message. “Damn you, Peter,” she said, and clicked.

The e-mail itself was brief. The subject line: REPORT: LKR-2867c91. The message: SEE ATTACHED.

She downloaded the report, ran it through her decryption software, and opened the resulting file. The report concerned events that had taken place on Duran Island in the Caribbean Sea, forty-eight hours earlier. Most of the information had come from sources within the Isla de Cervantes government. Their security forces had responded to the call that something had happened on the smaller island. When they arrived, they had found over a dozen bodies laid out side by side in the old fort that dominated the strip of land. The only people found alive were locked together in a different room upstairs, all of them uninjured.

Among the dead was Duran Island’s owner, the former Isla de Cervantes presidential candidate Javier Romero. According to preliminary interviews with the survivors—all of whom appeared to have been in service positions for Romero, such as nurses, maids, and cooks—Romero had built up a small army, and then forcibly brought in several men, all hooded and bound, and locked them in cells inside the fort. There was some discrepancy about how many men had been held captive—some said five, others said as many as ten—but all agreed that the detainees had been tortured multiple times.

Apparently these same men had somehow escaped, and turned the tables on Romero and his forces, killing most of them before leaving the island. Isla de Cervantes officials also

believed that it was someone connected to the escapees who had called in the tip about Duran, and provided information about a boatload of Romero's men who'd fled the fight and were sailing for Isla de Cervantes.

In addition to the dead at the fort, the security forces had discovered two more bodies along an empty runway on the other side of the island. Though officials had no idea who they were, Helen's people had been able to identify them after running photographs of the dead men through a facial recognition system.

The big man was named Janus. According to the file in the archives, he worked mainly as hired muscle for whoever was willing to pay.

The older man, though, was Peter, former head of a defunct agency known as the Office.

The Office was the organization Helen's own core agency had been created to replace. She had been apprehensive about taking the job at the time. Peter had always been a friend, and, in many ways, a mentor. Though she knew it was an excellent opportunity, without Peter's blessing she would have declined the assignment. He had given it without hesitation.

The two of them hadn't always seen eye to eye, but Peter had never refused to take her calls, and had often been the only person she could turn to for advice.

The few additional details contained within the report that weren't part of her original briefing were minor at best, and unimportant. She ignored the photos of the dead, and clicked through to the back of the report to read a short analysis prepared by her people.

It was her team's belief that the deaths had been a result of an act of revenge gone wrong, its roots stretching back several years to when Javier Romero had made his run for president of Isla de Cervantes.

At the time, it was the opinion of nearly every nation in the western hemisphere that a Romero presidency would have been a catastrophe that could have created a ripple effect, not just through the Caribbean, but also through

Latin America.

A plan was put in place, and a termination team was dispatched to remove any chance of Romero winning the election. While the mission failed in its surface goal of eliminating Romero, the long-term goal of keeping him out of office was achieved, due to the severe injuries he incurred during the attempt on his life.

The Office supervised the project. Given the presence of that organization's former director, and the obvious abilities of the men who had been held with him and subsequently escaped, it is believed that Romero had rounded up the team sent to kill him years before so he could avenge what they had done.

We have not at this time been able to locate records of the operatives assigned to that mission, nor did Romero have any record of whom he'd locked up. It is possible the information was on the memory card that had been in a plastic bag attached to Romero's shirt when he was found, but it was destroyed by one of the bullets he'd taken to the chest. Some of Romero's surviving staff did claim to have heard several names used when those abducted were being led around. Because of the discrepancies between what each recalled, the accuracy of the list that follows is not guaranteed, nor is it known if it's complete.

Layer
Berkeley
Cousin
Cohen

Helen sat back. As much as she would have liked to deny it, revenge was an emotion that helped drive her industry, taking so many unnecessary lives over the years.

You do this to me. I'll do this to you.

And so on, and so on, and so on.

Now the cycle had taken Peter.

At least Romero was dead, too. If he weren't, it would've been Helen's turn to jump in, as she would not have hesitated to order him killed immediately.

She'd arranged through back channels for his body to be

brought to the US, where it would be cremated, and she could then scatter his ashes somewhere serene. But that bit of info was not in the document in front of her.

What *was* left on the report was a place for her digital signature. She stared at the empty box for a moment before finally hitting the keys that would affix her name, and not only approve the report but officially confirm Peter's death.

That's it, she thought as she closed the document. *Finished.*

She ran the now signed report through the encryption program, scrambling what she had earlier unscrambled, attached it to a new e-mail, and sent it off for final distribution.

She then stared at her computer screen, feeling like she should say something, anything, to mark the event and honor her dead friend. But when no words came, she did the only thing she could, and focused on the next item that needed her attention.

THE REPORT'S DISTRIBUTION was not handled by a person. The address Director Cho had sent it to was an automated system that forwarded the report to three locations. The first was to the active archives where the report could be quickly accessed by those with clearance; the second was to Antarctica, the name for the remote backup system used by Helen's burgeoning network of agencies; while the third was another automated distribution system, the one that handled human recipients. There, the report number would be run through a database looking for requests to receive the information. If there were no matches, the e-mail would be irretrievably erased.

In the case of report number LKR-2867c91, there was one request.

The automated software created a new e-mail, attached the report, and forwarded it. It didn't matter that the receiver was someone on the outside, and not a member of Helen's team. The software was following its programming.

Just before the original was about to be securely removed from the system, a subroutine kicked in, staying the command. The bit of code was not part of the official program. It had been added in the last two months, and was unknown to anyone within the organization. It had been created for a single purpose. As reports passed through the secondary distribution node, it would perform a rapid keyword search, something it was able to do whether the document was encrypted or not. In the sixty-odd days since it had been attached to the software, the sought-after keywords had not shown up.

This time, however, all relevant terms appeared in the appropriate order. Per design, the subroutine sent a message to a privately owned P.O. box store in Raleigh, North Carolina, telling the manager that a letter the store had been holding should now be mailed. Once this was accomplished, the original e-mail was erased, as had been the main program's intent.

The subroutine's final act was to destroy itself and any evidence of its existence. This, like its other task, was executed perfectly.

WASHINGTON, DC

“YOU'RE SURE?”

Kyle Morten grabbed the side of his laptop as if he were going to turn it around. “I could show you the photo.”

Like he knew would happen, his client quickly turned her head away. “Absolutely not! I just want to know that you're sure.”

Morten glanced at the picture of the body splayed across a patch of bloodstained ground. “Peter will no longer be a problem.”

“Finally,” she said, allowing herself the slightest of smiles.

Morten held back his displeasure at her implication. This had *not* been a protracted operation. As soon as he'd found

out the problem existed, he'd moved into action, identified a creative solution, and—with Griffin's assistance—implemented a plan to keep the truth from ever getting out. So in light of the careful steps needed to ensure the termination of the Office's former leader, the operation had been quick and efficient.

The client rose from her chair and straightened her jacket. "And we're positive no one else knows what he was looking into?"

"Positive."

"His personal files? I assume those have been taken care of."

"Do you want the details? Or..." Apparently the woman needed to be reminded that creating a wall of plausible deniability was part of the services Morten's company, Darvot Consulting, provided.

She gave him a look he'd seen on clients' faces a thousand times before, a blend of arrogance, annoyance, and reluctant admittance he was right.

"You'll update me if there is anything else I need to know," she said.

"There won't be."

"I'm counting on that."

She picked up the leather portfolio she'd walked in with and headed for the exit. Griffin, who had been standing quietly at the back of the office, stepped over to the door and opened it. As she had when she entered, the client left without even acknowledging the man's presence.

When they were alone, Morten said, "Are the teams in place?"

"Ready and waiting."

"Give them the go."

Griffin pulled out his phone and fired off a text that would activate the two teams of housebreakers, one positioned at the Georgetown apartment building where Peter had lived, and the other outside the nearby townhouse Peter had sometimes used as a satellite office. Both locations would be searched for anything that might pertain to the private

investigation Peter had been conducting. So, the real answer to the client's question would have been, No, the files hadn't been secured yet, but they soon would be.

"When is O & O scheduled to begin?" Morten asked.

"This evening," Griffin said. "Needed to give our people enough time to look around first."

O & O was a for-hire, quasi-government security agency that had proved extremely useful to Darvot over the years. Because it had a poorly defined management structure, Morten had been able to use O & O to obtain sensitive, top-secret information without the organization even realizing what they'd handed over.

O & O was also useful when it came to assignments Morten and Griffin would rather not use their own men for. In this case, Griffin had engaged the agency to watch the apartment and townhouse once the search was complete, and deal with anyone who might show up in the next few weeks. To support the latter point, a thick file of false documentation had been provided to O & O, indicating anyone who entered either place during that specified time frame was likely connected to a particularly violent Islamic terrorist organization, and should be considered an eminent threat to the country.

The reason for the stakeout was that, contrary to what Morten had told his client, he was far from positive no one else knew what Peter had learned. While he felt confident that prior to being kidnapped, Peter had kept his investigation to himself—especially given the personal nature of what he was looking into—the concern was about *after* the old intelligence officer had been taken to Duran Island. Morten thought there was at least an even chance Peter had guessed how Romero had come to possess his and the other men's names, and had shared his suspicions with his fellow prisoners. This wouldn't have been a problem if that jackass Romero had pulled off his plan to kill them all. Unfortunately, it appeared that everyone but Peter had escaped. Which meant there were four men out there somewhere who might be a problem.

That's why the apartment and townhouse needed to be

watched. It was also why Griffin had hired some freelance trackers to hunt down the four men. To this point, none of the fugitives had resurfaced.

As Morten mentally went through everything again to make sure he hadn't missed any angles, the desk phone rang. Griffin walked over and picked it up.

"Yes?" He listened for a moment. "Okay, thank you." He hung up and looked over at Morten. "Your car's here."

Morten pulled himself from his thoughts, satisfied they'd covered their bases, and walked over to where his shoulder bag was waiting. The rest of his luggage for his flight to Europe was with the doorman downstairs, and undoubtedly being loaded into the car at that very moment. "Anything comes up, *anything*," he said, "contact me immediately."

"Of course," Griffin said, opening the door.

"I'll be back the evening of the third. Let's have it wrapped up by then, shall we?"

"Yes, sir."

CHAPTER THREE

FIFTY-ONE HOURS EARLIER
AUGUST 24th
DURAN ISLAND

“**NO, NO, NO, no, no!**” Jonathan Quinn dropped to the ground beside Orlando.

Blood covered most of her shirt. More saturated her left pant leg, the wounds courtesy of the now-dead Janus. She wasn't the only victim. Before Quinn and Daeng had taken Janus out, the man had also shot Peter, who was dead before he hit the ground.

“Orlando. Orlando, can you hear me?”

A flicker in her eyes.

“Orlando? Come on, baby, stay with me!”

Quinn grabbed her hand, hoping she would grip back, but her fingers lay motionless across his.

“Do you hear me? Baby, please stay with me!”

A slow, long blink.

“You're going to be okay. You're going to be fine. Just stay with me. Please. Orlando, come on. Stay with me!”

When her lids slid closed again, they stayed that way.

“Orlando!”

Someone grabbed his shoulders and pulled him back.

“No!” he yelled.

“You need to move out of the way,” Daeng said calmly.

Quinn snapped his head around, ready to shove his friend

away, but stopped when he saw Liz and Nate running up with the first-aid gear from the plane that had come to take them off the island. Nate skidded to a halt and fell to his knees, then ripped open the Velcro seam of the bag he was carrying.

Quinn's sister, on the other hand, froze when she caught sight of Orlando. "Oh, Jesus."

"Give me that," Daeng said to Liz, grabbing her bag. He motioned at Quinn. "Get him out of the way."

Liz tore her eyes away from Orlando and put an arm around her brother. "We need to give them some room."

"I'm not going anywhere," Quinn said, twisting away from her.

"Don't be stupid. You'll only make things harder."

He glared at her, then looked down at Orlando.

"Come on. Please," Liz said.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Okay," he whispered.

Liz guided him off to the side.

Working at skill levels equal to that of seasoned EMTs, Nate and Daeng ripped away the clothes covering Orlando's wounds, and set to work stopping the bleeding. Once they'd done what they could, Daeng pulled a transfusion kit out of the bag.

"What's her blood type?" he asked.

Before Quinn could think of the answer, Nate said, "B positive."

"I'm B negative," Daeng said. "She can take from me."

As he set up the transfusion line, two of the men they had just rescued—Lanier and Berkeley—jogged up with a stretcher from the plane. Once blood was flowing out of Daeng's veins and into hers, they moved Orlando onto the stretcher, lifted her, and, with Daeng jogging alongside, headed quickly toward the aircraft.

Quinn started to follow, but caught sight of Peter's crumpled form and slowed, unsure what to do.

Nate came up behind him, carrying the first-aid kit. "I know," he said. "But we don't have time."

Leaving Peter's body seemed wrong. He deserved more

than just being part of the carnage they were leaving behind on the island, but Nate was right. Orlando was in critical shape, and if she didn't get medical attention soon, she would also die.

Liz put a hand on Quinn's arm and pulled. "Let's go."

He took one last look at Peter before running with Nate and his sister toward the small jet.

The moment the last person had climbed aboard, Nate yelled toward the cockpit, "Go!"

In the back of the plane, Quinn knelt beside Orlando, took her hand in his, and gently squeezed it.

"I'm right here," he whispered. "I'm not going anywhere."

He searched her face for some sign that she'd heard him, but saw nothing.

Moments after the plane's wheels left the runway, Nate tapped him on the shoulder.

"Sorry," Quinn's former apprentice said. "I don't want to disturb you, but, well, it's just that I'm not sure where to tell the pilot to go."

Nate had been held captive for several days on Duran Island, arriving there with a black bag over his head, while Quinn had come open-eyed, intent on rescuing Nate and the other men who'd been taken by Javier Romero.

There was only one choice.

"Isla de Cervantes," Quinn said. The island was a short flight from Duran.

"Okay." Nate headed toward the cockpit, fighting against the incline of their assent.

Under any other circumstances, Isla de Cervantes would have been out of the question. The events at Duran Island were deeply interwoven with Isla de Cervantes's political history. Who knew how the authorities were going to react when they discovered what had happened on Duran? If they somehow learned Quinn and the others had been involved, and were still around, there would undoubtedly be questions.

Hard, difficult questions.

What Quinn and the others really needed was assistance

from someone in the area, someone who could help cover their tracks. Quinn's closest contact was Veronique Lucas, based an hour away in Puerto Rico. She had already proved incredibly useful by arranging for the plane they were now using. Maybe she had resources on Isla de Cervantes, too.

The plane was equipped with several satellite phones. The nearest was in a small cabinet next to the bathroom. Quinn retrieved it and made the call.

"Yes?" Veronique answered cautiously.

"It's Quinn."

"Quinn?" she said, happily surprised. "Is it martini time al—"

"Veronique, I need your help."

"More?"

"Orlando's been shot."

The playful tone in her voice vanished. "What?"

"We're flying to Isla de Cervantes now. We need help. Fast."

"Can you bring her here?"

"Too far. She's...she's not doing well."

"You're flying into St. Renard's?" The island's main airport.

"Unless there's another place that would be better," he said.

"No, that'll be fine. How soon?"

"Fifteen minutes or so, I think. Not much more than that."

"I'll have an ambulance waiting."

Quinn's gaze flicked to Nate and the three other freed prisoners. "We have others who need medical attention, too."

"How many?"

"Four, but none are as bad off as Orlando."

"Understood. So they could wait a little if they had to."

"Yes."

"Okay. Let me—"

"One other thing," he said. "No one can know we're there. It could get...problematic."

"You might want to tell me why."

Quinn hesitated for a moment, but knew if he really wanted her help, she needed to know. “Do you remember a man named Javier Romero?”

“Hell, yeah. Kind of hard to forget.”

He gave her the CliffsNotes version of what had happened on Duran.

“*Virgen Santa*,” she said when he was done.

“You could also do us a favor and have their navy pick up the boat of Romero’s soldiers that got away. Someone should go to the island pretty soon, too. We left Romero alive, but who knows what Janus did before he came after us.”

“Okay. I need to get working.”

“Thanks, Vee.”

AS VERONIQUE PROMISED, an ambulance was waiting for them when they taxied to a stop.

A doctor, nurse, and two EMTs rushed on board the moment the stairs were in place. Quinn tried to stay nearby as they examined Orlando, but one of the EMTs motioned for him and the others to get off the plane. The only one who was allowed to stay was Lanier. He had O-negative blood, which made him a universal donor, and had taken over transfusion duty from Daeng mid-flight.

As the EMTs carried Orlando off the plane, Quinn caught Lanier’s eye, silently asking how the examination had gone. Grim-faced, Lanier tried to smile, but couldn’t pull it off. Once he and Orlando were in the ambulance, Quinn moved to climb on board with them.

“No room,” the doctor said, motioning for Quinn to stop.

“Make some,” Quinn growled.

After the nurse and doctor exchanged a glance, the nurse scooted over so Quinn could squeeze in next to her.

The ambulance raced from the airport, sirens blaring. Quinn figured they would probably head to Cristo de los Milagros Hospital. It was the largest on the island, and the same hospital he and Orlando had been in less than twenty-four hours before as they’d tried to track down information on

Nate's abductor. But instead of driving into the city where the hospital was, they turned onto a highway that circled around the edge.

The neighborhood they ended up in was a quieter one just south of the capital, composed mainly of what appeared to be industrial businesses and warehouses. A few streets in, they passed through the gate of a walled compound, and stopped in front of a three-story, windowless structure near a double door entrance. Within seconds, the doors swung open and several people ran out, pushing a gurney.

Since Quinn was jammed in at the very back, he opened the ambulance door and hopped out first. Lanier exited next. The EMTs had removed him from the transfusion tube during the ride.

"Háganse a un lado," a woman next to the gurney said.

Quinn pulled Lanier to the side so they wouldn't impede the others. Working in concert, the EMTs in the ambulance and the personnel outside carefully transferred Orlando from the vehicle onto the rolling bed. Once straps were secured across her torso, she was pushed into the building.

Quinn grabbed one of the orderlies. "He needs help, too," he said, motioning to Lanier before taking off after Orlando.

He followed the gurney all the way to the surgical room door, but the staff would let him go no farther. Knowing it was useless to fight, he allowed himself to be escorted to a waiting room, where he pulled out his phone and called Veronique again.

"How is she?" she asked.

"They've just taken her into surgery."

"Did they give you any indication on her chances?"

"No one's saying anything." He paused. "Who owns this place?"

"No one you would know."

"Government run?" he asked.

"No."

"They must know about it."

"They probably do," she said. "But it's a money

generator. Most of the clients are from off island. You know, they come to get procedures done they'd rather their friends back home didn't know about. So as long as the government receives its cut, it keeps its hands off."

"You're sure we're safe here?"

"You're safe. Trust me," she said. "But I've gotta say, even if the authorities do find out who you are and what you did, they're more likely to pin a metal on your chest than throw you in jail."

NATE, LANIER, BERKELEY, and Curson were all admitted to the nameless hospital and taken to individual rooms. They'd been whipped, electroshocked, and beaten while held prisoner by Romero. Though their wounds were not life threatening, the men were in serious need of treatment and rest. So only Daeng and Liz were able to keep Quinn company while he waited for word on Orlando's condition.

Two hours passed.

Then three.

Then four.

Every scenario that ran through Quinn's mind ended with "I'm sorry. We did all we could." Not knowing what was happening was driving him crazy. More than once, Daeng and Liz had to stop him from leaving the room in search of answers.

"They'll let us know as soon as they can," Liz told him. "You'll only get in the way otherwise."

When Orlando's surgeon finally did walk into the waiting room, Quinn braced himself.

"I'm Dr. Montero," the man said, speaking in nearly unaccented English. "Your friend is very lucky. There is no question she would have died without the transfusion you gave her."

Quinn stared at him. "She's alive?" he finally managed to whisper.

The doctor nodded. "At the moment."

"What do you mean? Are you saying she's not going to

make it?"

The doctor held up a hand, palm out. "It is far too early to know. Your friend was shot three times. One of her kidneys is destroyed, and her left lung was punctured. The third bullet hit her knee. There's a lot of damage there, but we haven't had time to fully assess it. We concentrated more on the life-threatening injuries. And even with the transfusions, her blood loss was significant." He paused. "We believe we've removed all the bullet fragments, and she's stable for now. If she stays that way and is strong enough, she'll have to go back into surgery in a few days. The next twenty-four hours are critical."

She's alive. She's alive. Quinn grabbed on to that thought and held it tight. "I want to see her."

The doctor looked as if he was about to say no.

"Please," Quinn pleaded.

The man hesitated for several seconds, and finally said, "Follow me."

"We're coming with you," Liz said.

The doctor held up his hand again. "Better only one."

"It's not open for discussion," Liz told him.

Apparently realizing it would be useless to argue, the doctor led them to a room on the second floor. Quinn was allowed to enter first. The hospital bed was all but hidden from view by four nurses, some monitoring equipment, and a couple IV stands.

One of the nurses turned as he approached. "*No deberia estar aqui,*" she said.

"It's all right," the doctor told her, also speaking Spanish. "Let him see her."

The nurse's eyes narrowed in disapproval as if some sacred law had been broken, but she stepped to the side.

Quinn moved all the way to the bed and looked down at Orlando.

She looks so small, he thought.

She wasn't big to begin with—five feet tall and barely a hundred pounds on her heaviest days, but now she looked...diminished, like she would float away if a breeze

blew through the room.

“Hey,” he whispered as he touched the hair above her ear. “You’re going to make it, but you need to fight, and be strong like you always are.” He skimmed her cheek with the back of his finger, her skin so pale and soft, and then leaned down and kissed her on the lips. “I love you. You better damn well come back to me. Understand?”

