

# Prologue

A lone figure stands in front of a wall of stars. Their lights long extinguished, the stars serve as a reminder of the lives lost in pursuit of their greater cause. Hewn in the marble, the text above the stars lauds them as heroes.

IN HONOR OF THOSE MEMBERS  
OF THE CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES IN THE SERVICE OF THEIR COUNTRY

Peter turns from the wall. He strides through the polished to reflection lobby, leaving behind the memorial wall and granite CIA seal inlaid in the floor, greeting all who enter. Light from the early morning sky leaks in from the windows. He's supposed to be on vacation, enjoying some rare time off. Instead, he was called in. 'Extremely fucking urgent' is the extent of the reason he was told over the phone. More justification isn't needed, you're just expected to be there. He reckons he should be pissed, or at least annoyed, at the sudden termination of his PTO. But he doesn't. Intelligence has that pull on you. The knowledge of what's going on behind the scenes, the true stories instead of what makes the news, the thrill of stopping terrorist plots and outmaneuvering foreign actors. It's addictive to be a part of. When you're away from it all, cut off from the operation, it just feels... empty.

And he's hardly the only one to feel this way. After all, you don't stick around for the money. You can do much better on that front outside the agency. No, you stay in intelligence for the thrill. That, and knowing your work matters.

He makes his way past security and heads for the Counterterrorism Mission Center. The only instruction he received over the phone was to report to the CTMC conference room they gave him. No additional information, because there never is, save for the knowledge that you'll never live it down if you aren't there. Your superiors will make sure of that.

There's always one emergency or another, no matter which intelligence division you're stationed at. It certainly isn't the first time he's been part of an all hands on deck operation. You never know what kind you're dealing with until you're knee-deep in the entire thing. He'll most likely be tasked with tracking down shady accounts belonging to some terrorist group or another, by following a phantom money trail that's just waiting to be found. Of course, they haven't found it themselves yet, but that's why they're putting him on the job. Peter lets out a sigh. The trouble is, most of the time he does end up finding something, leading to an ever increasing number of impossible requests. *You'd think the stuff gets easier with time. Instead, only more bullshit is thrown my way.*

A hand clasps his shoulder. "Hey miracle worker, glad you could join us."

It's Richard. With a scruffy beard and unkempt hair, the senior officer has seen better times. He looks drained, and Peter suspects he hasn't seen much, if any, sleep last night. He holds a hot coffee in his right hand, supposedly to stave off the exhaustion. Judging from the multiple cups stacked underneath, it isn't his first one.

"Morning Richard," says Peter as he turns to him. "Let me guess, you're the one who cut short my vacation?"

Richard nods. "You could say that. Hope you didn't have anything planned."

"Nah, it's alright. Nothing major. I assume you're leading the team then?"

He makes a dismissive gesture with his left hand. "No, not this time. Besides, I stepped back from that a while ago."

Although somewhat surprised, Peter nods understandingly. He's worked with Richard on multiple occasions. Last he heard Richard was dealing with a falling out with his wife. Never being there for his family. Always prioritizing work over her and their son. The usual. One look at him now and you know how that turned out.

They walk on together to the conference room. Peter tries to steer clear from Richard's family situation. But you can't exactly discuss highly classified work in the hallways either. Struggling for subject matter, Richard comes to his rescue.

"I heard you went on holiday last year to Thailand. I'm due for some time off myself, so I'm looking for recommendations. How was it?"

Peter gives a thumbs-up. "It was amazing. I'd definitely recommend it. Stunning nature, friendly people. The Director suggested it to me actually. Apparently he did his missionary work there."

Recollection flashes across Richard's face.

"Ah yes, now that you mention it. He used to talk about it during our time at the Farm. It's been ages though, I can't remember much of it."

"You have to see some of the stuff yourself to believe it. I got roped into attending a local wedding and you have no idea how crazy those can get over there. You just can't make that shit up."

Peter describes some of the highlights of his trip as they make their way to the meeting.

The smell of coffee permeates the conference room. Most present have a cup of coffee or tea in hand. Those that don't are standing in line for one. Not feeling like joining the line, Peter simply gets seated. Richard sits down next to him, his coffee a testament to his foresight.

A few minutes later the last team member walks into the conference room. David, director of the CTMC, steps forward, asks for the lights to be dimmed and the door to be locked. Two people rise to do as ordered while those still standing find themselves a seat. As David opens a presentation on the wall behind him, the room falls silent.

"Welcome everyone. Although unusual for my position as a director, I've decided to take charge of this operation personally. For those just joining us today, it should become clear why shortly. For those whose efforts have gotten us this far, thank you. Especially to those who've been working around the clock the last few days."

"Anything to keep me away from the family Chief," Richard quips, as he and a few others ceremoniously raise their cups of coffee in orchestrated cheers.

"I appreciate the enthusiasm. We can put that energy to good use. But let me bring our new members up to speed first."

A snippet of security footage appears on the wall, showing a huge explosion at an airport. The text underneath the image reads: 'October 23th 2023, Los Angeles International Airport'. Then it's replaced by the images showing the aftermath of the explosion. A gaping hole has split Terminal 3 in two, with rubble fanning out into the surrounding area and rescue workers attempting to extract any survivors from underneath.

"We're the team working on the global bombings that started with the attack on LAX in 2023. 56 deaths and over a hundred wounded. Before the end of the year, three similar bombings occurred: one at the Tokyo Loop, another on the Mass Rapid Transit in Singapore, shortly followed by the bombing at Heathrow Airport."

As David names the locations of the bombings, a world map appears on the wall behind him. On it, the countries affected by the bombings have been marked in red. Stamps highlight the exact location of each bombing.

"Bombings have occurred in Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Denmark, Egypt France, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Qatar, Russia, Saudi-Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, the UAE, the UK and, of course, the United States. Evidence gathered so far seems to suggest that a mix of explosive belts and remotely detonated bombs have been used. The bombings have been claimed by the Islamic State and various terrorist groups associated with them."

David pauses to look around the room.

"Everything so far should align with what you've heard on the news. But here is the snag: although a handful of bombings have been linked back to IS, most of them have not. In other words, either our network has been found lacking in monitoring IS activity, or there's another unidentified party involved. So, although we've had some small victories with preventive measures and lucky last minute interventions, the truth is that we've been in the dark for the last two years."

The world map fades away and a picture of a man in his thirties appears. He has short brown hair and emerald green eyes, enlarged by his rectangular glasses.

“That changed two days ago when Ryan Tyson, CEO of Emerald Electronics, turned himself in at a local police station in San Francisco in complete secrecy. After he convinced the station chief, they put us in direct contact with him.”

Sudden murmur echoes throughout the conference hall.

“In exchange for legal immunity and keeping his involvement strictly confidential, he told us everything he knew about the bombings,” David says as he stands in front of the man projected on the wall, facing the team assembled in front of him. “According to Tyson the bombings aren’t terrorist attacks, they are assassinations.”

The room falls silent. Perplexed, Peter glances at his colleagues, most of whom seem as shocked as he is. Richard and a few others already seem to be in the loop though, judging from their calm demeanor.

David continues as names and images of high-ranking politicians, successful businessmen, and other important figures appear on the wall.

“Among the victims of the bombings, we’ve identified several people who held influential positions before their deaths. We expect the assassination targets to be among the people on this list. According to Tyson, these assassins are disguising their attacks as terrorist bombings in order to hide their existence. Furthermore, since these bombings attract so much media attention, they also conveniently distract from the fact that a client is profiting greatly from the target’s death.”

As the puzzle pieces start to fall into place, Peter's eyes dart across the wall searching for the individual in question to link it all together.

“It’s unclear whether there is a link between IS and these assassins, or whether they are two separate actors. Regardless, there seems to be a distinct difference in their M.O.

“We expect that any suicide bombings should be the work of the IS, while bombings carried out by these assassins should all be remotely detonated. Blowing yourself up doesn’t make for a great business model.”

David resumes pacing back and forth in front of the wall as he speaks.

“We’re still unsure of many factors though. For starters, from what Tyson told us it may be hard to distinguish the two in the first place. Apparently he refused to pay the second half of the sum after his target died in the bombing. He believed his death was a coincidence until they showed him how they planted the bomb that led to his demise. According to Tyson they are planting bombs in coats or luggage of third parties and detonating them when they get close to the target.”

Some gasps emerge from around the table. Whether they’re from disgust or disbelief is hard to tell, but David continues undisturbed.

“They figure out the target’s daily routines, planned meetings, and potential future encounters based on their agenda. Then they identify and work on the best third party they can use to get the bomb to their target. An M.O. as horrible and inhumane as it is impressive. But considering how long they’ve managed to conceal their existence altogether, I have no reason to doubt their ability to deceive and manipulate unsuspecting civilians.”

Peter’s eyes rest on the wall as he notices the face of a middle-aged Japanese businessman. His gaze slides down to the name beneath it, confirming he found the link.

“Although they never identified themselves with a name, Tyson refers to them as *puppet masters*. With an M.O. like that, it isn’t hard to see why.”

A brief silence falls, which Derek, seated in front of Peter, capitalizes on.

“So, who did the assassins kill for our pall Tyson?”

Peter leans forward, flips out his laser pointer, and marks the Asian millionaire on the wall.

“Watanabe Takeshi. The previous CEO of the Japanese Denkami, one of the biggest competitors of Emerald Electronics on the global renewable energy market.”

He receives a nod of confirmation from David.

“Correct Peter. Impressive as always.”

Peter flashes him a quick smile. “So, what’s the plan of action? Tyson must have a way to contact them right? Either that or a money trail would be a good place to start.”

A frown appears on David's face.

"Unfortunately, we don't know."

Peter looks at him, confused. "What do you mean?"

David looks around the room, an unmistakable darkening in his eyes. "Last night a gas truck drove into the police station that held Tyson in custody. There are no survivors."

Peter stares blankly at him. He can feel his stomach turn as he realizes what kind of people they're dealing with. And he's not the only one. Everyone, even Richard and the rest of the core team, fall completely silent.

"These people are not to be underestimated," says David.

"Despite Tyson's best efforts to keep his visit to the police station secret, they managed to track him down and kill him before we could extract all the necessary information. And they demonstrated once more that they have no qualms about killing innocent bystanders. We don't know how far their intelligence network reaches, but one thing is certain: it is something to be feared."

David inhales.

"Which brings me to the following point. We don't know if they're aware of exactly what information was leaked by Tyson or where that intelligence went, but we cannot take any unnecessary risks. We will operate in complete compartmentalization. Nothing regarding the investigation will be discussed with anyone outside this room. Not a single physical or digital record should be traceable back to us. As far as I'm concerned, neither the investigation nor the team exists outside of this room. Have I made myself clear?"

The room is dead silent.

"Have I made myself clear!?" David stresses.

Some murmurs and nods of confirmation emerge from around the table.

"Good," he says, seemingly satisfied. "By the way, in case anyone asks, this meeting was simply an emergency update on classified operational protocols of the CTMC and related personnel. That should stop people from asking questions and nip any unwanted gossip in the bud."

David visibly relaxes as he straightens himself and returns back to the core issue.

“As for the case itself, we’ve already compiled a long list of potential clients and targets, which gives us a good starting point. We’ll be keeping an extremely low profile during our investigation. Like Tyson, the other clients must have paid a substantial amount of money for the assassinations. Such big transactions are bound to leave traces. Once we find those, we find these *puppet masters*.”

David’s confidence seems to loosen the tense atmosphere ever so slightly, while simultaneously dumping a massive pressure and responsibility on Peter who will be key in making it happen. He groans. *Of course. It always comes back to me...*

“Now that we’re all on the same page, let’s get started on our list of suspects.”

The faces of two people and their personal details appear on the wall behind David.

“First up we have Martin Lamero, CEO of Texas-based Fangar Incorporated and key figure in the development of military focused Artificial Intelligence. He’s our primary suspect for the death of Veronica Aigner, the Austrian machine learning specialist and lead architect on-”

A knock on the door interrupts David. He signals everyone to keep quiet as he turns off the projector and walks to the door to unlock it. On the other side stands the new receptionist holding a plastic bag.

“Good morning Sir,” says the girl. “Miss Fisher just dropped by the lobby with your lunch.”

She seems a bit uncomfortable with the dead silence, not to mention all eyes in the dimmed conference room staring in her direction.

“Thank you for the trouble Alison,” says David, as she hands the bag to him.

“You’re welcome,” she says, somewhat flustered. “Now if you’ll excuse me.”

As she turns around, she nearly bumps into someone from OTS, the Office of Technical Service, who’s passing by with a cup of coffee. Peter can practically feel the conference room holding their collective breath as the two nearly collide into each other, then sighing in relief when they regain their balance. Disaster avoided. Alison profusely



apologizes while the startled 'tech wizard', who's part of the team supplying the agency with the latest gadgets and tools, desperately tries to keep his cup leveled. When she realizes that the entire conference room witnessed the incident, she turns red and makes off to the lobby as fast as her legs can carry her.

"Cute girl," says Derek.

Richard grins. "Oh, the ignorant youth. She may seem cute at first, but marriage will put an end to that..."

Laughter emerges around the table. Those less acquainted with him roll their eyes. Peter just sighs, finding the joke in poor taste, despite being meant to make light of Richard's own family situation.

"Hey, not all marriages end up like yours Richard," Derek retorts. "Look at our director. He's been married for ten years now, and his wife still makes him lunch!"

David laughs as he locks the door.

"The darling sure does," he says, as he walks back to his chair. "A small consolation prize after the all-nighters this week, chasing these lunatics."

David puts down the bag on the conference table and, as if to check whether it really contains his lunchbox, glances inside.

Peter sees all color drain from his face in an instant. David's hands, still holding the bag open, start to shake. It takes a split second before Peter realizes. He launches from his chair and yells as he dashes for the door.

"Everyone, get ou-"

But the sound of his voice, along with everything else in the room, is swallowed by the blinding white blast that erupts from David's lunchbox.

In an instant, 43 stars lost their light.