

## CHAPTER 5--REAL TIME

As his mind emerged from a black hole, Brian Parker became aware of several sensations. First was the dryness of his mouth. It felt as if someone had scrubbed the inside of his cheeks with a cotton ball the size of a fist and left the cotton ball.

Next, Brian sensed he was lying on his back. He couldn't yet tell what he was lying on. A floor? A bed? A cloud? One sensation was missing. After another moment Brian realized he was not feeling forward motion or rhythmic rumbling. He was no longer aboard the train.

He heard Silver's voice: "Who's Spider-Girl?"

Brian opened his eyes and rolled onto his side. He was lying on a battered army cot, a black polyester blanket pulled to his chest. The room was small, about five feet by six feet, with pale brown walls. A naked light bulb shined from the ceiling. There were two doors; Brian guessed one led to a bathroom. The only window was painted over with a shade of brown too dark to match the walls. He could hear birds chirping outside the window.

The contents of his suitcase and backpack were spread across the floor. The clothes were neatly folded, his Brewer's cap on top. His comic books and German Foster Blake novels stood in separate stacks.

Silver sat in the far corner tapping his knee with a rolled-up comic. He repeated his question.

“Who’s Spider-Girl? I never heard of her.”

“She’s Spider-Man’s daughter.” Brian was surprised to hear strength in his voice.

“Since when does Spider-Man have a daughter?”

“It’s set in an alternate future, sort of.” Brian said. He didn’t have the energy to explain the whole thing.

“Christ,” Silver said, “Marvel and all its alternate universes.”

*A DC guy*, Brian thought. *No wonder I didn’t trust him*. Brian closed his eyes tightly, hoping to squeeze consciousness back into his brain. He opened his eyes and sat.

The movement made Brian aware something else was missing, that extra snugness around his waist. His money belt was gone. He spotted it on the floor with his other possessions. His cash was next to it, an untidy pile of euros.

Silver saw where Brian was looking. “It’s all there. I’m not about to rob a kid. But I will be holding on to these.” He pulled Brian’s passport and cell phone from inside his jacket, wagged them at Brian, and then slipped them back.

“Where are we?” Brian asked.

“Not telling,” Silver said.

Brian noticed he was still wearing his watch. As an interrogator, Silver should have removed the watch to deprive Brian of his sense of time and disorient him. Brian shrugged and checked his watch. It was just after four thirty. But which four thirty? He could hear birds, so it must be the afternoon. Brian was too groggy to have been asleep for only a few hours; he must have been out for an entire day. He tried to calculate how far they could have traveled in that

time.

“Are we still in Switzerland?”

“Could be,” Silver said.

Brian knew what Silver was playing at. By withholding information, by taking Brian’s passport—hell, by kidnapping him—Silver was demonstrating his power over Brian. The mind games were designed to keep Brian off balance and liable to let secrets slip. Except that Brian had no secrets. He had told Silver everything he knew about Tetzels’ death, and he doubted the CIA man (Brian was now certain of that) wanted to learn more about Spider-Girl.

Silver handed Brian a white, plastic-foam cup filled with coffee. “You’ll need this. You’ve been out for a while.”

“Like I’ll take something from you after you drugged me,” Brian said.

“I needed you asleep then. I need you awake now. Always know what the other guy needs, so you can exploit it. It’s one of the keys to surviving this game.”

Brian took the cup. It was warm, not hot. “When did you drop knock-out pills into my water on the train? I didn’t notice.”

“I didn’t put anything into the bottle.” Silver wiggled a thumb. “I rubbed a sedative around the lip.”

“Right after I mentioned Skyrin?”

“You got it,” Silver said. “Now drink up.”

Brian drank. Silver was right; he needed the coffee. It washed the dryness from his mouth and the lethargy from his mind.

“I’ll bring you dinner in a few minutes, but I have to show you something first,” Silver said, looking at his watch. “If you want water, you can get it from the bathroom,” Silver said,

nodding at the nearer door. "You won't find anything you can use as a weapon in there. Unless you're strong enough to rip the toilet from the floor."

Silver chuckled at his own joke, and it occurred to Brian the man was a little drunk. Silver's chuckle faded as he looked down at the stack of Foster Blake novels.

"You weren't kidding about being a Foster Blake fan," he said. "Agent 17K. -K for killer. I read those books when I was your age too. Read 'em all at least three times." He looked up. "Which one's your favorite?"

"*Lightningrod*," Brian answered.

"That's a good one. My favorite was the one in Mexico, *Dying on Borrowed Time*. Who was the woman in that one?"

"Fabiola Montez."

"Oh yeah, Fabiola Montez. Did I dream about her! And that was before the movie."

Wistfulness filtered into Silver's voice. It crept Brian out but fascinated him, too.

"I really bought into the superspy thing," Silver continued. "That's why I applied to the CIA right out of college. I wanted to be Foster Blake. And don't think the Agency doesn't work that angle. They play up the cloak and dagger thing when they set the interview. -Go to Room 204 of such and such motel at so and so time. Don't tell anyone you're coming, not even your family. Once you get the job, they send you to the Farm - you know what the Farm is?"

Brian nodded. "The CIA's training center. In Virginia."

"You are a well-informed young man." Silver laughed as if that were a joke and then went on. "They take you to the Farm for almost a year and teach you how to parachute onto a three-foot round target in pitch dark. And how to smash your car through a roadblock at sixty miles per hour. They get you thinking you'll get to do the cool spy stuff from books and movies,

all that Foster Blake shit.ö

Silver looked at the floor. öThen they post you overseas, give you a drab office in godforsaken Bangladesh so a JMB thug on a motorbike can run you down and you're sent to some Third World doctor who doesn't know how to reset your shattered leg. As a reward, you get reposted to boring, neutral Switzerland and told to scout out schlubs you can bribe or blackmail into giving up their country's secrets.ö

Now Brian did feel disoriented. He was the captive, yet Silver was confessing. Brian doubted it was another mind game. Silver was complaining about his job like any disgruntled employee. Well, as long as Silver wanted to be informative, Brian decided to keep him talking.

öWas Tetzl a schlub?ö Brian prodded. öWas he one of your joes?ö

Silver snorted. öNo one calls them joes except in le Carré novels. We call them *assets*. Tetzl was one of my assets.ö Silver paused, then added softly, öMy million-dollar asset.ö

öHe was on his way to meet you, wasn't he? That's why you got to the police station so fast. You weren't in Lucerne for a lunch date. You had a rendezvous with Tetzl.ö

Silver refocused his gaze on Brian, a different kind of sadness in his eyes. öYou see, that's why you're in this mess, Brian,ö he said. öBecause you use words like *rendezvous* and *case officer*. If you were another kid who spent all his time playing with his Xbox, I could have handed you off to the State Department and let them baby-sit you while I searched for Tetzl's killer. But you had to have read these spy thrillers written years before you were born. You had to have watched Military Channel documentaries about who killed Georgi Markov. You had to know too much about the spy game. I couldn't risk leaving you at the embassy.ö

Then it hit Brian: Silver didn't want to make him talk. Silver wanted to keep him quiet.

The theme from *The Munsters* screeched from inside Silver's jacket, and Brian jumped.

Silver answered his cell phone, a Motorola and not the Nokia he had used yesterday.

“You’ve got him? Great job. Give me five minutes and then you’re on.”

Silver turned to Brian with a graveness that made the skin between Brian’s shoulder blades tingle. “Like it or not, Brian, we have become partners. You need my protection, and I need your cooperation. I know you can’t trust me. So I have to make you obey me.”

Silver turned on a laptop computer on the small table beside his chair and then stood. “Take a seat. I’ve prepared a little slide show for you.”

Brian sat in Silver’s chair. Silver reached over his shoulder to start the PowerPoint presentation. Brian caught a whiff of alcohol as Silver leaned over him. Then the program began and Brian gasped as his transcript from “Tosa East filled the screen.

“While you were sleeping, I had time to get to know you. Brian Eric Parker. Age fifteen. Sophomore at Wauwatosa East High School in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. Son of Raymond and Victoria Parker. Older brother of Cecelia.”

The image changed to a picture of his mother leading a field trip to the Milwaukee County Zoo. The photo had appeared in the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel last December.

“Your mother teaches seventh grade at Whitman Middle School, also in Wauwatosa. Your father is an accountant at the law firm of Milner, Fields, Bolander & Henderson in Milwaukee. Apart from having a black belt in tae kwon do, your sister, age twelve, was last fall’s highest scorer in her division of the Milwaukee Kickers.”

The picture changed to one of Cecelia driving down a soccer field. The photo had run in the sports pages of the Wauwatosa News-Times last October.

The image changed again and Brian groaned. He was looking at his house on Lloyd Street, but it was bathed in the eerie green of night vision. A note at the bottom of the photo

claimed it had been shot at 4 a.m. Central Time, which Brian guessed was a few hours ago.

The computer screen changed to show a city street, but the cars were moving and Brian could hear the traffic of another Milwaukee rush hour. Silver spoke from behind him: "It's almost 5 p.m. where we are. That means it's almost 9 a.m. in Wisconsin. You're watching this in real time."

The time code flashing at the bottom of the screen said it was 8:56 a.m. Central Time. The camera moved in a slow arc to show the surroundings, and Brian recognized the spot on Wisconsin Avenue just east of Water Street. The person operating the camera was standing outside the office building where his father worked. The camera panned. When it stopped Brian saw his father walking toward him.

"My friend is shooting this with the latest in buttonhole cameras," Silver said. "Incredible technology, isn't it?"

Brian had to agree. As his father approached, Brian could see he had nicked his chin shaving again. His father's face, seen from a low angle, filled the screen and Brian heard the voice of Silver's accomplice.

"Excuse me. What time is it?"

Brian's father glanced at his watch and smiled at the stranger. "It's about eight to nine," he said and walked past.

Silver hunched down so his mouth was next to Brian's ear. "Your dad's watch is four minutes slow," he said. "I hope you get the chance to tell him to reset it."

Brian understood the stakes now. If he didn't follow Silver's orders, the people he loved were at risk. Although they were thousands of miles away on the other side of an ocean, Silver had just taken Brian's family hostage.