

# Chapter 17

Detectives and police crowded the subway station, snapping pictures of bodies and the damage. Paramedics attended the wounded, along with some shocked passengers still in hysterics.

“Are you sure it was him?” the sergeant asked the officer who’d nearly taken Crowe into custody.

“I saw his face,” she whispered angrily to both the sergeant and another officer. “I had Crowe until those . . . those things came in blasting.”

Sergeant Riley understood Anderson’s anger. Both he and Freeman had had him in their grasp, only to have him slip through their fingers.

“He warned us,” Freeman put in. “He told me about the Replica. He saved our lives.”

Riley remembered what Freeman had said just before he’d reentered the train.

*“We have to stand down.”*

*“Why? We have him in our sights. If we get through those doors, we can take him out.”*

*“No, we can’t. That kid just told me it’s a fucking Replica.”*

The other cops, ready to barge in after the gunman, had reevaluated their bravado upon hearing the word Replica.

*“He’s on the move,”* a cop had shouted from outside. *“And he’s taking a body with him!”*

Through the window, Riley witnessed the Replica run over the officers it killed, then crash through the doors at the end of the cars. Dragging the bloody corpse of a Replica behind it, the thing had gone through the train and hadn’t stopped until it reached the end where it had crashed through the last door and vanished into the tunnel.

*“Jesus,”* one of the cops had gasped, standing by him. *“He was a Replica. We could’ve been killed.”*

Riley had never seen such atrocities. The slaughter left him more jaded than he could ever imagine. He turned to Freeman. “What are you saying? That if you spotted Crowe on the street now, you’d let him go?”

“Hell no! I could always use an extra four million in my checking account.”

“Should we report it?” Anderson asked.

Riley shook his head. “No. Wouldn’t be a good idea on our part. Some people have already mentioned him, but I’m not going to say anything about how we let him get away.”

“I second that,” Freeman agreed.

Five well-dressed individuals came down the escalator. Stepping off, they walked in triangular formation, moving in sync with each other. Riley immediately put on his game face.

“This is a restricted area,” he said, intercepting them. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

A woman at the front displayed her identification. He leaned in to read her badge. “Adel Terwilliger, S.H.A? What the hell does that stand for?”

“Special Human Affairs,” she answered stiffly.

“*Special* Human Affairs? Never heard of you. Who sent you?”

“We represent Doctor Linden,” she explained shortly. “I assume you’ve heard of him?”

He thought for a moment before the name registered. “Isn’t he the nutjob who made those damn Replicas?”

Terwilliger’s face soured. “Linden is one of the greatest geniuses of our time.”

“Yeah, well, this genius you’re so wet for has a few of his monsters loose in our city.”

She took in a deep breath before she continued. “That’s the reason why we’re here, Officer. . . ?”

“Sergeant Omar Riley,” he answered petulantly.

“Yes, well, we need to get to the bottom of what happened.”

“What happened?” he mimicked testily, placing his hands on his hips. “What happened here, sweetheart, is one of those things busted into a subway train, shot up what we hope was another Replica, and killed some of my officers.” As he spoke, Terwilliger’s eyes glazed over. “We’re gonna hunt for the damn thing, take it out, and send it back to Linden in a hundred Tupperware containers.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” she snapped. “We’ll find the model ourselves and deal with him appropriately. You and the others won’t speak a word to anyone about what’s transpired here. Not to other officers and especially not to the press. Understood?”

He was appalled. “Excuse me? You got a lotta shit witchoo. I plan to blow the whistle on Linden and bring his little lab out there on Mill Rock crashing down. That’s the least he deserves after what his creation did to those officers.”

She peered over her shoulder at the man behind her. He got on his phone, spoke briefly, and pressed END. Riley’s own phone rang in his pants pocket.

“Your chief wants to speak with you,” she said.

He considered her a moment before taking out his phone. “Riley.”

“Riley!” Osborn exclaimed. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Sir, I’m sure you’ve been briefed about our situation, and now, to top it off, I have to deal with—”

“Riley,” Osborn said in a low voice, “listen very carefully to me. If word leaks about what went down, the entire city will go into a freaking meltdown. Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

“Sir, but—”

“Don’t argue with me on this. Do you want to be knocked back down to a beat cop?”

“No, sir, but the public has the right to know what’s out there.”

“The public doesn’t need to know jack shit,” Osborn said hotly. “It won’t do them any good telling them something that will most likely never interfere in their lives anyway.”

“Sir, I don’t understand.”

“Those people you’re giving a hard time are there to help, so you best do what they say.” Then he added something that made Riley’s palms sweat. “You don’t want the mayor to find out that you let his daughter’s killer go, do you?”

His jaw unhinged and hit the ground. “How did you. . . ?”

“The security footage has been sent to my computer. I watched—on the brink of vomiting—as you let Crowe leave when you had him right there. Now, I’m willing to let it slide,” he said in a reasonable tone, “on account that you didn’t know. But trust me; the mayor will be less forgiving. Got it?”

“Y-yes, sir.”

“Good. Now get to work and keep your mouth shut.”

“Are you ready to cooperate now?” Terwilliger asked.

He stood shocked, then nodded. “What is it you need from us?”

She gave him his instructions. The passengers were told that the Replicas weren’t Replicas after all, but dangerous fugitives. The other officers were instructed to keep quiet, and the footage was erased.

Just like that, the crisis was resolved.

“We’re not going to kill you, Nikolai,” Marko assured him. “We just need to make sure you’re not on the wrong side.”

Before he could ask anything, Kip said, “What’s this?”

Kip snatched Jade’s note from his pocket. It had become partially exposed when he’d brought the MIR card out.

“Hey,” he exclaimed, reaching for it before remembering the Desert Eagle. “That’s private, asshole!”

Kip unfolded the note and started reading. After skimming through it, he handed it over to Marko. “It’s from Jade.”

Marko took the letter. “I have to read this,” he said, taking out his glasses.

With a deep sigh, Nikolai turned away and rubbed his forehead. As he did, Kip pointed at the broken handcuffs around his wrist. “Are ya sportin’ some bad boy trend with those?”

He slapped his hand away. “Fuck off.”

Marko finished the letter, slipped his glasses back inside his shirt pocket, and said, “Come with me.”

Nikolai glared at Kip, who directed him with his gun. Without a word he descended the stairs with Kip behind him. When they reached the bottom, the group parted for them.

“I know you’re loaded with questions right now, so I’m going to fill you in about us,” Marko explained as they made their way through a dark kitchen. When they reached a

pair of double doors, he stopped. His dark face reflected in the dim light coming through two circular windows. “What I’m about to tell you and what you’re about to see can never be repeated to anyone, understand?”

Nikolai nodded without hesitation. Marko continued. “In the past hundred years, maybe longer, there’s been a special group of people who’ve blended into the government’s little world, exposing dark secrets to the public. They’re known only as the Organization. We’re part of this Organization.”

Nikolai snorted.

“The Organization? That’s not very original.”

“Exactly. That’s the whole idea. There’re so many organizations in existence that no one knows who’s doing what in which group.”

“What does *this* group do?”

“We’re suppliers of the never-ending demand for the truth.”

“All right, I’ll bite. What kind of dark secrets?”

“For example, Watergate. In 2005, it was the leak about wiretapping on calls made overseas, and in ’07, we exposed information about cloned soldiers going into the Iraqi War. The Organization’s biggest achievement came in 2023, when evidence surfaced about medical companies withholding the cure for AIDS, diabetes, and most cancers. We let the public know that they’d kept this knowledge to themselves to gain billions of dollars for treatment of those diseases.”

“That was you?”

“Wicked, huh?” Marko beamed. “Because of the Organization, people with AIDS and diabetes have been cured worldwide. But we also work on the government’s behalf to flush out spies and traitors aiming to harm the country. We’re like bugs. We bury ourselves in walls and floors to spy on the ones abusing their power.”

“Are you sure you’re not connected with WikiLeaks?”

Marko snorted. “Hardly.”

He pushed open the double doors and walked out of the kitchen. “We’re an Organization without a name in order to help protect us from being discovered.”

They entered the main room of the strip club. The building’s décor led Nikolai to believe he’d entered an abandoned palace.

The first thing to catch his attention was the Islamic art painted over every inch of the walls. His wandering eyes were drawn to the worn carpet. It appeared to be one large Persian rug over the entire floor. Battery-powered forty-watt bay lights were strung up on cords like festive accents, tied around gold columns, giving the room a cool white glow. The floor of the main stage was made of glass, with a large mirror covering the wall behind it. Strapped to each golden column were sticks of dynamite equipped with detonators. When he noticed the explosives, he made a mental note to stay clear of them.

Parked on either side of the room, facing the wall, were two brand-new jet-black Jeep Grand Cherokees with solid black windows. They were the fastest, most powerful jeeps ever made. Nikolai had researched those exact models when shopping around for a

vehicle, though the jeeps were well out of his price range. They were equipped with Street Racing Technology and four-wheel drive. Unlike most cars of the Going Green era, these monsters were fueled by diesel for extra power. They could go from zero to sixty in five seconds, and the front suspension brakes made perfect emergency stops. With 3,500 pounds of towing capacity, they could accommodate several passengers and still make a fast getaway. Powered by a 6.1-liter HEM V8 engine grinding out 420 horsepower and 16-foot torque, they were hardly built for carrying groceries.

Triangular-shaped iron grills were welded to their front ends. They reminded Nikolai of cowcatchers on old steam trains. He wondered how Marko was able to get the jeeps inside, until noticing the size of the entrance doors. The wide, arched double doors provided just enough room to drive the vehicles through. But why inside?

“For years,” Marko went on, heading toward a Tibetan table with a laptop on it, “the Organization has uncovered injustice done by our governments.”

“Our *governments*?” he inquired.

They passed by a beefy man and an older woman, surveying security monitors at a nearby table. Another woman jumped off the edge of the main stage to join the crowd trailing them.

“Americans aren’t the only ones keeping watch on their leaders,” Marko explained, approaching the computer. “No one knows exactly where or when the Organization started, but it’s worldwide, and you’d be amazed at how many of us exist.”

Nikolai stopped next to a large ottoman behind the table. “With so many people involved, aren’t you concerned someone might get caught and expose the whole thing?”

Marko shook his head. “We’re a family, but we don’t know each other. We know the Organization exists, but like God, it’s invisible. The people in this room are merely a portion of it. If any of us get caught—and it has happened—and they talk, they’d only rat out the few people known to them, if that. I’m only associated with a handful of people in this room.”

Nikolai glanced back at Kip.

“Most of us live in different states, living different lives. No group is linked to another, and no one knows the real name of the person working next to them.”

“So,” he said, “*you* changed your name to a wholesale store?”

Marko showed off his best feature when he smiled. “It’s just a temporary name. I don’t have a real one anymore. Like the rest of us, we’ve erased our records, birth certificates, medical histories, passports, social security numbers, and driver’s licenses and replaced them with fakes. To the rest of the world, we don’t exist.”

“What does this have to do with Jade?”

Marko opened the plastic bag and slid the MIR card into his hand. He held it up as if Nikolai had never seen it before. “*This*. Jade was a very special person to us. She wasn’t part of the Organization, but she was our friend. I first met her in San Francisco years ago, after she left home. She worked as a—”

“A tattoo artist,” he cut in. “She told me that when we were together. She lived in California until she was twenty-four, then moved back to New York. She never mentioned you.”

“No,” Marko said. “I wouldn’t think she would’ve. She was quite the carefree kind of chick, the opposite of what I’d expect from the daughter of a politician.”

“She didn’t get along with her father.” Nikolai was hurt that she’d kept him at arm’s length all this time, but he couldn’t bring himself to be angry with her. He only wished that she had trusted him enough to let him into this secret part of her life. “And she never spoke about her family to me.”

“I know. And her stepmother wasn’t exactly on her BFF list, either.”

“Why did she come back? What brought her back to live with people she couldn’t stand to be around?”

“The answers are on this card,” Marko said. “That’s all I can say at the moment.”

“Why?”

“Trust me; it’s best if you see it for yourself.”

He huffed. “Okay, Mister Tight Lip, what *can* you tell me?”

Marko smiled again. “She told me about you. You gaffed her heart.”

He swallowed hard, sending his heart back into his chest. “Jade knew who you really were?”

“I told her, yes. I tried bringing her into the Organization, but she declined. It wasn’t until last month that she texted me, telling me that she’d gotten the evidence we’d been waiting for. But first we needed the records to expose everyone involved.”

“What evidence? What records? Expose who that’s involved in what?”

“This,” Marko said, picking up a thick file from the table. “This is half of the puzzle, and this . . .” He held up the MIR card in his other hand. “. . . is the other half. We needed both to expose the truth. Without one or the other, we’d have nothing.”

“Where did you get the file?”

“Hear about the bank?” Kip said from behind.

Nikolai turned to him, having forgotten he was there. “You’re the guys who robbed the bank today?”

“Yep,” Kip returned. “And we’re damn lucky to have gotten away. Jade was friends with the daughter of a police captain.” He pointed to a young woman standing nearby. “Jeri was willing to help buy us the time we needed to find the file.”

He turned back to Marko. “You’re seriously a bunch of crazy fuckers.”

“You have no idea,” Marko said, inserting the card into the laptop’s optical MIR drive. “Jade got this evidence somehow. She explained to me yesterday that once we stole the file, she’d bring this card to us. But she . . .” He stopped himself.

Pain flickered in Marko’s eyes. He cleared his throat and shifted them directly to Nikolai from the monitor screen. “She was murdered.”

The agony of her death twisted his heart into a knot. Just hearing about her murder made his eyes well up. A deep quiet dropped like a bomb throughout the room.

Marko put on his reading glasses again and leaned over the screen with a bewildered expression. “Shit.”

“What?” Kip asked, walking around the table. He took one look at the screen and let out a hiss. “Goddamn. Now, that’s a mess.”

“There’s something wrong with the card. It’s scrambled,” Marko said.

“How are we gonna fix it?”

“Let me see,” Nikolai said. Marko rotated the monitor towards him. Jumbled pixels of a still-frame picture dominated the screen. “I hate these shitty MIR cards.”

Marko frowned.

“Something must’ve happened to it while I was on my way here.”

“What could you have done to it?” Kip inquired.

“You don’t wanna know what I’ve been through in the past hour.”

“Can you fix it?” Marko asked hopefully.

“I can try. It’ll take time, but I’ve dealt with broken MIR cards before.”

“What do you do?”

“I decode computer viruses.”

“It was him,” the beefy man said from his computer. “I bet it was him who took out our viruses.”

“You tried getting into the computers this entire week?” he said, stunned.

“I’m afraid so,” Marko admitted. “We’ve been hacking into computers so we could email footage recorded on the card to the public. But hacking became nearly impossible. The whole process turned into a big mess.”

“I’ve been busting my ass cleaning it up,” he said, then grinned. “But you brought me a lot of business.” He rotated the monitor back as he went around to the keyboard, where he took a seat on a red velvet booth with two bronze camel sculptures behind him. “Give me some time,” he said, his fingers dancing over the keys.

“I can see why Jade fell hard for him,” a woman murmured to Jeri.

“I know,” she whispered back. “He’s totally Baldwin.”

Not long into the job he realized it would be no easy task. He started to doubt that he’d be able to unscramble it as he promised.

*This is half of the puzzle, and this is the other half. We need both to expose the truth. Without one or the other, we have nothing.* He recalled Marko saying.

If he couldn’t find a way to repair it, they would have nothing.

Knox held his 9mm handgun at his side when he cracked the door and slipped through, entering a dimly lit room. Closing it gently behind him, he crept inside, hearing a low beep coming from a heart monitor. No one but a man sleeping on the bed occupied the room. After a quick scan, he holstered his weapon and approached him. There was a bandage wrapped over his nose, and his eyes were bruised from the trauma of surgery. Another bandage wrapped his chin. The man appeared to be heavily sedated.

He leaned over to examine his face more closely. Even though his face was unrecognizable, he knew the man was Douglas Crawford.

The door opened just before the lights went on. He pulled his gun and pointed it at the intruder. "Shut the door."

The man backed up and shut the door, nearly dropping the clipboard he held.

"What's your name?" Knox demanded.

"D-Doctor Novak," the man answered. "I'm a surgeon."

"Take a seat, Doc." Novak complied, taking a seat in the only chair available. Knox lowered his gun. "Is this man your patient?"

The surgeon glanced at the unconscious man beside him. "Y-yes. Who are you?"

"I'm the guy with the gun," he said coolly. "And because I'm that guy, you need to answer my questions."

"What do you want to know?"

"This is Douglas Crawford, correct?"

Novak nodded.

"When did he come here?"

Novak clutched the clipboard so tightly his knuckles turned as white as his coat. "He checked in last month."

"What kind of surgery did you do on him?"

"He wanted a full facial reconstruction. He . . . he wanted to look like someone else."

"Do you have a picture of who he wanted to look like?"

The man nodded.

"Show me. *Now!*"

Novak jumped and brought up Crawford's chart on his clipboard. After a few taps with his stylus, he turned the board around for Knox. The detective took a couple of steps toward it and saw what he suspected. It was an image of Nikolai Crowe.