

Chapter One

Thursday, May 26, 2005
Portland, Maine

Daniel sat at a brushed metal, modernist work station in his expanded cubicle, and stared blankly at a sleek flat screen monitor. An MBA from Boston University's School of Management earned him a little extra space in one of the outer cubicles, and a partial view of the tall pine trees behind the building's rear parking lot. His one hundred square foot home at Zenith Semiconductor was as close to the "corner office" as modern workplace design theory would allow, and he had fellow MBA's like himself to thank for it. At least his position entitled him to a frosted glass "privacy door," which he could slide shut to emphasize his desire to remain undisturbed. Most of the staff and entry level management didn't have this option, and were vulnerable to constant, unannounced intrusion.

His door had only been closed for fifteen minutes, and he'd already counted at least five lingering shadows behind translucent glass. He continued to stare at the market analysis presentation on the screen, unmotivated to continue. His indoor soccer team pulled the late slot the night before, and he still hadn't recovered from a three hour sleep deficit. He shook his head and decided to take a walk around the ten thousand square foot cubicle "ghetto" known more formally as the third floor.

He stood up from his sleek designer chair, and surveyed the immense room. At six feet tall, Daniel could effectively see over the cubicles. Just as he slid the door open, his phone rang.

"I almost escaped," he muttered, and plopped himself back down into the soft chair.

He put his headset on, and pressed a button on the gray desk phone.

"Dan Petrovich."

"Dan, it's Sandy. I have a call for you from Azore Market Solutions."

"Do you know who it is?" said Mark, surprised to be hearing from Azore so soon.

"They didn't say," said Sandy, one of the junior assistants assigned to the marketing department.

"Just needed to talk with you immediately."

He had contracted with Azore Market Solutions to provide raw data for an overseas regional marketing analysis, but didn't expect to hear from them for another month. He usually conducted business with them via e-mail, so he was slightly concerned about the call. If Azore couldn't deliver the data, he'd have to start the process from scratch, which would put Zenith's South American market expansion efforts behind schedule, and his job at risk.

"Alright. Put whoever it is through. And Sandy...would you please ask who's on the line next time? I don't know if I'm talking to the CEO or a janitor," he lamented.

"I don't think it's the janitor, but I'm not sure. Do you want me to ask who it is before I put the call through?"

"No, don't worry about it this time," he said, and hangs up.

Several cubicles away, Sandy shook her cropped brown hair and rolled her eyes.

"Fucking janitor bullshit," she mumbled as she transferred the call.

Dan shut the door to his cubicle, and pressed the button to connect the call.

"Daniel Petrovich."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was hoping to reach Marko Resja," the male voice said, betraying no emotion.

Dan felt a surge of adrenaline fire through his central nervous system, and his brain switched over to a long dormant mode of operation. He ceased to function as Zenith Semiconductor's Emerging Markets' Analytical Lead. He stood up slowly, and glanced down the vast sea of cubicle tops.

"I'm not in the building, so you can sit back down," said the voice.

Dan remained standing and opened the cubicle door.

"Are you sitting?"

"I am," replied Petrovich.

"That's better. Do I have your attention?" said the voice, which confirmed that he was not under direct surveillance.

Dan activated the "wander" function of his headset.

"You never lost it."

As long as he remained on the third floor of Building A, his headset would function without a hard wire connection. He might be able to get a slight head start on whatever was coming his way. He opened the top drawer of his desk, pocketed his keys and cell phone, and started to walk toward the nearest staircase.

"The General has a proposal for you," said the voice.

"I'll be sure to look him up the next time I'm the D.C. area," said Dan, approaching the door to the stairwell.

"This proposal is extremely time sensitive."

He wrapped his hands around staircase door handle.

"I don't really care,"

"He thought you might say that. He told me to tell you that 'he knows everything,'" the voice said with a slight hint of impatience.

"I'm still not impressed," said Petrovich.

"Zorana Sekulic," uttered the voice.

"Where do we meet?"

"Starbucks. A few blocks from your building. Five minutes."

"No good. I'm a regular there. I'll meet you inside the Starbucks at Northgate Plaza," countered Dan.

"Where is that?" said the voice.

"Figure it out," Dan said, and disconnects the call.

He stuffed the headset in a trash bin by the door and took three flights of stairs running. He felt slightly panicked by the brazen use of Zorana's name. He'd taken extreme measures to bury that name far in the past. He opened the door to the lobby and walked briskly toward the rear security station, which would lead

him directly to his car in the back parking lot. He'd call his assistant as soon he's on the turnpike, and make up some excuse for vanishing.

Dan approached the security exit with nothing for the guards to search. Normally, they would take a cursory look inside of his briefcase, but this time he wasn't carrying anything. He addressed the single guard, who swiveled in his chair as Dan reached him.

"No need to get up Harry. I'm just running a quick errand at Target before I forget. I have a pick-up soccer game after work, and if I don't do this now...it'll never get done."

Harold Parsons eased back into his chair, glad to get the reprieve. People would start closing up their work stations in about an hour, and he'd be searching bags non-stop for two hours. This was the quietest time of his day. Everyone was back from lunch, just waiting for the end of the day, which for some arrived as early as four in the afternoon. Harold wished he didn't have to punch a time clock, but told himself that he wasn't cut out for a life of meetings and cubicles. He barely turned his head far enough to watch Daniel move swiftly through the sliding door, and nearly break into a run.

■

Dan strained to keep from breaking into a full sprint toward his BMW 545i sedan, which sat three rows deep in the lot. Though out of Harold's line of sight, five levels of windows faced the back lot, and the sight of anyone sprinting in the parking lot was sure to attract the wrong kind of attention, especially in the middle of the afternoon.

He fished a ring of keys out of his front pocket as he approached the back of his car, and remotely unlocked the doors. As his hand reached for the door handle, he pressed the ignition button on his key fob, and the BMW's powerful 325 HP engine roared to life, and settled into a low hum. Seconds later, Dan screeched out of the parking lot, headed for the Turnpike entrance.

■

James Parker tossed the burner cell phone onto the passenger seat, and started to program the dashboard mounted GPS system as if his life depended on it---which it did. After pushing a few buttons, he located the Starbucks store in Northgate, and activated the navigator, which was programmed to take the shortest route to the coffee shop. He pulled his Grand Cherokee out of the Starbucks parking, and started to weave through traffic on his way to Congress Street, where he'd be able to pick up more speed without running the risk of attracting the attention of local law enforcement.

Roughly one minute after speeding out of the parking lot, his SUV passed the entrance to the Zenith Semiconductor Industrial Complex, and James glared at the closer of two glass encased office buildings. A few weeks earlier he might have spotted Daniel in the building's parking lot, but May unleashed thick rows of brilliant yellow Forsythia bushes, which completely obscured his view of the complex's ground level. He leaned on the accelerator and shot toward Maine Mall Road.

■

Daniel's car arrived at the Maine Mall Road stoplight, one series of lights behind Parker's Grand Cherokee. As soon as the BMW came to a stop at the light, he reached under his seat and drew a compact SIG SAUER pistol from a hidden holster. He pushed the pistol under a newspaper on the front passenger seat and considered his next move. One thing was certain for Daniel. If this contact had any information regarding Zorana Sekulic, beyond her name, that information would die in the parking lot outside of Starbucks. The light turned green, and Daniel sped down Maine Mall Road to Western Avenue, banking on the likelihood that the General's man won't take the turnpike. Just as the BMW's tires squealed through the turn onto Western Avenue, Parker's Grand Cherokee passed the turnoff leading to the 95, and pushed forward on the shortest, but not quickest route to its destination.

■

Daniel arrived at the Northgate shopping complex and parked his car at the back of the Shaw's parking, to the far right of the store. He could think of no conceivable way for his adversary to spot the car from any of the three approaches to Starbucks. He reached into the back seat and grabbed a dark blue, zippered nylon jacket and a dirty Red Sox ball cap. He opened his door and stood up to put on the jacket, followed by the hat. Before jogging across the parking lot toward the entrance to Shaws, he tucked the pistol into the rear belt line of his dark brown wool pants and pulled the jacket down to ensure that it was concealed.

He arrived at the automated entrance and glanced around. Starbucks was to his immediate right, and there were three open parking spaces in front the coffee shop, directly off the covered pedestrian walkway linking together the strip mall's business fronts. A dozen more spaces sat unoccupied among the three rows of parking available further back from the store fronts. He didn't have much time to position himself, so he trusted his instincts, and walked briskly into the field of cars across from the coffee shop.

His mind raced with thousands of possibilities, variables and scenarios, as he searched for an unlocked car in the third row away from Starbucks. His training had broken through, but it felt like a glitchy computer. He shook his head, as if he could rattle his brain's circuitry back into place. After checking several cars, he found an unlocked Honda Accord, and slipped into the back seat.

■

James Parker veered his Grand Cherokee left at the split of Auburn Street and Washington Avenue, and spotted the traffic signal that marked the front entrance to the Northgate shopping center. His stomach is knotted, and he tried for the hundredth time, since arriving in Portland, to stop grinding his teeth. He'd seen enough of the Petrovich file to warrant an ulcer.

He arrived at the red light, and scanned the parking lot in front of the Starbuck and Shaws for a BMW, though he was reasonable sure that he'd beaten Petrovich to the shopping center. His only goal had been to get into the Starbucks alive, where, in front of witnesses, he'd at least have a brief opportunity to explain that he knew nothing about Zorana Sekulic. Only the name. The General had made it clear that this would be the most pressing business on the table, and that Parker's survival would depend on it.

The light turned green and Parker sat for a few seconds, momentarily paralyzed. A repeated horn jars him back to reality, and he pulled into the plaza, cruising slowly while he searched for the BMW.

■

Daniel spotted the Cherokee immediately thanks to an impatient Mainer. Three short horn blasts drew his attention to the front entrance, where even the most unobservant field agent could spot Parker cruising "casually" past Shaws, craning his neck in every direction. *Jesus. Why doesn't he just put his highbeams on?*

He peeked through the Accord's headrest and watched the Cherokee drive past Starbuck, and turn into the second row of cars. As the SUV headed in his direction, one row away, Daniel slid himself across the back seat and unlocked the passenger door. Hand on the door handle, he waited for the Cherokee to park.

■

James Parker guided the SUV into a parking space two rows back from the entrance to Starbuck. He didn't see a BMW anywhere in the lot, but he didn't want to make his arrival too obvious and park right in front of the shop. He placed the Cherokee in park, unlocked the doors and reached for the black nylon business satchel sitting on the front passenger seat. As he straightened back up, he heard a door open and felt the unmistakable steel of a pistol barrel press up against the back of his head.

"Hands up on the dashboard above the radio. Do not turn your head. Understood?" Daniel said and closed the rear driver car door, settling into the back seat and easing the pistol back from Parker's head.

James Parker nodded once, and his brain scrambled for the right combination of words to keep him alive. First he needed to get his hands up into view. He almost looked back as he slowly placed his hands, palms down on the dashboard.

"I'll ask you some questions. If I don't like the answers, then all the General's horses and all the General's men, won't be able put you back together again. Understood?" Daniel said, and Parker nodded again.

"I assume you've read some kind of file regarding my past?"

"Yes, but I don't know anything about the name I mentioned earlier."

"What name?" said Daniel.

"The General told me to use the name if I didn't think you would meet with me."

"Well, The General must not like you very much, because he knew damn well I wouldn't entertain any proposal from him, and he knew even better that giving you that name was a death sentence. How well do you know The General?"

"I've been working directly under General Sanderson for two years."

"He's not a general any more. Pissed on too many people. Important people. How did you get stuck with him?"

"We met in Afghanistan. Before he retired," said Parker.

"Retired...doesn't sound like he retired."

"He didn't. That's why I'm here."

"What do you know about Zorana Sekulic?" Daniel whispered, as he placed the barrel of his pistol against Parker's skull.

James Parker fought the wall of panic that had descended on him. He desperately wanted to try and get out of the car, but had no offensive options against Petrovich. Without some kind of distraction, he didn't stand a chance. He needed to concentrate and play the game. The General assured him that Petrovich was reasonable, and so far his behavior matched The General's assessment. Still, something lurked just below the surface. Parker could sense it, and it scared him. Parker cleared his voice.

"Absolutely nothing beyond the name. The General stressed to me that the first thing I needed to clear up with you, is that fact that I know nothing about Zorana Sekulic. He said my life depended on it."

"And you still showed up," Daniel said, pulling the pistol back, but keeping it aimed at the back of Parker's seat.

"I didn't really have much of a choice," said Parker.

"That's the problem with General Sanderson. He doesn't like for any of his people to get comfortable with the concept of free will, which is why we parted ways long ago. I'm done with The General...Mr?"

"Parker. James Parker. Can we talk about this over some coffee? The mission is critically important to our work and national security. You might change your mind."

"I'll listen, but I need you to know that I won't hesitate to add your brains to the African artwork in that place. Are you armed?"

"No. Gun's in the glove box...but I have a small Spyderco knife in my right front pocket."

"I expect to hear that knife clatter on the pavement. You can pick it up later, if it's still there. And the coffee's on you. Fair?"

"Fair," said Parker, clearly relieved.

■

James Parker placed two coffees on the table and took a seat across from Daniel, who sat against the back wall, with one hand hidden under the table. Daniel examined him for a few seconds, as he reached out for his drink. Parker

had deep blue eyes and thick, black hair, closely cropped for a neat, trimmed impression. Not short enough to immediately betray a military background, but clearly the preferred look for someone not completely comfortable with civilian life. His outfit matched the haircut. Khaki's, casual blue dress shirt with no tie and a dark blue blazer. Business casual for the ex-military officer. Petrovich suspected that he had been a senior Army captain or possibly a major.

"Special Forces in Afghanistan?" Daniel said, and took a sip of steaming hot cappuccino.

"Navy SEAL platoon commander. I met General Sanderson at Anaconda in 2004. He showed a lot of interest in the spec ops guys operating out of the Korangal Valley. That was before we started sticking outposts up there. Fucking Wild West out there. We stayed in touch, and he offered me a job as a security consultant when I got out."

"So what's in the bag Mr. Parker?"

"Mission specifics. Untraceable weapon," he responded.

Daniel kept control of the tension evoked by sudden realization that Parker had lied about being armed, and only slightly tightened his grip on the Sig Sauer pistol hidden under the table.

"I thought I said no weapons," said Petrovich.

"The case is locked, and I don't have the combination. I have a phone number for you to dial, which is programmed to respond to your cell phone number. You get the combo from a recording. I know who the target is, and all of the mission details, but The General did not want me to have access to the contents of the brief case. I don't ask questions."

"What's the phone number?" Petrovich said, and removed his cell phone from one of the inside pockets of his jacket.

"You're not going to open the case here?" said Parker.

Petrovich leans across and whispers.

"You're fucking right I am. I don't need this case exploding inside my car...and if I don't like the contents, I don't want to make another trip to return it. The number please."

Parker recited the number as Daniel dialed. The call lasted less than thirty seconds before Daniel abruptly snapped the phone closed. He leaned over the left side of the table to look at the nylon case.

"May I?" said Daniel.

"The case is yours."

Daniel lifted the case off the floor and placed it in his lap, backing his chair up flush against the wall. He still wanted some room to maneuver, just in case this elaborate set-up was a hoax and a trap, though he felt comfortable enough about Parker. The guy was far from a trained agent or contract killer. Daniel suspected that he was exactly what he claimed to be.

He flipped the four digit combination and opened the top of the case. He stared at the contents, noting the presence of a zip lock bag enclosed pistol in the padded compartment normally reserved for a lap top computer. He found two sealed documents in the other side of the case, and removed them.

"Do you have to look at this here?" said Parker, looking nervously over his shoulder at two women who occupied brown leather chairs several tables away.

"You need to relax. I didn't drag the gun out, did I?"

Parker didn't look relieved by his comments, and kept looking over his shoulder while Daniel unsealed the heavier of the two envelopes. Daniel extracted the contents, and placed them on the table next to his coffee. The top item was a picture. Parker felt severely uncomfortable with Petrovich's brazen behavior, and fought every urge to flip the picture over. He was actually afraid that Petrovich might stab his hand with the knife that Parker had dropped.

Parker watched Daniel read the contents of the second envelope, a short letter from what he could tell, and replace it with the same disinterested expression that had dominated Petrovich's face throughout their interaction. Petrovich put the second envelope back into the briefcase and took the picture off the table. Staring at the picture, he asked a question.

"I suppose this gentleman needs to take a permanent vacation?"

"Something like that. His name is..."

"I don't need to know his name. I assume this packet contains all of the information I'll need? Places of business, hours of work, gym, favorite bars...though I get the feeling this guy might not partake in the consumption of alcohol, or bacon."

For the first time since Daniel placed a gun against his head, Parker cracked a smile.

"Ah. A sense of humor. I don't think The General likes those either," said Daniel.

"So, I'll track this guy down, and find an opportunity. But I need to talk to The General personally, right now, or this whole thing is off."

"The General isn't available to talk right now. He went offline right before I arrived in Portland."

"Get him on the fucking phone, or you're going to have to kill this guy yourself. I don't think this kind of work would suit you."

Parker stared into his eyes, and sees nothing, which frightens him more than what he read in the man's file. Though his face has remained almost emotionless, something changed when Petrovich looked up after reading the contents of second envelope. A very subtle shift...and it was in the man's eyes. They looked dead when he lifted them to meet Parker's gaze.

"I'll try, but I'm serious about..."

Daniel's cell phone interrupted Parker's sentence. Unknown number.

"Daniel Petrovich," he answered dryly, now pretty sure he was under surveillance. *Another deception by Parker.*

"Danny! It's been a while. Great to hear your voice."

"Well, you can play it back all day and night I suppose," said Daniel.

"Newest technology on the streets. Turned Parker's cell phone into a bug without even him knowing," said General Sanderson.

"Congratulations. I'm glad to know you didn't spend the Srecko trust fund all in one place," said Daniel.

"Daniel. I need you in on this operation. We're sending a strong message to the Muslim fundamentalist movement here at home..."

"Are you fucking kidding me? Save that bullshit for the tourists. I'll do this for one reason only, and you know it. Then I am done. This shouldn't take too long if your intel is good. Give me a few days for reconnaissance..."

"I need this done tonight. Our timeline is set in stone," said The General.

Parker shifted in his seat. He sensed unpredictability with Petrovich, but couldn't have been further off mark. Daniel's brain worked like a perfect machine when under pressure, and his processors analyzed hundreds of solutions to his current dilemma within seconds. Killing Parker in a suburban Starbucks never passed through Daniel's neural connection. Petrovich knew The General had the upper hand, and that all paths led to the completion of task outlined in the briefcase. It had been no accident that Parker arrived only hours before the mission's deadline.

"I'm done after this. You understand that, right?"

"I understand. I apologize for pulling out the trump card..."

"Apologies never suited you General, and I don't believe it for one fucking second," Daniel said and shook his head slowly.

"Whether you believe it or not, your actions will make a huge contribution to the war on terror, and..."

"Save the elevator speech for Parker. I have a long afternoon ahead of me. My slate is clean."

"Clean," said General Sanderson.

"I'm curious General. How long have you known?"

"Do you remember one of the first things I told your training class? There's no such thing as a coincidence," The General said, and disconnected the call.

Petrovich set the phone down on the target dossier and glanced up at James Parker. The former special operations soldier looked tense, and ready to make a bad decision.

"Parker. Chill out and drink your coffee. You're making me nervous. I need a contact number in case I run into unforeseen circumstances," he said.

"You'll find instructions for that in the file. I'll need to collect the dossier and the gun when you're finished," he replied.

"I'll leave it all at the scene for you," Daniel said, and slipped the file into the briefcase alongside the table.

He collected his cell phone and picked up his coffee.

"Don't bother getting up. Thanks for the coffee by the way."

"My pleasure," said Parker, not bothering to push any further.

He knew there was no way Petrovich would meet with him again to hand over the briefcase and its contents. He figured The General knew it too, or he would have immediately called. He turned his chair to the left, and watched him walk past the two women huddled over a laptop computer screen. They talked excitedly and pointed to the computer screen as Petrovich brushed past them, and pushed through the door to disappear from Parker's life forever. He hoped.

■

Daniel Petrovich walked back to his car, sipping coffee and firmly clutching the briefcase. The General was a careful and thorough operator, so he felt considerably secure that he would not have to play the counter-surveillance game this afternoon. If The General suspected any possibility that his plot had been detected, he would have given some warning.

Not for Daniel's safety or wellbeing, but to give Daniel the best possible shot at accomplishing the mission. The outcome had always been The General's only true concern. The General could be unfailingly loyal, as long as your usefulness outweighed your burden. Daniel learned this early, and leveraged it throughout his "stay" overseas. Unmarked graves scattered across the continents covered the remains of "graduates" that never quite grasped this concept.

Daniel reached his car and deactivated the alarm system, which emitted two sharp chirps. Three low chirps would have indicated that someone or something had made contact with the car in his absence. The vibrational sensitivity of the system could detect someone leaning against the car, or even the slightest bump of an opening door. The alarm would only sound if someone tried to open one of the doors, or forcefully hit the car.

He started the car, and moved it to an empty row in the back of the parking lot, where he opened the case, and pulled out the file. He quickly thumbed through the documents, taking in all of the salient points. The General's operational files hadn't changed in years. Functional and easy to navigate, Daniel had a solid assessment of the job within minutes. A rough plan developed before he could shift gears and speed out of the parking lot. He had a lot to accomplish before soccer practice tonight.