

Zero Effect

By

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Shooting script

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OVER BLACK, a man's voice, very measured--

ARLO (VO)

It's an uncompromising standard of his practice. He never meets any of his clients. He never speaks to them or, for that matter, communicates in any direct fashion. It's his policy...

INT. STARK'S OFFICE - DAY

OUR FIRST IMAGE, VERY TIGHT on STEVE ARLO's face. Arlo has the look of a well-tended business man, thirty-ish. His voice is clear and crisp, his speech careful and precise--

ARLO

...But I am his sole representative and he is my only employer, and as such I have authorization to speak on his behalf, on all of his matters of business. I have with me a signed letter to that effect...

CUT TO FLASHBACK:

INT. MOTEL CORRIDOR - DAY

We TRACK WITH-- THE WHEELS of a maid's push cart, with linens hanging off, rolling slowly down a hallway. Then the PUSHER'S legs enter the frame, following in no great hurry.

MAID'S VOICE (OS)

(singing to herself, quietly)

"Amazing Grace/How sweet the sound/ That saved..."

The legs (and cart) stop in front of a door--

KNOCK. KNOCK.

MAID'S VOICE (OS)

(cont'd)

Maid service!

Still on the legs--

No response. KNOCK. KNOCK. She gives up and WE HEAR her keys unlocking the door over--

MAID'S VOICE (OS)

(cont'd)

"...How sweet the sound/ That saved..." Aaahhhhh!

The legs stumble back, away from the just opened door as she airs a BLOOD CURDLING SCREEEEEEAAAM!

BACK TO PRESENT:

INT. STARK'S OFFICE - DAY

Quiet, but for the voice. As ARLO continues, we begin to PULL BACK. Arlo is quite well dressed in an expensive looking Italian suit, which goes well with this very top-floor looking office. He sits in the visitor's chair, in front of a large desk.

ARLO

He doesn't negotiate his fee. He works at a flat rate.

Writes a figure on a small piece of paper, and passes it across the desk in front of him. As he does this--

ARLO (CONT'D)

Under some unusual circumstances, he works pro bono.
Never in between.

Our PULL BACK continues over the shoulder of another suited professional, with white hair-- STARK.

STARK

I suppose I don't qualify for the latter category?

ARLO

I haven't heard your proposal yet.

We see STARK's face for the first time-- Seated behind a very cluttered mahogany desk, a man of stature, likely smelling of cologne, mid-fifties. He's obviously in some considerable distress, and he studies Arlo carefully, very cautious.

STARK

I have a feeling that mine is not a charity case.

ARLO

Most aren't.

STARK

Mr. Arlo, you realize that this is all... very strange-- that nobody else... in this field asks the kind of money that... your employer does. Nobody else communicates via messenger. It's all very unusual.

ARLO

I do realize. But, Mr. Stark, my employer is hardly your typical private detective.

CUT TO FLASHBACK:

INT. MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

CU-- In Slo-Mo-- A HAND holds a GUN, with a long silencer. The finger pulls-- POP! POP! STILL ON THE HAND, we hear a THUD, the sound of a body falling. The hand remains steady for a moment then, as if startled, it suddenly DROPS the weapon.

BACK TO PRESENT:

INT. STARK'S OFFICE - DAY

Again TIGHT on Arlo's face as he speaks very softly and seriously--

ARLO

To give you some sense of his prowess, I'll tell you about the matter of the Man with the Mismatched Shoelaces.

(leans in to tell the story)

This was many years ago, when I first came into his employ-- he was contracted to find a man. I'm afraid I can't give much in the way of detail, but believe me when I say that, if this man had not been located, our country's good diplomacy with a certain economic super-power might have a distinctly different face, today. Federal, state and local authorities all over the world were searching round the clock, for a face whose significance they couldn't fathom. He had vanished without a trace.

Stark is hanging on every word, but trying not to show it.

ARLO (CONT'D)

On the eighth morning of the search, I was contacted, by a non-political third party, with an unrelated private agenda. Prior to this day, my employer had never heard of this missing man. Knew nothing about him. After one hour of desk work-- just an hour after accepting the case!-- he picked up the telephone and placed a call. Guess who answered the phone?

STARK

The missing man.

Arlo nods slightly.

ARLO

The man with the mismatched shoelaces.
(with the deepest admiration)
Without ever leaving the house.

CUT TO:

INT. BAR - NIGHT

A dark, smoke-filled bar. Half-full, quiet jazz on stereo.

At a booth in the back corner, Arlo leans against the wall, in the same suit he was wearing in the previous cut. Jacket off and tie loosened, he nurses a long-neck bottle. It's the end of the day. He is so much more relaxed than he was in the office that it takes a second to realize it's the same person. As he talks to someone just off-screen, he occasionally massages the headache his speech is giving him--

ARLO

(with disgust)

I'm telling you, he never even leaves the house. He's like
(MORE)

ARLO (cont'd)

some kind of... recluse. Complete freak. No social life. In fact, no social skills. It's the strangest fucking thing-- when he's working, he's the smoothest operator you've ever seen. He'll do anything. Brave. Slick. Cunning. But as soon as he's off work... it's all gone. Afraid to go to the dry cleaners. Too uncomfortable in his own skin to go out to eat. Tactless and inept. Rude, too. Just an asshole.

BACK TO:

INT. STARK'S OFFICE - DAY

Again composed, soft spoken and very dramatic. A continuation of his first speech--

ARLO

You could meet him five times without ever realizing it's the same person. He can walk into any room, anywhere and nobody will notice unless he wants them to. He can elicit a confession from a criminal, without their realizing that they're being questioned.

Stark is listening intently. He's trying not to be impressed, but he can't help it.

STARK

How does he do it?

ARLO

He has a deeply nuanced and thoroughly functional understanding of human behavior to rival the great psychoanalytical minds of our time. He understands the criminal mind as well as he understands the innocent mind. And the stable mind as well as the psychotic, sociopathic mind. The male as well as the female.

BACK TO:

INT. BAR - NIGHT

The relaxed, honest account--

ARLO

I don't know if he's ever kissed a girl. And he's, like, thirty-some years old.

In this conversation, Steve Arlo is talking to BILL. He's a friendly looking guy, dressed in much less flashy clothing than Steve. He listens to his friend, riveted.

ARLO (CONT'D)

And it's no wonder, because he's so fuckin' paranoid, you can hardly talk to him.

BILL

Does he have any family?

ARLO

(shakes his head)

If he does, he doesn't speak to them. Something horrible happened to him as a child. I don't know what.

BILL

And no friends at all?

Arlo shakes his head, overwhelmed by the situation. Then, with his thumb, he points to himself. "Me."

ARLO

It's really ugly.

BILL

What does he do when he's not working? He just sits around the house?

BACK TO:

INT. STARK'S OFFICE - DAY

Both elbows on the table, Stark is now beyond inhibition in his fascination with these stories--

ARLO

When private investigation won its most worthy champion, Academia and the Arts suffered a loss. A great loss. In addition to his many scholarly gifts, he is a terrifically talented musician.

BACK TO:

INT. BAR - NIGHT

Arlo, now intoxicated and a bit belligerent, continues--

ARLO

He writes songs. He's terrible. His metaphors are thin, his imagery is cliched and his thematic material is trite and heavy-handed. Meanwhile, I fly around the world having these meetings for him... It's awful.

Bill just shakes his head, fascinated--

BILL

Why do you do it?

ARLO

(thinks about this)

I don't know. I left the firm, had no idea what I was going to do... And I got this message on my answering machine. He had watched me argue a case in court. Said I was the only person for the job. Who knows what he was talking about, he's nuts. But at the time, it seemed ideal. Sort of exciting.

(MORE)

ARLO (cont'd)
 Very lucrative. And now...
 (realizes)
 ... it's ruining my life.

Bill just shakes his head, sympathetic and fascinated--

BILL
 How does Jess feel about the whole thing?

ARLO
 She hates it. She's always hated it. And since we moved in together, she hates it more.

BILL
 What's his name?

ARLO
 (shakes his head)
 Tell you the truth, Billy, you're better off not knowing. Good, honest people shouldn't know his name. He's famous among the pond scum of the world.

BACK TO:

INT. STARK'S OFFICE - DAY

Stark stands, peering out his window, back to Arlo. He has taken his jacket off--

STARK
 The mysterious and brilliant Daryl Zero.

Stark turns and sees Arlo's earnest expression. He lets out an uncomfortable chuckle--

STARK (CONT'D)
 Certainly does take himself seriously, doesn't he?

No response but a stare back, without even blinking. Arlo takes himself pretty seriously, too. Stark settles into his seat, behind his desk--

STARK (CONT'D)
 Alright, Mr. Arlo. I'm sold. So, what happens now?

ARLO
 You explain to me how it is that my employer can be of service to you. Then I fly home to speak with him.

STARK
 Where is home?

ARLO
 Not to be coy, Mr. Stark, but I'm afraid I can't tell you that.

STARK
 Of course not.
 (laughs to himself)
 (MORE)

STARK (cont'd)

I'm not accustomed to being in this position, Mr. Arlo. To being needy.

ARLO

I understand.

STARK

Yes.

After a long beat--

STARK (CONT'D)

It is of the utmost importance that what I am about to tell you never leave your confidence or that of your...inaccessible employer.

ARLO

That I can guarantee.

After a final long beat, the commitment--

STARK

Mr. Arlo, I've lost my keys. And I need to find them.

Arlo takes this in and nods to Stark to continue.

CUT TO FLASHBACK:

INT. MOTEL ROOM - DAY

A new perspective of the screaming MAID--

Now in the motel room, we are watching the terrified woman stagger away from the door, staring in our direction. A nondescript, out-of-focus shape cuts our lower frame line. WE RACK TO THIS CLOSER SHAPE-- Jutting into the frame, a woman's legs in a tie-dyed skirt lie still in a wide pool of blood.

For an extended beat, it's just the SCREAMING maid and the legs.

BACK TO:

INT. STARK'S OFFICE - DAY

Stark continues--

STARK

I'm being blackmailed. So far, this has cost me a good deal of money and many nights' sleep. I need the matter resolved. I need some questions answered. And I need to know who it is that's stolen the key to my safe deposit box.

ARLO

Start at the beginning and try not to leave anything out.

EXT. LOS ANGELES/WILSHIRE BLVD - DAY

The heavy traffic moves surprisingly quickly, drenched in the relentless California sun.

ARLO (OS)
Hey baby, I'm home.

JESS (OS)
Yeeahhh! How was your trip?

A shiny, black Mercedes Benz does not particularly stand out, one of many clean, expensive cars rolling through the city. The windows in the doors are opaque with tint, but through the windshield, we see ARLO talking into the hands- free microphone of his car phone--

ARLO
Fine. Safe. Real easy.

JESS (ON PHONE)
Did you get to see Bill?

ARLO
I did. Really nice to see him.

JESS (ON PHONE)
(playful)
So, when are you gonna get your body over here, where it belongs?

ARLO
(laughs)
I have to stop by the office real quick, but I'll be trying to seduce you before you know what hit you.

JESS (ON PHONE)
(likes the idea)
Mmmm... I'm warning you, it may not be easy.
(remembers)
Oh Steve, the Nameless Wonder has called, like, three times in the last hour. Wanted to know if I'd heard from you yet.

ARLO
Okay.

JESS (ON PHONE)
Be quick. A girl like me is only gonna wait around so long on a beautiful Sunday afternoon.

ARLO
Bye.

JESS (ON PHONE)
Bye.

The phone beeps out, disconnecting and Arlo looks like a school boy.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

VERY TIGHT on six guitar strings crossing the big sound hole of an acoustic guitar. Perfectly parallel and still. Then--

A HAND with GUITAR PICK falls through the frame, striking a loud, resonant chord. One hit and the chord rings, then fades to stillness as the strings steady.

EXT. "WILSHIRE TOWERS" CONDO COMPLEX - DAY

LONG SHOT-- Arlo's Mercedes pulls into the brick driveway of the very lush apartment building. As the car pulls under the overhang, one of three green-uniformed valets in top hats moves to take the car. The valet opens the door and Arlo emerges from the car with his briefcase.

VALET

Mr. Arlo, good to see you, sir.

ARLO

Thanks, Rahim. Keep it close, will you? I'll only be twenty minutes or so.

VALET

We'll keep it up top.

ARLO

Great.

STILL LONG-- We see the car pull away as Arlo walks briskly toward the lobby. The door is opened for him by another of the green suited men--

ARLO (CONT'D)

Thanks, Rudy.

BACK TO:

INT. BEDROOM - SAME

STILL IN CU, the hand strums the guitar; a very familiar type of major chord progression. It plays for a moment, before accidentally skipping a beat, prompting it to quit.

A throat is cleared--

The hand starts again. After a short intro, a mediocre singing voice begins to sing. It's a soft and distinctly phony voice that sounds as if it's emulating a Broadway musical star of the late fifties, over-enunciating cutely--

VOICE (OS)

"If I were to come knockin'/ Knockin' at your door/ Would you let me in/ Like you've done before/ And if I asked the question/ On this October day/ Would'ja say, "It would be a joy /with you, my good boy"?! Cause if you would, I'd say--/ LET'S RUN OFF AND GET MARRIED..."

CUT TO:

INT. ELEVATOR - SAME

Beep. Beep.

Arlo stands back to the wall, briefcase hanging from his hands in front of his waist. He watches the numbers on the display ascend-- "24. 25. 26. P."

The elevator stops. Arlo pulls a large key ring from his briefcase, and sticks one into a hole in the elevator terminal. He turns the key and the door opens.

BACK TO:

INT. BEDROOM - SAME

Over passionate, if sloppy, strumming--

CU-- A BLACK AND WHITE VIDEO MONITOR-- Arlo can be seen from a bird's eye perspective, standing in front of what must be the front door to this place. He is actively engaged in something.

CUT TO:

INT. ENTRY - SAME

The entire entry way is made of white marble, and the large front door appears to be made of steel, like a vault. It's a very posh design, usually reserved to buildings inhabited primarily by retired senior citizens.

Arlo stands next to a large black leucite chest, with a big, tacky gold encrusted letter Z. He is entering a series of numbers on a telephone-like security system terminal. A very long series of digits. Finally, a loud BEEP--

A series of MECHANICAL CLICKS, and the large metal door opens. Arlo steps through only to be faced with ANOTHER FRONT DOOR, a pair of french doors actually, which look perfectly ordinary for a place like this. Except that as we pan down from another large gold Z, we see that there are six separate dead bolts on this door. Systematically, Arlo begins to unlock them, each with a different key.

INT. BEDROOM - SAME

CU-- A pair of socked calves with no apparent pants stand facing a doorway. The floor is covered with clothing, papers and books.

VOICE

(still singing)

"Let's run off and get married/ It's the only thing for us to do/ We've got to run off and get married/ If you love me like I love you..."

INT. FOYER - SAME

The other side of the door Arlo was working on. All of the locks look even more daunting from this side. The door OPENS, and Arlo comes inside, head first, as if hesitant to proceed. As soon as he recognizes the music, which sounds distant from here, he cringes.

WE TRACK WITH ARLO, over his shoulder, as he starts down a hallway from the entry. He walks slowly. First of all, the place is a complete mess, bordering on filthy. Secondly, it is huge. Third, the blinds are all closed, so it's pretty dark in here, a stark contrast to the over-bright marble hallway and the pounding sunlight outside. This hallway runs the length of the apartment, and we pass by several rooms as we follow Arlo--

First, on the right side, the LIVING ROOM which sits dark until Arlo hits a switch, opening the blinds mechanically, shedding sunlight on what must be THOUSANDS of books that fill this large room. The walls are covered with shelves, but many of the shelves are empty, as the proprietor clearly prefers the floor for storage purposes. In places, there are thigh-high stacks and, in one corner, a pile that seems more like the work of an earthquake than a person. Crammed in one corner, a small desk-- Arlo's desk. He approaches it and makes a face, then pushes a large pile of newspapers onto the floor, clearing the surface, making room for his briefcase and jacket--

STILL TRACKING WITH HIM, we follow him into the KITCHEN, a full size chef's kitchen, complete with center island and industrial sized appliances. It looks as though this room has never been used for eating, much less cooking; all of the counter spaces are covered with months of newspaper. Four large trash cans against the back wall are nearly overflowing with pizza boxes, paper cups, folding Chinese food carry-out boxes. Arlo walks to the refrigerator and pulls open the large door. The refrigerator contains: about a dozen large bottles of orange juice, neatly arranged in rows, hundreds of boxes of Kodak Film, several gallons of Stolichnaya, a shelf full of canned tuna fish and about three cases of Tab soda. Without a glance, Arlo grabs a can of soda--

Back in the hallway, he passes by a large DINING ROOM, and "switches open" the window blinds, revealing a room that seems to be used as an office. The walls are covered with cork boards and black and white photos. The large dining room table is covered with papers, notebooks, photos and a monstrous computer rig. Next to the table stand two huge computer-memory towers--

WE TURN BACK and have to CATCH UP with Arlo. He passes by an open door on his left, the only room so far with the lights on. This room is probably intended as a DEN, but it is being used as an archives, with three rows of file cabinets.

Arlo turns a corner in the hallway. THE GUITAR grows louder and we can hear singing, but we can't make out the words because Arlo is now facing the CLOSED DOOR to the MASTER BEDROOM SUITE. He pushes the door open and suddenly the SINGING IS CLEAR, but the singer still unseen--

VOICE (OS)

"...If I came a-calling/ On a rainy afternoon/ Would I be glad
that I came calling/ And whistle a merry tune..."

STILL TRACKING, Arlo passes by the open door to the bathroom on his left side and we see that the right side of the hallway opens onto the bedroom, where the blinds are drawn. The bedroom is very large and quite cluttered, the king-size bed surrounded with all sorts of computer and surveillance equipment, garbage and reading materials, like an extremely high-tech, college dorm room. But it's hard to focus on the room. Because standing in front of the bed, in socks, boxer shorts and a red thermal undershirt, playing proudly and looking straight at Arlo (over whose shoulder we are peering) is DARYL ZERO. His youngish face unshaven, and his greasy-looking blond hair a mess, it feels as though he has been in this room for a very long time. His musical performance is animated and quite expressive, grinning widely when the lyrics suggest it. He is, at this moment, completely without self-consciousness--

ZERO

"...Then I'd pop the question/ Straight from my heart/ I'd say,
"Let's run away/ and be happy and gay"/ And these six
words convey-- LET'S RUN OFF AND GET MARRIED/
It's the only thing for us to do/ Let's run off and get married/
If you love me like I love you..."

Zero repeats the chorus, then finishes with a few resolving chords and big down beats. Confident and wide-eyed, he waits expectantly for Arlo to say something.

OVER ZERO's SHOULDER-- Arlo leans against the wall and just takes the whole thing in. He's back in LA. Nothing's changed.

ARLO

That's good. Really good.

ZERO

You like it?

Arlo nods, a little less than gushing.

ZERO (CONT'D)

I've had the first couple verses for a while, but I just came up with that last one. Just a couple hours ago. You really like it?

ARLO

Yeah.

Ecstatic, and at the moment a bit insane looking, Zero whips the guitar strap over his head and throws the instrument on the bed. Then OUT OF NOWHERE, Zero turns suddenly very sharp, even hostile--

ZERO

So where the fuck have *you* been?

Arlo is not very surprised by this sudden change in tone, but clearly a bit irritated--

ARLO

What do you mean?

ZERO

Where the FUCK have you BEEN? I've been waiting for you.

ARLO

I came straight from the airport.

Zero heads for the door, and Arlo has to get out of his way--

ZERO

I'm hungry.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

The GRIND of an electric can opener, which Zero is using to open his can of tuna. He calls to Arlo, in the other room--

ZERO

I've been awake for three days!
 (he giggles at the thought of it)
Three! Just loooooove those amphetamines!
 (another amused laugh, then to himself)
 Gotta love 'em. Got to love 'em...

Arlo enters and leans against a wall, sipping his soda.

ARLO

Sounds healthy.

ZERO

Good for my skin.

He turns to Arlo--

ZERO (CONT'D)

Did you know that if you do enough of that stuff, over a very short period, you get these, like, canker soars on your tongue? They bleed...

The thought trails off as he reaches to his mouth and approaches Arlo to show him. Arlo, grossed out, turns away before he can see--

ARLO

That's disgusting.

Zero has a good laugh, then turns very serious again as he starts directly into his can of tuna-

ZERO

So what did the guy in Portland want?

ARLO

Blackmail.

ZERO

Name?

ARLO

Stark.

ZERO

Gregory Stark? Oregon Timber?

Even though Arlo must be used to it, he's still impressed with Zero's ease in summoning this information.

ARLO

Yeah.

ZERO

Hmmmff. Very rich man. Old money. Blackmail, huh?

ARLO

Yep.

ZERO

Did he kill somebody or fuck somebody?

ARLO

Fucked somebody over, I think. Sounds like embezzlement or something.

ZERO

Hmmf. Runs in the family, I guess. His father had a big tax evasion suit against him in '82. Legally exonerated but Karmically convicted, apparently. Died right after the acquittal.

(mouth full, talking anyway)

Massive coronary. Didn't take care of himself. Ate like a pig. Fat man, his father. Gregory Stark, huh?

ARLO

Yep. You wouldn't be the first hound down this trail.

ZERO

Who?

ARLO

Clearburg. Didn't turn a thing.

ZERO

(disgusted, makes vomiting noises)

Blah! Hack. You know the trouble with that fucking Clearburg? He has absolutely no tact...

Arlo mouths along "No tact." He's heard it before.

ZERO (CONT'D)

...Stinks up the whole neighborhood. Press hungry, too. Repulsive.

Zero shovels the canned meat down his throat, too much at a time. His eyes dart around as he thinks, probably trying to decide whether or not to get involved.

ZERO (CONT'D)

Hmmm...Stark... How desperate? Scale of one to ten?

ARLO

Bordering on manic.

Zero grunts his interest, as he shovels three large fork-fulls of tuna into his mouth, finishing off the can.

ZERO

Do I need to go there, you think?

ARLO

I think you'd need to check it out. There's not much to go on.

ZERO

Go there, huh?

ARLO

Yeah. I don't like it.

He banks the empty tin off the wall into the trash can, and exclaims--

ZERO

Aw, fuck it! Sure. Tell him I'll do it.

Zero DARTS out of the room and after a beat, Arlo walks after him, calling--

ARLO

Don't you want to hear what it is first?

ZERO (OS)

What day is it?

INT. ZERO'S OFFICE/ DINING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Zero sits behind his enormous computer, pounding keys without hesitation as he speaks. Arlo enters and leans against the door frame--

ARLO

It's Sunday.

ZERO

(to himself mostly)

I'll get on the plane to Portland at eleven... fifteen tonight. Arriving Portland at one thirty two AM. You'll give me the details on the way to the airport tonight. Be here at ten.

He is booking his flight as he speaks--

ARLO

Tonight? Wait a second! Can't we at least wait 'till tomorrow And I could spend one night with Jess?

ZERO

(still typing and speaking rapid fire)

You'll go tomorrow... at seven thirty six AM... but I need you to take me to the airport tonight-- at ten o'clock-- because I need to be debriefed then, because right at the moment the integrity of my abilities... Do you want that low-cal breakfast?

ARLO
(not happy)
No.

ZERO
...my abilities are seriously impaired, maybe even disabled,
right at the moment because...
(stops typing and looks dead-on at Arlo)
I must sleep. Right now.

With that he reclines the back of his desk chair and closes his eyes.

ARLO
Wait a minute...

ZERO
(cutting him off, eyes closed)
Goodbye. See you at ten!

Arlo glares at him. After just a SPLIT SECOND--

Zero lies in his chair, chest rising and falling in sleepy rhythm.

Still shaking his head, Arlo turns and leaves the room.

EXT. ARLO'S HOUSE - DAY

A small, peaceful house in the Hollywood hills. Trees and modest landscaping surround a parking area at the end of a short driveway, which provides a little separation from the main road.

Arlo's car pulls in and parks. Arlo hops out, opens the back door, pulls out a bouquet, and heads for the house.

INT. ARLO'S HOUSE/ENTRY - SAME

He opens the front door, already unlocked, and walks in--

ARLO
Jess!

No answer, as again, WE TRACK WITH HIM, through the house. A tidy, cozy little two bedroom house. Off-white carpeting, photos on the walls and big picture windows which look out onto a very nice, tranquil view of the Hollywood hills--

ARLO (CONT'D)
Jess!

Still no answer. HE CONTINUES INTO THE BEDROOM, also empty, bed still unmade. Hew takes off his jacket and throws it on the bed. The sun light gushes through an open, sliding glass door that accesses an enclosed patio. We PULL AROUND IN FRONT OF ARLO, who smiles slightly when he sees the open door.

EXT. ARLO'S HOUSE/ PATIO - CONTINUOUS

JESS sits in a Jacuzzi, head against the ledge, deeply relaxed. The LOUD BUZZ of the air jets drones. When Jess opens her eyes and sees Arlo, flowers in tow, she grins wide. After a beat, she manages the effort to pull herself out of the tub.

Dripping, bikini'd and without a word, she wraps Arlo in a very wet embrace, which he happily welcomes with a groan and a kiss, tossing the flowers at a nearby sun-recliner. A very deep, very long kiss, after which, in lover's low tones--

JESS

You're all wet.

ARLO

I don't mind.

JESS

Thanks for the flowers.

ARLO

You're welcome.

Another kiss--

JESS

Wanna get in?

ARLO

Yeah.

She starts working on the buttons of his shirt--

JESS

I'm glad you're back.

ARLO

I'm glad to be back.

JESS

(playful)

Where are you gonna take me tonight?

Arlo doesn't respond-- he has an airport run to make. And now he has to tell Jess about it.

She looks up to his silence-- and knows without his saying anything. And she's not happy about it.

JESS (CONT'D)

Jesus, Steve...

The mood is broken. She pulls away from him, and goes to take care of the flowers.

TIGHT ON ARLO-- He's disappointed, sickened by the situation. All he can do is look to the sky for some kind of answer.

INT. ZERO'S CAR - NIGHT

TIGHT ON ARLO-- Now in the passenger seat, speaking clearly, doing business. The light over his seat is on, so that he can consult his notes. He makes each point very distinctly, as the highway speeds by outside--

ARLO

He wouldn't say what's in the box...

Zero listens closely as he speeds along, behind the wheel. Hair combed and dressed in a dark blazer and slacks, he looks a lot better than he did this afternoon, much more functional than basket-case.

ARLO (CONT'D)

From what I could piece together, it sounds like some kind of financial record. But he didn't want to tell me.

ZERO

(a bit confused)

So whatever it is he's hiding, he keeps it in his safe-deposit box, and he keeps the key to this box cleverly hidden on his key ring, with his car keys and house keys?

ARLO

I'm just telling you what he said. So anyway, about a year ago -- it'll be a year on the twelfth-- he loses his keys. They had a gold-plated Swiss Army knife attached to them...

Arlo's speech continues over the following image--

CUT TO:

INT. AIRPORT - NIGHT

THE TICKET COUNTER, not enough clerks to service lots of customers waiting impatiently in a folding line, partitioned by suspended ribbon--

ARLO (VO)

(continuing)

...Last he remembers having them was that morning but by the time he's ready to leave the office, he can't find them...

A YOUNG LATINO COUPLE is at the front of the line, waiting with their suitcases. Behind them is ZERO, with a small leather duffle hanging over one shoulder and a briefcase in his other hand. Very nondescript, like any traveling business man in work clothes. The young couple steps forward to be helped, and after just a short moment, Zero follows. We TRACK WITH HIM the short distance to the counter--

ARLO (VO) (CONT'D)

...A couple days pass, and he starts to get a little panicky.

-- as Zero, reaches the counter, WE HEAR THIS MOMENT--

ZERO
Flight 211 to Portland. Name's Burges. Harold Burges.

BACK TO:

INT. ZERO'S CAR - SAME

Again, we are back with the image that accompanies the track, ARLO giving the briefing--

ARLO
(continuing)
...But he tries to relax. Tells himself he's being paranoid. A month passes, without event. Then, on June 23, he gets a letter at his office. Comes FedEx, stamped personal and confidential. Sender's name marked as Past-Due Collections.

ZERO
(chuckles)
That's nice.

ARLO
Laser printed, not very long. Starts out, "Mr. Stark, I have evidence linking you to your crime. You may entertain notions of impunity, but in the end, everyone is culpable..."

ZERO
"Yours Truly, God". How much?

ARLO
Says that "a succession of hundred thousand dollar payments will be expected. Instructions to follow." Week later, he gets the first set of instructions.

ZERO
Instructions?

ARLO
Yeah. For payment. He's made seven payments and never the same way twice. Always very complicated. Example-- The first time, they send him a bag with a lock and a beeper. He puts the money in the bag and goes to the airport, at a certain time. He gets a flight number beeped to him on the pager and goes to pick up a ticket, already reserved in his name. Checks the bag, gets on the plane. He gets to the next airport-- Seattle, it was-- and picks up the bag, off the carousel. Then he gets another page. Does it again, three more times. Ends up back in Portland. When he gets home, of course, the money's gone. Took about ten hours, in all.

ZERO
Take his money and drive him crazy in the process. Very skillful. And never the same way twice?

ARLO

(shakes his head, "No")

Elements repeat. The beeper. The airport. The final deposit is usually at some crowded public place. Usually in a rest room. Three times actually in a toilet.

ZERO

That's revolting.

ARLO

You're up against a guy who knows what he's doing.

Again, we CUT AWAY as the track continues over the following image--

INT. AIRPLANE - NIGHT

Zero sits in an aisle seat, next to an empty seat, perusing a short stack of papers, in a simple black file folder.

ZERO'S POV-- A XEROX COPY OF THE LETTER, as described, laser printed. It's a fairly short, very neat letter. The beginning does, in fact, read "Dear Mr. Stark, I have evidence...". He turns the page and there is a Xerox of another letter.

ARLO (VO)

...He gave me copies of all the letters and I put them in your file for you to look at, along with a list of all of the transaction dates...

As Arlo says this in VO, Zero turns the page, to a document titled-- "Transaction Information".

BACK TO:

INT. ZERO'S CAR - SAME

Arlo continues--

ARLO

...There's a drop scheduled for tomorrow. I told him that unless he heard otherwise from me, he should plan to go through with it, as instructed.

ZERO

Good. How does it work?

ARLO

Basically, he's supposed to go about his day as usual. Go to the gym, then the office. Late afternoon, he starts driving down a certain street. Then it's a maze. It's all in the letter.

ZERO

Where does he work out?

ARLO
(strange question)
What?

ZERO
I said, where does he work out?

Arlo checks his notes--

ARLO
Um... Portland Athletic Club and Fitness Center. Goes every morning with a couple of guys he works with.

ZERO
Who?

ARLO
Umm... I'll find out.

ZERO
That would be nice.

Arlo tries to ignore this last comment.

ARLO
There's a pretty severe lack-of-information problem, here. And he won't say much.

ZERO
What's wrong with these people?

ARLO
I told him that there's no use lying to you. Eventually you always figure it out. He's just slowing things down.

ZERO
Did you tell him about the Case of the Guy Who Lied About His Age?

ARLO
Of course.

ZERO
Was he impressed?

ARLO
Yeah.

ZERO
Really impressed?

ARLO
(bored by this, sarcastic)
Fucking flabbergasted.

Zero hears the tone in Arlo's voice and shoots a glance over at Arlo--

ZERO

I think that if you're big enough to look truthfully, you'll see that *I* have nothing to do with it, but rather *you* went ahead and moved in with her a little prematurely...

Arlo is shocked by this--

ARLO

What?!

ZERO

You heard me. Your problems with Jess are not my fault.

Arlo looks really angry--

ARLO

Let's not talk about this, please, Daryl...

ZERO

You're not ready to get married yet, and maybe you need to look at that...

ARLO

Please!

Zero shuts up when Arlo starts yelling. They drive in silence for a short beat. Then--

ZERO

So, does he have any family?

ARLO

(tries to move on)

Ummm... Mother died a year after the father, no brothers or sisters. Married right out of school. Harvard. They never had children. Sounds like a troubled marriage, but that's your department.

ZERO

(distracted)

Maybe Hodgemeyer.

ARLO

What?

The conversation continues over--

CUT TO:

EXT. BUDGET RENT-A-CAR/PORTLAND - NIGHT

It is pouring rain. Beneath the big orange Budget sign, a sign reads "Welcome to the City of Roses."

ZERO (VO)

I'm thinking maybe I should get in touch with Hodgemeyer for this case.

INT. BUDGET RENT-A-CAR - SAME

Again, Zero stands in line, waiting for help at the counter--

ARLO (VO)

Whatever makes you tick.

Zero steps up for assistance. Again, for just one line, WE HEAR Zero speak to the Budget clerk behind the counter--

ZERO

Reservation for Hodgemeyer. Mitchell Hodgemeyer.

CU-- He presents a driver's licence with his picture and Hodgemeyer's name.

BACK TO:

INT. ZERO'S CAR - SAME

Arlo checks his notes for anything he's missed--

ARLO

You might want to glance over these newspaper-clippings on Oregon Timber... which are in a file that I am putting in your briefcase, with the case file.

Zero thinks it over--

ZERO

I assume somebody's checked with the bank to see if anyone's been to his box?

ARLO

He said he had. But he wouldn't say which bank it is.

ZERO

This guy's gonna be a pain in the ass. See if you can figure out which bank it is.

ARLO

Alright.

Zero's brow wrinkles as he stares ahead at the road--

ZERO

So, we have a six digit extortionist with an attitude, a client who won't say anything and is probably lying, and one shot to break through this, tomorrow afternoon.

ARLO

That's about the size of it.

Zero thinks about this as he speeds along the freeway.

ZERO
Easy enough.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. ZERO'S OFFICE - NIGHT

A COMPUTER SCREEN and ZERO'S TYPING HANDS. The screen is filled with the following text. His fingers keep even pace with his speech, and never fail.

ZERO (VO)
It is not without serious reservation that I sit down to begin the seemingly impossible task of documenting my own methods. It always seemed that someone else should do it. Unfortunately, my faithful legal representative, has shown no interest whatsoever. And so, I am forced to take on the task myself-- With no intention of glorifying, aggrandizing or immortalizing my own memory, but rather in the hope that such a memoir might someday be useful to others. That said, I begin my examination of The Method...

INT. ZERO'S MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

In complete silence, Zero sits cross-legged in a chair next to the window, the curtains drawn. The room is dark, except for the intrusive fluorescent light from bathroom. He rocks back and forth slightly. Nothing happens. He just sits there.

ZERO (VO)
...I always say that the essence of my work relies fundamentally on two basic principles: Objectivity and Observation, or "The Two Obs", as I call them. Webster defines "objectivity" as "having to do with the characteristics and features of the thing involved, rather than the thoughts and feelings of the artist, writer or private detective". The other definition is "without bias; detached". My work relies on my ability to remain absolutely, purely objective. Detached.

After a moment, he nervously jerks the curtain open-- just a crack-- and peers out the window. Just as suddenly, he pulls it shut. And resumes his sitting.

EXT. HEALTH CLUB - DAY

Under a grey Pacific Northwestern sky, the parking lot is semi-full with the early morning before-work rush-- very nice cars and a few jump-suited fitness buffs. In large, black lettering on the roof of the building-- "Portland Athletic Club and Fitness Center".

ZERO (VO)
...I have mastered the fine art of detachment. And while it comes at some cost, this supreme objectivity is what makes me, I dare say...

POV-- The same, through a car window--

REVERSE-- Zero's rental car is parked across the street from the gym.

INT. ZERO'S RENTAL CAR - SAME

Zero watches the morning bustle from the driver seat--

ZERO (VO)

...the greatest observer that the world has ever known.

Singing quietly to himself, not in voice-over--

ZERO (CONT'D)

"...Let's run off and get married/ It's the only thing for us to do..."

He glances down at his watch--

CU-- ZERO'S WATCH-- A simple, armed clock with a black leather band reads six minutes to eight.

INT. GYM - DAY

Amidst the sounds of a busy work-out space, STARK strides a treadmill, sweating and breathing heavy. He is watching the television on the wall--

ON THE TELEVISION-- A weather man, inaudible through all the noise, is forecasting rain on the large map behind him--

Stark watches the weather report intently. After a moment, we PAN OVER to his left. ZERO is standing atop his own treadmill, matching Stark's aerobic pace. Just like Stark, Zero is completely fixated on the television.

ZERO (VO)

Observing a subject, particularly a client, in his or her own element is usually very telling. Behavior is always more revealing than language. If you know what to look for.

After a long beat, without looking at Stark--

ZERO (CONT'D)

More rain, would you believe it?

Stark is surprised at being spoken to. He looks over to Zero who is still watching the TV. Out of breath and automatically a bit agitated--

STARK

What? Are you talking to me?

ZERO

I said, "Would you believe more rain?"

Stark is not interested.

STARK

Oh.

Zero still does not look at Stark. Another long beat passes--

ZERO

What are you doing over there, if you don't mind my asking?
About a Level Eight?

STARK

What?

ZERO

About a Level Eight, you're running over there?

STARK

Ummm... Seven.

ZERO

Seven. Funny, so am I.

STARK

Hmm.

ZERO

What?

STARK

Nothing. I didn't say anything.

Stark pushes a button on his machine, and the belt begins to slow. Zero looks at Stark for the first time--

ZERO

Name's Carmine. Nick Carmine.

STARK

Greg Stark.

ZERO

Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Stark.

Stark steps off his machine and towels off.

STARK

Likewise.

With that, he walks away--

Zero watches very intently--

ZERO'S POV-- A REDHEADED WOMAN in a black unitard crosses Stark's path, and as she does, Stark's head turns very slightly, then jerks back. He disappears through double doors, over which a sign reads "Massage and Training".

As soon as Stark is through the doors, Zero HOPS off his treadmill, doubles over with his hands on his knees, and tries to catch his breath. He's exhausted.

INT. MASSAGE ROOM - SAME

Stark lies face down on a massage table, under a towel and the able hands of BETSY, a very athletic looking young masseuse in a staff T-shirt-- also a redhead.

Zero enters through the door from the gym proper. He looks over the situation--

ZERO'S POV-- Over the door, a clock reads nine twenty five AM.

He walks into the locker room, looking back over his shoulder for one last glance at Stark.

INT. LOCKER ROOM - SAME

Zero stands in front of a locker, wrapped in a towel, rifling through a black leather bag. It's a very fancy locker that doesn't lock, the type you might find in a country club.

IN THE BAG-- Primarily a briefcase. Lots of papers, binders, folders, memos, in no order at all.

Zero pulls out one item, that seems to interest him--

CU-- A printed bit of E-MAIL correspondence-- in the header/address--
"To:STARK@ORTim.com; From: clearburg@clrPI.com" -- the text, in lowercase letters,
"thorough check finds no boxer with the name k.v. -- clearburg".

Zero reads the note, and makes a face. He looks around and decides to take it.

INT. LOCKER ROOM/SINK AREA - SAME

OVER THEIR BACKS-- Stark and an older man, GERALD AUERBACH, stand in front of a very hospitable row of marble sinks. WE SEE THEIR BACKS AND THEIR REFLECTIONS IN THE MIRROR. Auerbach, in great shape and sharp as ever at seventy, has the kind of soft voice that wins elections. The two men are very familiar, as the already dressed Auerbach applies cologne and the half-dressed Stark shaves--

AUERBACH

...I think it's too early in the season to write anyone off.

STARK

It's true, it's true. But Gerry, even you have to admit, that since Anderson left, they just can't complete the break. And I can't remember a team going all the way without a fast-break...

ZERO (OS)

The Celtics of the mid-eighties had no fast-break.

Stark and Auerbach stop talking at the interruption, and look over to their right as--

WE TRACK DOWN THE COUNTER to see that Zero is two sinks over, finishing his own shave.

ZERO (CONT'D)

In their three title seasons, only... let's see... 18% of their earned field goals were off the break.

They are surprised by this statistic. For an awkward beat, they are unsure how much to include this nut in their conversation. They don't really want to, but Auerbach concedes--

AUERBACH

It's true. They were a slow team.

STARK

(to Zero, a bit warmer than before)

Best shooting team I can remember, though. I went to school in Cambridge.

AUERBACH

The Starks are a dynasty of Celtic fans.

ZERO

Hmm.

Zero registers this, and turns to them--

Auerbach smiles warmly.

STARK

This is my dear friend and colleague, Gerald Auerbach...

Stark doesn't remember Zero's "name", so before it's embarrassing--

ZERO

Nick Carmine. Pleasure.

CU-- Zero takes the opportunity to look them both in the eyes.

INT. GYM/FRONT DESK - SAME

Zero, now suited for "work", approaches the desk. The young desk woman, DAISY, is smiling and ready to help him.

DAISY

So, how was everything for you, Mr. Carmine?

ZERO

Terrific. Daisy, I was wondering if I could book a massage for tomorrow morning.

She opens the appointment book--

DAISY

No problem.

ZERO

Betsy comes highly recommended.

DAISY

Betsy is excellent.

ZERO
How about nine o'clock?

DAISY
Betsy has a regular appointment, every morning at nine.

This is what Zero was looking for.

DAISY (CONT'D)
How about ten?

Before Zero can respond--

WOMAN (OS)
Oh!! That's the time I wanted!

Zero is surprised by this and turns to find the speaker--

She's standing behind him, dressed in shorts and a large T-shirt, mid-to-late twenties. She's smiling, a little embarrassed at having blurted so.

ZERO
Sorry...

WOMAN
That's alright. You beat me to it.

ZERO
(he looks at her for a moment)
Are you a paramedic?

WOMAN
(shocked)
Yes! How did you know that?

ZERO
Just a hunch.

WOMAN
"Just a hunch?" What do you mean "just a hunch?" How did you know that?

She looks like she's just seen a good magic trick. Zero suddenly gets VERY UNCOMFORTABLE--

ZERO
I'm very intuitive.

WOMAN
I'll say!

He turns away from her, back to Daisy--

ZERO
Give this lady the ten o'clock massage.

WOMAN (OS)

No, you take it. I think you need it more than I do.

This strikes Zero as very strange, and he turns back to her again--

ZERO

What do you mean...

--but she is GONE. Zero is perplexed. Daisy just smiles--

ZERO (CONT'D)

(to Daisy)

What did she mean? Who was that?

DAISY

(confidential, gossipy)

Her name's Gloria Sullivan.

(whispering)

And she's not married.

Zero makes a face at this, then half-nods.

INT. PORTLAND AIRPORT - DAY

People stream out of a doorway at an arrival gate--

ARLO steps off the plane, with a small duffle and a briefcase, both just like Zero's. He looks around, then follows the crowd toward the baggage claim--

He walks about twenty feet, fairly expressionless, before a MAN in a red bandana and sunglasses, staring at the ground, walks quickly past him. As the man passes--

BANDANA

Follow me.

Arlo stops, surprised. He watches the man walk away, then does as he's told--

Arlo follows a few feet behind Bandana. They walk past a bank of pay phones, three mini-booths on each side. As Arlo gets to the phones, Bandana puts one finger in the air, without turning back-- "Wait here"--

Arlo stops in his tracks, about five feet from the phones. He stands there, waiting, looking around. After a second, one of the phones RINGS. It rings twice before Arlo realizes that this is what he's waiting for. He figures out which is the right phone and picks it up--

ARLO

(overly friendly)

Hello. Steve Arlo.

(listens)

I really hope you're being followed...

(listens)

Then is the costume really necessary?

CUT TO:

Bandana, who is Zero, is on another phone. This disguise, while effective in obscuring his face, is that of a Tacky Guy--

ZERO

You can't be too careful.

(listens)

Because we need to talk now. First of all, how was your trip?

BACK TO:

Arlo feels silly talking on the phone this way, and he makes no effort to contain his exasperation--

ARLO

Fine.

BACK TO:

ZERO

Good. So, I just left Stark at the gym. Some major revelations. First of all, this guy's a mess. Somebody's holding something really serious over his head, and I don't think it has anything to do with money. He doesn't move like a white collar criminal. You should see the way he walks-- His shoulders ride at ear level. He's cut himself shaving three times in the last ten days or so. Those are symptoms of a deeply ingrained, paranoid fear. Fear of being found out. Most people as wealthy as Stark prefer to assert their power through passivity-- the power of silence. Stark is convincing the world-- which is to say "convincing himself" -- at every moment. A very profound case of "is-mine-big-enough-complex". Couple of examples-- I get on the treadmill next to him, and get the machine going to exactly his pace...

Through this following speech, we CUT BACK AND FORTH between this scene and the key images that Zero is describing. These CUT-AWAYS are ZERO'S POV images from the gym, which are tighter and more detailed than the coverage we had seen before--

ZERO (CONT'D)

...Then, I start a conversation and eventually ask what level he runs his treadmill at. I guess Eight. He says Seven. But he's running at the same speed I am, which is Level Five. He'd sooner lie --to a complete stranger-- than confess to being a whole three levels lower than my guess. Dick Fear in its most pure form. Also, like most Ivy League graduates, he drops his alma mater with almost no prompting at all. Harvard. I mention the Celtics, he says Cambridge. Not only uninterested, but actually fearful of talking to a stranger. As soon as I spoke to him, he ran the other way. Just conditioning though, a reflex, because he obviously didn't think to connect me to all of this blackmail business. If he was suspicious of me, he would have remembered my name which he didn't. Oh, yeah-- This gentleman prefers redheads... And he lusts after his masseuse. Could tell in the

(MORE)

ZERO (CONT'D)

way he takes his massage; it's more than a little eroticized and he does it every day with the same woman.

The CUT-AWAYS end; Arlo listens intently, interested--

CUT TO:

Zero, at his pay phone, continues--

ZERO (CONT'D)

...Major sexual hang-ups. Has not gotten laid in a very long time. He's not cheating on his wife, though, which is always suspicious, in this day and age. Some kind of very dark, guilty association with his own sexuality-- some type of abuse or force or something, either in his childhood or at his hands. Oh! Also, found an old e-mail from Clearburg, in Stark's briefcase. It's a little cryptic. The note says, "Thorough check finds no boxer with the name K.V." K.V. are obviously initials and we should figure out what they stand for. Also, it means there's probably other e-mail correspondence between them, which I'd like to see. Let's see... what else? That's the important stuff.

CROSS-CUT BETWEEN:

There is a long beat as Arlo takes all this in, then looks around and remembers that he's on a pay phone--

ARLO

Um, Daryl?

ZERO

Sssshhhhhh! Knight! Sergio Knight!

ARLO

(again exasperated)
Whatever. I have a question.

For the first time, WE CUT WIDE. Zero and Arlo are on opposite sides of the SAME PHONE BOOTH.

ZERO

What's that?

ARLO

Why the hell are we talking on the phone?

ZERO

(whispering)
I told you. You can't be too careful. Two guys? In an airport? Talking? It's a little fishy.

ARLO

(can hardly contain himself)
Why are we at the airport at all? Why didn't we just leave!?

ZERO

Oh. I see the confusion. I need more research. I need you to go to my computer, and find some things. And while you're there, I need you to break into Clearburg's computer and pull anything pertinent. I've never done it before, but it shouldn't be too hard. I've written out elaborate directions. They're in an envelope in the phone book in front of you. Turn to Rentals. Your boarding passes are there, also. I'll meet you at the motel tonight when you get back.

Arlo can't believe his ears. He's fuming--

ARLO

Are you telling me that instead of calling me, you had me fly out here, so you could tell me to go straight back to the computer, and fly back again tonight?

ZERO

It wasn't an emergency. There was no reason to risk the long distance lines. They listen, you know.

It looks as though Arlo may have reached the end of his rope. He shakes the phone book and the envelope comes loose.

ZERO (CONT'D)

Steve, are you still there?

Arlo is too mad to speak.

ARLO

No.

He SLAMS the phone down, and Zero jumps. Arlo walks back in the direction he came from.

INT. PARKING GARAGE - DUSK

WE HEAR only the echoing footsteps of--

Stark, wearing a grey overcoat and carrying two briefcases, walking through the concrete structure to his car.

After a moment, WE HEAR--

ZERO (VO)

(reading the letter)

"Mr. Stark-- Transaction Instructions for this Monday night. \$100,000 cash, transported in a discreet, black leather bag that you shall provide for yourself. Wear your business suit and your grey overcoat. Carry the enclosed pager, set to the inaudible, vibrating response. Go about your day, per usual. Go to the gym, then the office. Arrange to leave the office at five PM. Your course is as follows:...

EXT. PARKING GARAGE - SAME

The large silver Bentley rolls out of the garage, onto the street, and pulls away--
-- a few seconds later, Zero's rental car follows.

INT. ZERO'S CAR - SAME

Zero drives along, in a very nondescript baseball cap and denim jacket, focused but relaxed.

EXT. STREET - SAME

In light traffic, Zero keeps his distance with two cars separating his from Stark's.

ZERO (VO)

"1) At 5:30PM, be at the intersection of Powell and Green Ave. in your Bentley, with the cash...

EXT. STREET - SAME

Reaching a large intersection, Stark pulls over to wait--

Zero flies right by.

INT. ZERO'S CAR - SAME

CU-- Rearview mirror-- Stark's Bentley getting smaller with distance.

ZERO (VO)

"2) When the clock in your car reads 5:34, begin driving, North-bound up Powell. In moving traffic, maintain a speed between 25 and 30mph. Stay in the right-most lane...

INT. STARK'S CAR - SAME

CU-- The digital clock changes from "5:33" to "5:34".

Stark pulls away from the curb. He drives along, carefully checking his speed.

EXT. POWELL STREET - SAME

Stark's Bentley seems to be moving very slowly in the traffic. The car behind him gets annoyed and changes lanes to zip ahead.

ZERO (VO)

"3) Pager will go off, displaying six digits...

INT. STARK'S CAR - SAME

On the front seat, next to Stark, the pager starts rattling.

Even though he was expecting it, he's a bit startled-- the first time that "other" presence makes itself known. He picks it up and checks the display--

CU-- The beeper display-- "425465", PAN TO the odometer "42,544.8" and counting.

ZERO (VO)

"When your vehicle's odometer reads the same overall mileage, pull over and park, ASAP..."

EXT. REMOTE INDUSTRIAL NEIGHBORHOOD - SAME

Absolutely nobody around, Stark sits near his parked car, waiting for the bus, now carrying only one bag--

ZERO (VO)

"4) Funds in hand, walk to the nearest bus-stop, same side of the street. Get on the next bus..."

-- he just looks for the bus, impatient.

EXT. INDUSTRIAL NEIGHBORHOOD - SAME

A bus-- presumably one with Stark on it-- passes through an intersection.

ZERO (VO)

"5) Pager will deliver a three digit number. Get off the bus at next opportunity..."

INT./EXT. BUS (5TH AVE AND MORRISON)- SAME

With the bus still moving, Stark stands waiting to get off. The bus slows to a stop, and the doors open. Stark is the first one off, and WE TRACK WITH HIM as he gets off the bus, and runs across the street. A car screeches to a stop, narrowly missing him-- which freaks him out. He reaches the other bus stop and a COUPLE OF BUS PATRONS give him a look.

ZERO (VO)

"Cross the street. Get on the bus with the painted bus number that corresponds with the pager message. Sit in the front-most available seat..."

INT. BUS 2 - SAME

Stark has just paid the toll. He starts down the aisle, very slowly, looking for the "front-most available seat". He finds it--

It is a window seat directly next to a RAG-CLAD VAGABOND who may smell. Across the aisle and just one row back is an aisle seat next to a YOUNG SECRETARY--

Stark looks back and forth between the two seats; he has a clear preference.

CUT TO:

INT. BUS 2 - SAME

Sitting next to the homeless gentleman, Stark's edginess has never been more apparent. THEN, the pager starts RATTLING in his coat pocket. He starts grasping at his pocket to stop it. Trying to be inconspicuous, he couldn't be more conspicuous. Finally, he finds the thing, and stops it. He checks the number on the pager and stands to get off the bus--

ZERO (VO)

"6) Pager will deliver third and final message. Get off bus and walk to corresponding street address...

He turns around and looks to the back of the bus.

STARK'S POV-- A MAN in a black suit and sunglasses sits at the back of his bus and seems to be STARING RIGHT BACK AT HIM. Just as Stark looks at him, he closes a cellular flip-phone. Is he responding to Stark?

EXT. YMCA - SAME

Stark stands in front of the building, double checking the address-- this is the place.

ZERO (VO)

"7) Upon arrival, enter the building. Enter first possible, men's room...

INT. YMCA ENTRY - SAME

Stark comes through the door. The place is full of dozens of MEN and WOMEN in sweat suits. It's a distinctly less glitzy work-out alternative to his health club; a place for the Everyman to workout and play basketball. Stark surveys the room, looking quite out of place. Then he spots it-- the Men's Room.

INT. YMCA MEN'S ROOM - SAME

Very crowded in here, Stark makes his way past the sinks and urinals to the stall furthest from him. He tries the door-- it's locked. He looks under the door-- there's someone in there. Suddenly, he looks even more panicked--

ZERO (VO)

"Go to toilet stall, furthest from door. Lock yourself in. In tank of toilet, find plastic bag. Transfer cash into bag, replace in tank.

-- the door opens and a very fat MAN emerges. Stark is reasonably a little disgusted by the whole scenario.

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

"8) Walk outside and trip the nearest fire alarm. Then leave immediately. You have three minutes to get out of the building, from the time you enter. You are not to be accompanied. You are not to be followed. Your complete cooperation," blah, blah, blah...

(aside from letter, to "reader")

A little note about following people: People know they're being followed when they turn around and see somebody following them...

As Stark walks into the stall and locks the door behind him, we SLOWLY TRACK BACK through the room. Standing back to us, apparently reziping his fly, is ZERO. He looks over to Stark's stall as he reaches up to flush the urinal. He's beat Stark here. He turns and heads for the exit door.

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

They can't tell they're being followed, if you get there first.

INT. STARK'S STALL - SAME

Stark is crouched in front of the toilet, with the tank lid removed. He is in the process of depositing cash bricks into a blue garbage bag. He's going as fast as he can.

INT. YMCA ENTRY - SAME

A water fountain, not in use. A twelve-man BASKETBALL TEAM in uniform purple T-shirts passes by, just through playing, and when they clear, Zero is just finishing using the fountain. He turns and leans against the wall, watching--

Zero's POV-- The Men's Room door, fifty feet away, swings open and Stark emerges. He's running a little behind and he starts frantically scanning the walls for a fire alarm. He can't see it anywhere. WE PAN OVER SLIGHTLY, and see that there is a red emergency switch, just ten feet away from him. WE PAN BACK and see that he is completely oblivious to it.

Zero cringes a bit-- this kind of ineptitude is hard to watch.

Stark stands there, now so flustered as to almost draw attention to himself, spinning in circles, drifting in different directions. He starts to wander away from the switch--

CU-- Stark's face-- Wet and frightened, "Where is this thing?" After beat, A HAND reaches into the frame and lightly TOUCHES his arm. He jumps at the touch and whips around to see who it is--

STARK'S POV-- There's nobody there.

He looks around. Who was that? Then, his eyes settle-- The fire alarm. He makes his move.

Zero stands against another wall, shaking his head slightly.

Stark stands a few feet from the fire alarm. He checks his watch, gives a quick glance around... and PULLS THE SWITCH.

THE ALARM SOUNDS, loud, like a siren in the room. Everybody jumps, but it takes a second to realize what's going on.

TWO OF THE STAFFERS behind the front counter try to take control--

STAFFER 1

Okay, folks-- That's the fire alarm! Everybody has to get out of the building!

STAFFER 2

But please do not run! Everybody walk out of the building!

The crowd starts to gravitate toward the door. Some run for dear life, others don't take it very seriously.

EXT. YMCA - SAME

Stark is among the first out the door. He has to stop himself from running, glancing back over his shoulder a few times.

BACK TO:

INT. YMCA - SAME

Staffer 1 strides right by Zero, who's again standing next to the drinking fountain.

STAFFER 1

Let's go, everybody! Let's go! Everybody out!

Zero is watching closely, trying not to miss anything.

Zero's POV-- Back and forth across the room... A few young KIDS are on their way out the door... The Men's room door remains shut... four little BOYS, waiting for their parents look scared and STAFFER 1 comes to help them... The Men's Room door opens and a MAN IN A CARDIGAN walks out carrying a gym bag... a SKINNY HOMELESS MAN in a bow tie walks into the building carrying a tambourine, going against traffic. His eyes dart around and he moves erratically through the room...

Zero focuses on this strange guy as he gravitates towards Mr. Cardigan.

Staffer 2 walks over and instructs Bow Tie to leave.

Staffer 1 walks by Zero again, without looking at him--

STAFFER 1 (CONT'D)

Let's go! Let's go! Evacuate the building!

Zero starts toward the front door and mixes into a group of WEIGHTLIFTERS who must be coming down from another level. He is following Cardigan.

Outside, we HEAR additional sirens-- Fire trucks and ambulances arriving.

CU-- Zero intently tries to see what's going on. He focuses on the door to the Men's Room--

--which is shut.

Suddenly, a brigade of five FIRE FIGHTERS come marching in, and disperse. Then another TEAM comes marching in--

FIRE FIGHTER 1

Everybody out of the building!

Zero looks around. Cardigan has been delayed at the door to let the fire fighters enter. Once they're in, he leaves. Zero looks back to the Men's Room one more time-- no activity. He decides to move with Cardigan and steps outside the building--

CUT TO:

EXT. YMCA - SAME

--Zero steps out of the building, and watches Cardigan descend the stairs and move through a large crowd of evacuated people.

Zero is craning his neck to watch as a TEAM OF PARAMEDICS rushes past. He steps out of the way for them and looks to see where they're coming from--

Another ambulance has just pulled up. THREE MORE PARAMEDICS jump out.

Zero takes one more look to place Cardigan; he's starting down the sidewalk, away from here. Zero starts to move toward him when, SUDDENLY, something catches his eye--

COMING UP THE STAIRS, right at him, is the WOMAN from the line at the gym--
GLORIA.

Zero has to step out of the way for her and her partners as they rush past. He checks after Cardigan one more time-- can still see him-- then sticks his head into the building once more.

Zero's POV-- Gloria and her team rush inside and disperse. She moves straight to the Men's Room, pounds on the door, then steps inside.

Zero looks very surprised as he watches. He runs down the stairs, checking once more on the other guy, then back up to peer inside. Just as he does, Gloria is coming out of the Men's Room carrying a First Aid kit.

Zero's POV-- CU-- The First Aid kit, held in a rubber gloved hand.

Zero watches her-- this is a surprise. He whispers to himself--

ZERO

Gloria...
(remembers)
...Sullivan.

INT. MOTEL FRONT DESK - NIGHT

A heavy-set WOMAN sits at a table behind the front desk, reading an old, worn issue of a magazine called "Large Game Hunting". The door RINGS, and after finishing her paragraph, she stands to assist--

It's ARLO. Same apparel as this morning, only very tired and travel worn--

CLERK

You Arlo?

Arlo nods. The clerk drops the pen and reaches under the desk. She pulls out an envelope--

CLERK (CONT'D)

That other guy left this for you. That Olson.

Arlo takes the envelope and opens it--

CLERK (CONT'D)

Strange personality, that Olson.

Arlo just stares at the note--

CU-- The note-- "*Arlo- Gone back to LA. Back in the morning. Get some rest. Wait for me.*"

Mad as hell, Arlo takes a deep breath.

The clerk offers a key and, without looking, Arlo takes it.

INT. ZERO'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

The whole place is pretty dark--

SLOW PAN across the floor-- Piles and piles of books, computer print-outs--

ZERO (VO)

I can't possibly overstate the importance of good research...

UP TO THE DESK-- A digitized photo, probably from a newspaper, of Stark accepting an award; a plastic bound document entitled "Oregon Timber-- Quarterly Analysis- 1995"; a computer print-out of a phone bill; a Visa bill; a printed page-- "Dental History-- Patient: Sullivan, Gloria".

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

Everyone goes through life dropping crumbs. If you can recognize the crumbs, you can trace a path all the way back from your death certificate, to the dinner-and-a-movie that resulted in you, in the first place...

Back at his pad, Zero looks more comfortable, sitting hunched behind his computer, absolutely focused on the screen.

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

But research is an art, not a science. Because anyone who knows what they're doing can find the crumbs-- the where's, what's and who's. The art is in the why's. The ability to read between the crumbs-- not to mix metaphors...

CU-- ON THE SCREEN-- A series of ten digits, rapidly spinning, trying to break a code. After a moment of this, the computer beeps and the message --"Access System-- Loading". Then a large graphic, in a plain font-- "Clearburg and Associates-- The First Name in Private Security".

Zero looks at this slogan and smiles; he's penetrated their computers rather easily.

LATER--

Zero sits cross-legged on the floor, amongst the chaotic Zero library, studying a map of Portland--

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

For every event there is a cause and an effect. For every action, an equal and opposite reaction. For every answer, a question. For every crime, a motive. And for every motive, a passion.

He puts down the map, and picks up a piece of paper, across the top of which-- "Portland State Hospital EMT/ Paramedic Shift Rotation."

LATER--

Zero looks a bit perplexed, as he looks over a pair of pages on the micro-fiche monitor--

PAN ACROSS THE MICRO-FICHE MONITOR-- On the left side, the cover of the "Harvard University Literary Magazine-- Spring '68". On the right side, a poem entitled "For Clarissa/ The Plummeting Birds" by Gregory Stark.

ZERO (VO)

The art of research is the ability to look at the details and see the passion.

Zero stares at the screen, digesting information, his face blue-green from the monitor's glare in the dark room.

INT. GYM/PORTLAND - DAY

In the crowded gym, Gloria sits atop a stationary-bike, peddling away. All of the bikes are in use, and she's as fast as anyone, in her "final stretch"--

Across the room, ZERO watches her--

Gloria finishes her program, sits up and breaths hard, red and sweaty. She hops off the bike and reaches to her toes, stretching. She stands and heads for a large hydraulic machine across the room--

Zero sees where she's going, and moves--

TRACK WITH GLORIA-- Past the StairMasters, past the squat machines, past the treadmills. WE HANG ON THE TREADMILLS for a moment, as she passes right by STARK, huffing and puffing away. She doesn't even look. She passes a TRAINER, and SLAPS hands with him, laughing. As she reaches her destination, she slows; there is a line. She bends down to tie her shoe, and when she stands up, ZERO is in front of her in line, back to her. They stand in silence for a moment, then he turns toward her, as though just looking around. She recognizes him--

GLORIA

Hey...

He looks surprised to see her--

ZERO

Oh! Hi.

GLORIA

Okay, so you have to tell me-- Yesterday, how could you tell that I'm a paramedic?

ZERO

Do you really want to know?

GLORIA

Yes!

ZERO

I could smell it.

GLORIA

(shocked, laughs)

What do you mean?!

ZERO

I could smell iodine. It's a very specific scent, largely unique to hospitals and ambulances. And it looked like your hair had been wet --and dried naturally-- but since I could smell the iodine, I knew that you hadn't bathed or scrubbed down since your last shift, so I assumed that you had been working in the rain the night before. So I figured you were a paramedic, and not a doctor or nurse.

Gloria looks at him for a moment, smiling, a bit mystified. After a slightly awkward beat--

ZERO (CONT'D)

That's how I guessed.

GLORIA

Well, you were right. About each part. Very impressive.

ZERO

Did you say that you thought I needed a massage?

GLORIA

(smiles, he remembers)

Did I say that?

ZERO

I think so.

He sees that she's not going to explain and decides to change the subject--

ZERO (CONT'D)

Do you enjoy that work?

GLORIA

Sometimes...

It's going to take a little urging--

ZERO

Sometimes?

GLORIA

It can be a thrill. When you rush right into the middle of something, some chaotic mess, and intervene. Get involved. And maybe help somebody. Revive their body.

She looks right at Zero when she talks.

ZERO

The things you must have seen...

GLORIA

(considers this)

Yeah... Some of it's just boring, though. A lot of driving around... And the hours are terrible. Twelve- and eighteen-hour shifts... I'm sorry, I'm rambling...

ZERO

No, you're not. It's interesting to me.

She acknowledges this. It's nice to be interesting.

GLORIA

What about you? Do you live around here?

(laughs, to herself)

That's such a stupid question, "do you live around here?". What difference does it make?...

He's not quite sure what to make of her--

ZERO

That's okay. No, I'm only in town for a few days. On business. I bought a week's pass to the gym.

GLORIA

Are you here for the conference at the Red Lion Convention Center?

Zero makes an on-the-spot decision--

ZERO

Yes.

GLORIA

So, you're an accountant?

If Zero had anything in mind, it wasn't this.

ZERO

Yep.

(tries to assume the character)

Pretty exciting, I know.

GLORIA

Boy, I don't know how you do it. All those forms, all the time...

ZERO

Well... it grows on you.

GLORIA

Where do you live...

ZERO

(offering)

Nick.

GLORIA

I know. Nick Carmine. Daisy-- at the front desk-- told me.

Zero reacts to this--

ZERO

Right. Gloria.

She smiles at the sound of her name, and he smiles at her smile, which surprises him a bit.

EXT. PORTLAND STREET - DAY

A white Honda Civic pulls up to the curb and parks. After a beat, Gloria gets out, in uniform and with her purse hanging over her shoulder. She feeds the meter and starts down the street--

-- WE TRACK WITH HER, as she checks her watch and saunters casually past A MAN in a raincoat, buying a newspaper from a street machine. WE REMAIN on him for a beat after she passes and when she is gone, the man pulls a paper from the stack and lets the door to the box shut--

ZERO glances down at the headline, then casually looks off in the direction she's headed. He looks down to his paper again, reading as he follows her.

EXT. COUNTY FACILITY FOR THE DISABLED ELDERLY - SAME

The building is packed tightly between two others, brownstone style.

Zero sits across the street in a covered bus-stop. He has a scarf wrapped around the lower part of his face, rendering him very difficult to identify. He sits, watching--

ZERO's POV-- A NURSE holds the door open for an emerging WHEELCHAIR PATIENT. Approaching eighty and seemingly catatonic, his pulse is obviously sustained by the hideous mass of mechanical equipment rigged to the chair. So many tubes and bandages and tanks and boxes that it's hard to tell where the man ends and the machines begin. And pushing his chair toward the access ramp, covered in the Red Cross, is Gloria.

Zero's expressionless eyes don't blink as the breeze blows his hair around.

INT. ZERO'S MOTEL ROOM - DAY

Arlo sits on the bed, watching the TV because there's nothing else to do--

ON THE TV-- "Good Morning America". Tape of the effort to save a beached whale.

Suddenly, the DOOR OPENS. Zero rushes in and quickly shuts the door behind him. Without hesitation, he moves directly to the window and pulls the curtains closed.

Arlo looks up for a brief second, then back to the TV.

ZERO

(angry)

What did I tell you about the curtains?

Arlo just watches the TV--

ZERO (CONT'D)

What is that?

No response.

THE TV-- The whale being hoisted by a crane--

ZERO (CONT'D)

Fucking whale... Fuck the whales...

Arlo glances over at this, then resumes his viewing--

Zero sits down in a chair and takes off his running shoes--

ZERO (CONT'D)

I'm a mess. All this fucking exercise...

ARLO

(without looking)

Maybe you should stop snorting that shit.

ZERO

Keeps my teeth sharp.

ARLO

It'll kill you.

After a beat, Arlo sits up and remotes the TV off--

ARLO (CONT'D)

So, I brought all that stuff that you sent me back to LA to get.

(resentful)

But since you, then, went back to LA yourself, I suppose you probably don't need it anymore.

Either Zero is oblivious to Arlo's tone or he just ignores it--

ZERO

Did you see that terrible poem he wrote in college?

ARLO

"The Plummeting Birds".

ZERO

Yeah. "An ode to Clarissa". Poor girl. Worst poetry I've seen since the Case of the Shrinking Gypsy Stripper's Scriblings. Tell me this-- how do you rhyme "towards" and "birds"? Huh? "Falling, dropping, diving towards/ Two lovers lost/ Plummeting birds". They don't rhyme...

ARLO

Maybe it's not supposed to rhyme.

ZERO

Of course it is! It's an A-A-B-B, all the way down. Also, how do you write a poem for a woman named Clarissa, without once using the name in the poem? If ever a name begged to be in a poem, it's Clarissa! The guy is a miserable writer.

Arlo almost has to laugh, he's so lost on a response--

ARLO

I did that phone book data-base cross-reference thing you asked for, though. There are a thousand, eight hundred some men in Oregon with the initials K.V. And over a million in the US with listed phone numbers. How about you? Anything on your end?

ZERO

I found the blackmailer.

ARLO

You did?!

ZERO

Yeah. Her name's Gloria Sullivan.

ARLO

Who is she?

ZERO

She works out at the same gym as Stark. She's a paramedic.

ARLO

How do you know it's her?

ZERO

I watched her walk into the bathroom and get the money. I have to admit, I was a bit surprised-- I had a few guesses, but I hadn't even thought twice about her.

ARLO

Do they know each other?

ZERO

I don't think so. I couldn't find any intersections in their histories.

ARLO

How would somebody who doesn't know him, know about his safety deposit box?

ZERO

Maybe somebody told her. Maybe she's not the only one.

ARLO

What's her story?

ZERO

I couldn't find anything out of the ordinary. Model citizen. College graduate. Good paramedic. Volunteers at a home for the elderly. No criminal record.

Zero thinks about it, then stands and crosses to the bathroom--

ZERO (CONT'D)

Seems very even tempered. Friendly, eager to chat.

Zero steps into the bathroom and we hear him turn on the sink, he calls in from the other room--

ZERO (OS) (CONT'D)

No nervousness. Which is odd for a blackmailer. Even at the pick up, yesterday. Just... very cool. She's very cool.

Arlo looks as though he's heard something that doesn't quite check.

ZERO (OS) (CONT'D)

A definite intensity to her. Looks you right in the eyes. And you find yourself looking right into hers. Sort of a sensual quality.

Arlo, brow rumpled, mouths "Sensual?".

Zero reenters, without his shirt, face dripping--

ZERO (CONT'D)

Very personable. Nice sense of humor.

Zero collapses on the other bed, across from Arlo's, and closes his eyes--

ZERO (CONT'D)

Actually very charming.

Arlo can't believe his ears--

ARLO
Charming? Did you just say "very charming"?

ZERO
Yeah.

ARLO
Daryl, are you okay?

ZERO
I'm fine. What are you talking about?

Arlo just looks at him, then he smiles to himself--

ARLO
Nothing.

Arlo stares at Zero, lying on the bed, about to doze off--

ZERO
Keep looking for that safe deposit box. Make plans to get paid at five o'clock. Get him out of the office. Then you can go home for a couple nights.

ARLO
Aren't we finished? You found the blackmailer. He said that all he needed was a name.

ZERO
We're not done yet. First I have to figure out what her deal is.

EXT. ANKENY PARK AND RIVER-WALK - DAY

Stark's car pulls up to a restaurant valet, across the street from us. He steps from the car and lets the valet get in. When the valet has driven off, he crosses the street, to us, and surveys the area--

A large park along the river. SMOKING PUNKS on park benches, MOTHERS pushing strollers along the river.

Arlo, jacket off, stands amidst some children's play equipment, pushing a LITTLE KID, in a swing. Between gentle pushes, he scans the park for Stark. Then he spots him--

Arlo waves his arm once at the opportune moment and Stark spots him, then heads for the playground. He looks a little out of place here. When he arrives--

STARK
This your kid?

ARLO
Nope. Just a rental. You got the money?

STARK
It's in the trunk. The first third. Has he started yet?

ARLO
Started? Oh, yeah. He's started.

The SWINGING SIX YEAR OLD jumps off the swing at the end of its arc--

SWINGER
Bye!

ARLO
Bye!
(to Stark)
You want a turn?

STARK
(not amused)
Has he found anything yet?

Arlo looks around, then points toward the river--

ARLO
This is a little conspicuous. Let's walk.

EXT. ANKENY RIVER-WALK - CONTINUOUS

The two men walk along the river--

STARK
So, does he know who's doing this to me?

ARLO
I can't tell you anything yet.

STARK
Nothing?!

ARLO
Too soon. Could interfere with the investigation.

Stark doesn't look happy--

STARK
Jesus...

ARLO
Okay. So here's how this is gonna work: Did you give your car to that valet over there, like I asked?

STARK
Yep.

ARLO
Perfect. Now, when we get down here, out of sight, you're gonna give me your valet ticket and I'm going to give you
(MORE)

ARLO (cont'd)

one. Then you're gonna walk over to that restaurant over there, and you're gonna order something to eat...

STARK

I had a late lunch. I'm not hungry.

ARLO

Then order something light, like a salad. When you're done, you're gonna give the valet the ticket. He will bring you a car identical to your own --also a rental-- and you will take it. Follow the map I left in the glove box, and park next to your car, which I will have driven there, and taken our money out of. The keys will be in the visor. Now, before we do this, is there anything you'd like me to tell Mr. Zero that might make his job a little easier?

STARK

If it were easy, I wouldn't need him. What do you have in mind?

Arlo stops and looks him dead in the eyes--

ARLO

Like, for example, what's in that safe deposit box of yours and where is it?

STARK

I told you-- I don't believe that to be pertinent to his task.

ARLO

It would be best to let him decide that.

STARK

I'm afraid that's not possible.

Arlo shakes his head, thinks of how to put it--

ARLO

Suit yourself. You can be as surreptitious and secretive as you want. But that sound that you think you hear ...

CUT TO:

INT. STARK'S OFFICE SUITE- DAY (EARLIER)

Stark, leaving to go meet Arlo, descends the large spiral staircase leading to his office. He passes by a glass enclosed library, and we PAN BACK to see that Zero is watching, waiting for him to leave.

ARLO (VO)

...in the middle of the night when you wake up in a panic...

INT. STARK'S RECEPTION AREA - SAME

The door to an emergency exit stairwell is open slightly. Zero peeks through--

ARLO (VO)

...that sense you have that you're being watched...

ZERO'S POV-- Stark's receptionist, a RED HEADED WOMAN near forty, sits behind her desk, talking on the phone. On the door behind her, the letters "Gregory Stark, President"--

ARLO (VO) (CONT'D)

...but you don't see anyone around...

In the stairwell, Zero is watching her, with one hand in a circuit board. Without even looking at what he's doing, he's unplugging and replugging connections, one by one, looking for the right one. He pulls a wire--

ARLO (VO) (CONT'D)

...that nagging feeling that someone's sifting through your past and taking inventory on your mind...

-- the receptionist's phone GOES DEAD. She shakes the receiver, concludes that the phone is out, and walks away from her desk to go investigate.

Zero smiles and makes his move.

BACK TO:

EXT. ANKENY RIVER-WALK - SAME

Back to CU--

ARLO

You tell yourself you're being paranoid, but that's what it feels like when Daryl Zero is seeing right through you.

Stark just stares at Arlo, trying not to swallow.

INT. STARK'S OFFICE - SAME

Zero has opened the safe. He stands, hands in the safe, reading something--

In his hands, on which he wears *latex gloves*-- A stack of all the blackmail letters, which Zero flips through. He's seen them before. He stops on the forth letter; something catches his interest--

CU-- The letter reads, "*Mr. Stark, I warn you once: Stay away from Kragen Vincent.*"

Zero squints. He had not been shown this. He mouths, very quietly--

ZERO

K.V....

He continues through the letters.

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

First of all, in this day and age, nobody should need to be reminded of the need to wear latex. Always. Always. Now, a
(MORE)

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

few words on looking for things: When you go looking for something specific, your chances of finding it are very bad....

Zero replaces the letters and shuts the safe. He moves to the desk, and starts opening drawers, sifting--

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

...Because, of all the things in the world, you're only looking for one of them...

He pulls out a bound volume, with a large "Oregon Timber" logo on the front. He starts flipping through the pages. Then, with no obvious prompting, he gracefully DROPS to his knees and leans way back, folding himself to the ground like a failed Limbo player at a party--

The Redheaded Receptionist sticks her head into the office, making sure that her boss hasn't returned. She doesn't see anyone, and turns out of the room--

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

...When you go looking for anything at all, your chances of finding it are very good....

When she is gone, Zero straightens out. And just keeps reading. As though he does this all the time.

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

...Because, of all the things in the world, you're sure to find some of them....

He replaces the volume and turns to the computer that sits on a small table next to the large desk. He begins punching keys, "searching" through the computer. He checks over his shoulder once, making sure that nobody is there.

WE DRIFT AWAY from Zero at the computer, slowly panning over the room--

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

And the most important rule-- Often, the thing you're looking for is right in front of your nose.

-- and settling on A COUCH, under a window.

EXT. ROOFTOP - DAY

BIRD'S EYE POV-- Five stories, below us a silver Bentley pulls into a parking lot--

ZERO (OS)

So I told you about his thing for red heads, right? Guess what color hair his secretary has.

ARLO (OS)

Red.

ZERO (OS)

Men are so predictable.

We PULL BACK to reveal that we are watching from their perspective, atop a building.

On the ground, the car pulls up and parks next to Stark's own, matching Bentley.

ARLO

Did you find anything useful?

ZERO

Gold mine. First of all, I've got a full name on the boxer. Kragen Vincent. K.V. It was on a letter from our blackmailer to our blackmailee. "I warn you once. Stay away from Kragen Vincent."

ARLO

He said that he gave us all of the letters.

ZERO

Well, he didn't give us that one. Mr. Stark really doesn't want me to know about Kragen Vincent. So now we have to figure out exactly who he is and where.

ARLO

Kragen Vincent? OK.

ZERO

No record of Gloria Sullivan anywhere. Did find one other thing of interest, though...

Zero reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a LARGE KEY CHAIN, dangling it in front of him. Arlo is shocked--

ARLO

Holy shit! A gold Swiss Army knife. Those are the keys!

ZERO

(casual)
I know.

Arlo approaches Zero and examines the keys--

ARLO

And this is the safe deposit box key. Where'd you find them?

ZERO

They were in the sofa, under the cushion.

ARLO

What?

ZERO

They were stuck in the couch, in his office.

ARLO

Was he hiding them there? Is that possible?

ZERO

No. Not possible. That's where they fell out of his pocket, a year ago.

ARLO

So what do you make of this?

ZERO

I think that, just as I feared, Ms. Sullivan doesn't even know about these keys.

ARLO

You mean, the keys are just a coincidence?

ZERO

Yes.

Arlo hands back the keys and Zero puts them back in his pocket. Arlo takes this in--

ARLO

Well... that's confusing.

ZERO

Yep.

ARLO

Doesn't seem like a *good* thing.

ZERO

Sure, it is.

ARLO

How do you figure?

ZERO

First of all, it's good because, now that we have the key, it should be a lot easier to figure out which box it belongs to...

ARLO

What difference does it make, if she doesn't have the key?

ZERO

Aren't you curious to know what's in there?

Arlo makes a face, not sure what to think about that. Before he can respond--

ZERO (CONT'D)

Secondly, it's good because the man's been looking for his keys for a year and I found them!

Arlo nods. He has to agree.

INT. ZERO'S CAR - NIGHT

AT THE AIRPORT, Zero pulls up to the curb for "the immediate unloading" of Arlo. Arlo grabs his bag, but he has something to say--

ARLO

Now, I'm gonna go home. Tell me that you're not going to make me come back here tomorrow afternoon. Because I could check this Kragen Vincent out from here...

ZERO

(cutting him off)

I won't need you tomorrow.

ARLO

I'm trusting you here, Daryl.

ZERO

(sick of talking about it)

Have a nice trip!

This bugs Arlo, and he gets out of the car, pushing the door closed behind him. Zero hits the gas and leaves.

INT. ZERO'S MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

In the dark room, Zero sits on his bed, rocking back and forth, looking strung-out and terrified.

ZERO

(singing the blues)

"It's cold and dark in my heart/ Said, It's cold and dark in my heart, Mama/ Maybe if it weren't so cold and dark/ Maybe I'd have someone else's heart"

On the night stand, a bottle of Vodka and a few stray, yellow pills.

INT. GYM - DAY

Zero on the treadmill, striding along, going nowhere. He sees Gloria approaching him, and stands a little taller.

She covers her face as if embarrassed, then dives in--

GLORIA

Look, I realize this is totally inappropriate, but... Nevermind.

ZERO

What?

GLORIA

You know what I'm gonna ask, don't you?

ZERO

No. What?

She gathers her courage, then--

GLORIA

If I weren't so exhausted, I'd never have the guts to ask but...
is there any way that I could get you to look over my tax
returns?

She cringes. Zero just smiles at her. What luck.

EXT. ARLO'S PATIO/LA - DAY

Arlo and Jess are lying out, intertwined. She gets an idea suddenly, and starts lightly, playfully nipping at his cheek with her teeth. He's surprised and delighted. Then, the cell phone sounds that irritating ring. Jess stops abruptly, annoyed. Without even moving, Arlo reaches down to the side of the lounge chair and puts it to his ear--

ARLO

Yeah.

(listens a long time)

Are you telling me that you know how to speak six
languages and fly a jet liner, but you don't know how to file
tax returns?

(listens)

"It's never come up." And you have to do this right now?

(listens)

No, that's a W2. WW2 was the second world war.

He takes a deep breath and sits up in his chair--

ARLO (CONT'D)

Okay, the five minute version-- The form you're gonna be
filling out is a 1040, probably a 1040-EZ...

INT. GLORIA'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

The door opens, silhouetting Gloria. She flips a switch, illuminating the curtain-darkened room. Zero follows her into the house, and immediately, discreetly, starts exploring the room with his eyes.

GLORIA

Come on in...

Zero watches closely as, letting habits dictate her actions, Gloria places her purse on a chair and moves directly across the room to the kitchenette, where she leaves a shopping bag on the counter. Then she disappears into the bedroom, calling to him--

GLORIA (OS)
(CONT'D)

Here it is. My humble palace.

ZERO

Very nice.

ZERO'S POV-- Very fast, examining the room, trying to memorize everything, while she's out of the room. A large, comfortable couch with a cluttered coffee table in front of it-- a

much used space. A large easy chair with a folded blanket lying across the arm. The television...

ZERO (CONT'D)

How long have you been here?

GLORIA (OS)

Three years.

STILL ZERO'S POV-- ...A fireplace. The mantle over the fireplace covered with photographs, and a large decorative, marble box. Wood floors. A large area rug under the living room furniture. Stucco ceiling. One large, hanging light fixture. POV crosses the room to the dining room area. Dining room table. A dirty coffee mug with a large Red Cross on it. Yesterday's mail.

Zero starts to rifle through the mail pile. Junk, junk, bill, personal...

GLORIA (OS)

(CONT'D)

Okay... You're an accountant, so you would know...

She's coming back into the room--

Zero drops her mail, moves away from it, and manages to casually gaze out the window, just in time for--

Gloria to reenter the room, with an armful of papers--

GLORIA (CONT'D)

What is the Corrodium-3 Deduction?

He smiles a patronizing smile; he has no idea--

ZERO

The Corrodium-3 Deduction. That's a very good question. In fact, that may be one of the most widely misunderstood deductions in the book.

GLORIA

Really?

ZERO

Indeed. The Corrodium-3 Deduction is an incentive for large manufacturers, who are able to moderate their use of Class 3 decay toxins, like Corrodium and... Malgorium.

GLORIA

I see.

Seeing that she is satisfied by this, he quickly moves on--

ZERO

Alright! Time to get dirty.

She sets the papers down on the dining room table--

GLORIA

Please, tell me if this bothers you, because I'm happy to sit here with you and watch you do this.

ZERO

Go ahead. Take your nap. I'll be here.

GLORIA

Just yell if you need anything at all.

ZERO

Alright.

She drops the stack of papers onto the dining room table. It's a very big stack.

Zero looks up from the papers to her and smiles, trying not to look intimidated.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. GLORIA'S LIVING ROOM/DINING ROOM - LATER

Zero sits at the circular dining room table, with papers spread all over the surface-- IRS forms, receipts, a legal pad covered with his scribbling. He looks absolutely focused, trying to figure out how to do this. Occasionally, he punches the keys of the calculator sitting next to him.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. GLORIA'S LIVING ROOM - LATER

He's still working and he looks slightly harried by the experience. Gloria calls from the bedroom--

GLORIA (OS)

How's it going in there?!

ZERO

About five more minutes. I'm just double checking the math.

Zero looks up from his work as Gloria enters from the bedroom, wearing a very long T-shirt and no pants. A bit groggy, no make-up, hair mussed, just woken. Not a bad look. Sort of sexy, maybe.

Zero may never have seen anything like this before, and he has to stop himself from staring. He has to say something before it gets awkward--

ZERO (CONT'D)

You know, you should always keep your receipts. For everything.

GLORIA

I know. I never remember.

ZERO

Just put them in an envelope. I always keep all of my receipts. It's just a habit now.

She comes up behind him, looking over his shoulder at what he's done.

GLORIA

I just can't thank you enough. You've helped me out here, big time.

ZERO

It's my pleasure.

GLORIA

Okay, listen-- let me make you dinner.

ZERO

You don't have to do that...

GLORIA

No, I insist. I'm just gonna hop in the shower, real quick, and I'll make us some food.

Zero doesn't know what to do--

ZERO

Alright.

She hops up and runs into the other room. Zero watches her go. In fact, even after she's gone, he still watches. Then as if breaking a trance, he shakes out of it, and remembers his task at hand. He looks down at the legal pad.

He flips several pages into the pad, past many blank pages, to a couple of marked pages-- he's made some notes of his own. He tears the "hidden" pages from the pad, folds them up and shoves them in his back pocket.

His eyes race around the room. Where to begin?

ZERO'S POV-- Her purse, sitting on the chair by the front door.

He crosses the room to the chair, flips the bag open and looks inside, trying not to disturb things too much. He listens for her--

-- the sound of the shower running. And maybe some humming.

He readjusts the position of the purse and crosses to the bedroom door, which is half-open. Listening before entering-- the shower runs, the girl hums-- he decides it's safe to enter. Very slowly. He pushes the door open a bit more, and sticks his head in--

CUT TO:

INT. GLORIA'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

A very simple single woman's bedroom. Fairly tidy, with a few garments hung on furniture. A bureau with some framed pictures. A small couch. The bed sheets are ruffled from her

recent nap. Next to the dresser is the bathroom door, a few inches cracked and gushing steam.

Zero, cautiously sticking his head in, checks the layout, sees that the coast is clear, and pushes the door open just wide enough to enter. He steps inside very softly, looks everything over. He looks in the direction of the bathroom door, then gets down on his knees to check under the bed, the side she seems to sleep on--

UNDER THE BED-- We see Zero peering through the dark at us.

Still on his knees, he turns and opens the top drawer of the night stand. Peering inside, he reacts to what he sees--

ZERO's POV-- In the drawer, amid bunch of loose papers, a black police-type HAND GUN and some extra ammunition. His hand reaches in and picks up... the loose pieces of paper. Receipts.

He makes a face; should have had these a minute ago. Then he gets up, and crosses, very quietly, to the bureau. He starts opening drawers-- Nothing but clothes. The photos on top catch his eye--

CU-- PHOTO-- Gloria, posed with an older couple, presumably her PARENTS. WE PAN OVER TO THE SHOT NEXT TO IT-- It's an old, black and white picture in a metal frame of a handsome, stoic MAN, in an elegant suit, probably circa 1955 or so. This interests Zero. He picks up the picture, and studies it. Gently, he opens the back of the frame, looking for some kind of notation. He finds it-- "*My darling G., A photo of me, young and free. Thinking of you always, Kragen.*"

CU-- Zero squints, making a mental note and replaces the frame.

He looks around, deciding what to search next. As the steam oozes past him, he remembers how close Gloria is. The steady sound of the running shower continues, occasionally disrupted by a human body--

CU-- He is momentarily SEIZED by something-- Some unfamiliar feeling, maybe guilt, maybe sexual attraction, maybe some kind of doubt; likely a combination of all these things. Whatever it is, his eyes are, for this one moment, much less assured or focused.

Then he snaps to his senses and resumes his work.

INT. ARLO'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The two lie on the floor, opposite a Scrabble board. Deep into the game, the board is covered with tiles. Jess moves--

JESS
"RETIRED"...

ARLO
Jesus... Another seven letter word.

JESS
That's 17, plus fifty-- 67 points. What's the score?

ARLO
That makes it-- you: 214, me: 166. You're kicking my ass.

Jess shakes the tile bag-- not many left.

JESS
I think I've pretty much kicked it.

He laughs.

ARLO
Oh, yeah?

JESS
Yeah.

She gets up on her hands and knees and begins to crawl toward him. She crawls right over the board, WRECKING the game. She lies down right on top of him, looks him in the eyes and says--

JESS (CONT'D)
Retire.

ARLO
What?

JESS
Retire.

He hears what she's saying and looks at her.

ARLO
It's not quite that simple, Jess...

JESS
Why? Why is "not that simple"? Steve, whenever you say that kind of thing... it creeps me out. I still don't understand exactly what you do, but... it creeps me out. Why can't you explain it to me? What's going on here, that's so secret you can't explain it? To *me*, even?

ARLO
I've told you-- it's nothing... weird. I mean, it's a little weird, but it's nothing... creepy. Exactly...

He doesn't sound too convinced of this.

JESS
What do you get from this? What kind of hold does this guy, whoever he is, have on you?

He's not sure himself. The best he can do is--

ARLO
He needs me.

JESS

(she doesn't like that)

"He needs you." Who needs who, here?

This touches a nerve. After a beat, softly--

JESS (CONT'D)

I need you. It's time to get away from him, Steve.

He looks at her hard. He knows she's right--

ARLO

Okay.

She's can't believe she's winning, so she doesn't relent--

JESS

Don't do this the way you quit smoking, where you just put it off and put it off. Quit. Just go to him and quit.

ARLO

I'll do it tomorrow, when I get there.

She expected more of a fight. After a moment, she grins--

ARLO (CONT'D)

If you'll marry me.

Jess is shocked. Her face drops. Still on top of him, she says nothing for a beat. Then as her lip twitches a half-smile and her eyes get shiny, she nods slightly and kisses him.

INT. GLORIA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Dinner finished, Gloria and Zero sit at the table, sipping coffee--

GLORIA

Here's the thing I don't understand about people who live in LA. Maybe you can explain it to me. Since everybody knows that there's a huge earthquake coming-- like a really huge one, to make all other earthquakes look like speed-bumps-- why doesn't everybody move away?

ZERO

That's a good question.

GLORIA

When I was in LA, it seemed like such a lonely town. Everybody driving around in their cars. Nobody talks to each other. Do you think it's a really bad place to be single?

This makes Zero uncomfortable, and he shifts a little--

ZERO

I guess I've never thought about it, to tell you the truth.

GLORIA

That's what it seemed like.

ZERO

Just curious, how'd you know that I'm single?

GLORIA

(smiles)

I know things about people. Plus, Daisy told me.

For some reason, Zero's not sure how to react to that. She sees and hesitates a moment before letting him off the hook--

GLORIA (CONT'D)

Where are you from originally?

ZERO

Minnesota.

GLORIA

Minnesota. I've never been there. Do you go back much?

Zero obviously doesn't want to talk about this--

ZERO

No.

GLORIA

Is your family still there?

ZERO

Uhhh... We're not really... in touch.

There is a long awkward silence, and when it's clear that it's not really going away, Zero just moves out of it--

ZERO (CONT'D)

Yeah. So, what were you doing in LA?

After a beat, she accepts his abrupt redirect, and answers--

GLORIA

I've been there twice. When I was little, I was there with my aunt and uncle.

(aside)

I was raised by my aunt and uncle. They adopted me.

They're first generation Americans, and they were always real excited about seeing the sights...

Zero's eyes register this little bit of biographical information.

GLORIA (CONT'D)

...Anyway, they took me and a girlfriend. Just to see it. Disneyland, Universal Studios. Then last year, I was there skydiving.

ZERO
Skydiving?!

GLORIA
(laughs at his response)
Yeah.

ZERO
Why do you do that?!

GLORIA
I love it! It's the most amazing thing in the world!

ZERO
You're not afraid you're gonna die or something?

GLORIA
It's really very safe.

ZERO
Even so, it must be safer not to.

She leans in to make her point--

GLORIA
Haven't you ever wanted to fly, Nick?

Zero looks at her-- this touches something. He nods.

She just looks at him for a moment. Maybe trying to look into him. Then she grins--

GLORIA (CONT'D)
I know what you need.

Zero makes a face; that makes him nervous.

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - NIGHT

Blackness. Then-- BANG! An explosive muzzle flash--

Along a fallen tree, forty feet away from us, a dozen large coffee canisters, lined up, side by side. In the darkness, they are illuminated by the headlights of a car. On the ground, two very long human shadows--

Gloria is sitting on the hood of her car, which is parked, lighting the area for them. Zero stands in front of her, holding a small black hand gun, very awkwardly, nervous. Gloria watches him, encouraging him like a coach--

GLORIA
Okay. Try again. Take your time, now. Really set yourself...

He takes aim at one of the canisters, both hands on the gun--

GLORIA (CONT'D)
Remember to bend your elbows a little...

Zero over-accommodates this instruction. It looks like a swimming stroke--

GLORIA (CONT'D)

A little less... Good. Now check your aim again... Then whenever your ready...

BANG! His whole body jerks, and, of course, the canister survives. He recovers. She can't help laughing a little. At first, he insulted. Then he's laughing too.

ZERO

You do this all the time?

GLORIA

Whenever I can.

She hops off the hood, holding her own weapon. She walks up next to him, and takes aim, like a pro--

GLORIA (CONT'D)

I find it deeply... satisfying.

BANG! The canister goes FLYING off the log. BANG! Another tin bites the dust.

ZERO

Nice...

GLORIA

Thanks. Try again. Take your time...

She steps back behind him, as Zero positions himself behind the gun. He holds it at a distance, as though he doesn't want to get too close--

GLORIA (CONT'D)

Don't be afraid of it. It's safe as long as you're careful. It's all about staying relaxed...

He couldn't be any less relaxed but he tries. Gloria is watching his form. Then she moves toward him. She comes up behind him and--

CU-- Standing behind him, her HANDS LAND ON HIS RIB CAGE--

He jumps! BANG! Premature fire!

ZERO

Whoa!

She laughs, but she doesn't take her hands away--

GLORIA

Sorry.

CU-- Zero's face-- Embarrassed. Endlessly uncomfortable--

ZERO

That's okay.

CU-- Her hands GLIDE UP HIS BACK TO HIS SHOULDERS. They land there and kneed a couple of times--

GLORIA

Just relax...

Zero breathing is quickening slightly, but he tries to hide it. She REACHES AROUND and positions his arms. He closes his eyes, trying to focus.

GLORIA (CONT'D)

Bend your arms. Hips back a little...

CU-- She manually moves his hips back a little.

She moves her face close to his, whispering--

GLORIA (CONT'D)

Keep breathing... Aim...

On the ground, their long shadows look like one huge person with two heads--

GLORIA (CONT'D)

... Relax... And fire.

--BANG! TWINK! One of the canisters tips over.

She steps back a few feet and, though he tries to conceal it, he visibly relaxes when she's not so close.

GLORIA (CONT'D)

There you go! Doesn't that feel good?

ZERO

(still recovering)

Uh huh...

She watches him, smiling. She's had an idea--

GLORIA

Now, you wanna try the shotgun?

Zero shakes his head, chuckling--

ZERO

Sure.

She turns around and heads for the trunk of the car. Then when she can't see, he turns to the cans, arms at his side. Then, *in one sharp move*, side to the cans, with one hand, he quickly aims and--

-- BANG! The tin goes FLYING.

CUT TO:

INT. GLORIA'S CAR - NIGHT

She drives down the blackened highway. He just stares out the window. Silence for a beat, then--

GLORIA
Where's your motel? Near the airport?

ZERO
Sort of near there.

GLORIA
Why don't you stay at my place tonight?

Zero's eyes get wide. He looks a little panicked, though he's trying not to show it.

ZERO
Ummm.....

GLORIA
I mean, you don't have to. But the couch folds out, and it seems silly to go all the way back to my place, then all the way back across town to some crummy motel.

Zero shuts his eyes, makes a decision. He doesn't sound too certain--

ZERO
Okay. That would be great.

GLORIA
Good.
(joking)
I'll even give you a receipt, if you like. You can write it off.

ZERO
(laughs)
I'd appreciate that. You know my motto-- "Always take the receipt."

INT. ZERO'S OFFICE - NIGHT

THE COMPUTER MONITOR-- Again, the text appears as the words are spoken--

ZERO (VO)
Absolutely vital: The ability to blend in. To very discreetly assimilate. It's not usually very difficult. All you have to do is look around...

CUT TO:

INT. GLORIA'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The lights are out. The sofa has been folded out and the furniture rearranged to accommodate. Zero lies in bed, face up. His eyes are wide open.

ZERO (VO)

...see how all of the ordinary people around you are behaving, and try to behave like one of them.

After a beat, he sits up and breathes deeply--

ZERO (CONT'D)

(very quietly, breathing)

Relax. Just relax.

He just sits, trying to collect himself.

INT. AIRPORT PARKING GARAGE - DAY

Through the shadows, Zero and Arlo walk to the car. Zero does not help Arlo with his bag, and Arlo listens closely--

ZERO

"... Love, Kragen". I need to know who this guy is. Anyway, later on-- this was so strange-- she said that she was adopted. Said that she was raised by her aunt and uncle. I didn't see anything like that in the research. No adoption papers, no court dates. Nothing.

They reach the car and Zero opens the trunk. Arlo drops one of his bags in, and then moves to his passenger door. They talk over the roof of the car for a minute--

ZERO (CONT'D)

I'm wondering if... and it's too early to say for sure...but I'm wondering if, maybe, Kragen Vincent, our mysterious boxer guy, is her father.

Arlo just looks at him. After a long pause--

ARLO

You slept at her house?!

ZERO

She thought it made more sense than driving all the way back to the motel.

Zero opens the door, and get's in--

ARLO

I just can't believe you slept at her house.

Arlo opens his door and gets in--

INT. RENTAL CAR - CONTINUOUS

ZERO

What I can't believe is that with all that time, I couldn't tell more about what's going on in her head. I just can't tell what she's thinking.

ARLO
That's usually how it is in the beginning.

ZERO (IN CAR)
Hopefully, I'll be able to see more tonight at dinner...

Zero starts the car--

ARLO
You're taking her to dinner?!

ZERO
What was I gonna say, no? Anyway-- Do you have anything on Kragen Vincent?

ARLO
Yeah. There's one Kragen Vincent serving time at the state penitentiary. Life sentence. Didn't say what for in the prison records.

ZERO
We better go find out, right now. Anything else?

ARLO
Umm...

He does have something else to tell him. Now?

Zero is looking over his shoulder, pulling out--

ZERO
What is it?

Can't do it.

ARLO
Nothing.

Arlo shuts his eyes, immediately regretful.

INT. POLICE STATION HALLWAY - DAY

Arlo walks down a corridor, briefcase in hand, he stops at small office, and knocks on an open door across which is painted "OFFICER EARL HAGANS". The man himself, presumably, is sitting behind his desk--

HAGANS
Yeah?

ARLO
Are you the officer in charge of records?

HAGANS
What do you need?

Arlo is not about to explain himself, but he stays cool, standing in the doorway--

ARLO

I need to talk to the officer in charge of records.

HAGANS

I'm him. Lieutenant Earl Hagans.

ARLO

Steve Arlo. Mind if I come in?

HAGANS

What's this regarding, Mr. Arlo?

ARLO

I work for a private detective...

HAGANS

The department does not share records with PI's, except by court order. It's policy. Now, if you'll excuse me...

ARLO

I work for a private detective named Daryl Zero.

Hagans is STOPPED mid-sentence. He just stares at Arlo, not sure whether to believe him.

HAGANS

Come on in.

INT. HAGANS' OFFICE - DAY

Arlo sits in the chair, waiting. Hagans enters and hands him a few files--

ARLO

Thank you. This is very helpful.

Hagans sits behind his desk, watching him, very friendly--

HAGANS

I always thought it was a myth. Fishing stories for cops.

ARLO

(without looking up)

He's not a myth. He's very real.

Hagans is a bit star struck--

HAGANS

Is it true that he's the guy who found that missing sculpture collection?

Arlo is charmed by Hagans' admiration--

ARLO

The Case of the List, the Menu, the Selection of Choices and the Colossally Important Man.

Hagans is really intrigued and about to ask about it when something catches Arlo's attention-

ARLO (CONT'D)

One other thing-- Can you pull anything else you've got on the victim. This-- Clarissa Deveraeu.

INT. ZERO'S RENTAL CAR - DAY

Arlo talks, Zero drives--

ARLO

Murder one. In 1972. Single count. Guess what the victim's name is?

Zero thinks about it, trying to guess--

ZERO

Mmm... Don't tell me...

ARLO

I didn't mean actually guess. I don't know how you could possibly guess...

ZERO

Clarissa.

Arlo is stunned--

ARLO

Yes. Clarissa Deveraeu.

ZERO

Of "Plummeting Birds" fame.

ARLO

Seems likely, doesn't it?

ZERO

Yep. Seems very likely.

ARLO

Two shots, one to the torso and one to the head. And down she goes. Execution style. In her motel room.

ZERO

Sounds professional.

ARLO

Yep. Except that he made a complete mess. Ton of evidence. Left prints all over everything. I have copies of the crime scene photos.

ZERO

Remember the Case of the Hired Gun Who Made Too Many Mistakes?

ARLO

Yeah, it's a lot like that. So, they pick him up, try him and give life, no parole. Open and shut. Everybody thinks he's working for somebody but he won't talk, even when they offer him a deal.

(checks his notes)

As for her-- she had a long arrest record for a young girl. Mostly political, in New York and Boston-- disturbing the peace, public indecency. One for breaking-and-entering.

ZERO

A regular fire cracker.

ARLO

A regular plummeting bird.

They both smirk.

ZERO

And Vincent's still in jail?

ARLO

No. He has some pretty serious health condition, I guess, because two years ago, he was moved for medical reasons. The file didn't say where he was moved to...

Zero does a double take--

ZERO

What?!

Zero checks his mirror and SCREECHES a huge U-TURN.

CUT TO:

INT. COUNTY FACILITY FOR THE DISABLED ELDERLY/CORRIDOR - DAY

A sterile, beige hallway. A door marked "Stairs", directly across from a pair of elevator doors. The door opens and Zero emerges, checking that the corridor is clear.

WE TRACK WITH HIM down the hallway. He is looking for a specific room. When he finds what he's looking for, WE PUSH IN TIGHT ON HIS FACE--

Right next to a door with the large number "802", a small, temporary placard reads-- "Vincent, Kragen". There is an observation window in the door--

Zero approaches the door, and looks through the window--

ZERO'S POV-- STARING STRAIGHT AT US and CLOSER than expected, Kragen sits in his bed, alone in the room with the machines and tanks that sustain him. He just sits, with no expression. The sight might scare a child.

CU-- KRAGEN'S EYES-- Bright blue, wide open, lifeless.

CU-- ZERO'S EYES, back through the window-- Staring ahead, perfectly focused, perfectly detached. He steps out of frame.

INT. ZERO'S CAR - DAY

As Arlo drives, we push into--

ECU-- Zero's face, thinking aloud--

ZERO

"I'll warn you once: Stay away from Kragen Vincent." Kragen is her father. She was raised by his sister, because he was in prison. She blames Stark for ruining her father's life. Stark hired Vincent to kill Clarissa. For some reason. Then Vincent got caught, spent his life in prison. Now he's dying a slow, painful death. He's watched his life drip away, and she's getting even. She has... something, some kind of evidence, that ties Stark to the murder. I have to figure out what it is and where she's keeping it.

They drive for a beat. Zero is thinking hard, then an idea--

ZERO (CONT'D)

Take me to the scene of the crime!

Off screen, Arlo looks at over at him; he sounds like a mad man. A little lighter--

ZERO (CONT'D)

Make a right, up here.

INT. PORTLAND ATHLETIC CLUB - DAY

Gloria and Daisy are hunched over the counter, speaking in low, gossipy tones. Daisy is entirely engaged--

GLORIA

...and then we went to sleep.

DAISY

Alone?

GLORIA

Yes, alone!

DAISY

I'm sorry! That's a little strange for an out-of-town fling. Usually that's an important part.

GLORIA

Well, he's a little different. Anyway, I just wanted to thank you for... whatever it is you did.

DAISY

I had this feeling you two might be a good match. I'm good at reading people.

Daisy makes a conspiratorial face--

DAISY (CONT'D)

You want my opinion? Try to hold onto him.

GLORIA

(laughs)
Yeah?

DAISY

Definitely. I mean, how often do you meet a wealthy, single architect from Los Angeles?

GLORIA

What?! Are we talking about the same person?

DAISY

Mr. Carmine!

GLORIA

Daisy, he's an accountant!

DAISY

Are you sure?

GLORIA

(laughs)
Yes. He's here for the accountants convention. That's why I asked him to do my taxes.

DAISY

I thought that was a weird pick-up line. Huh. I could have sworn he said he was an architect...

GLORIA

It's an easy mistake.

DAISY

Yeah, but I usually remember these things.

Gloria becomes a little distracted as she thinks about this for a moment.

EXT. MOTEL - DAY

An ugly, deteriorating urban motel. Ten rooms on a parking lot. The beige stucco and green paint are peeling off the walls and window frames. A pair of PROSTITUTES sit on a small bench between two of the rooms, smoking.

Zero's rental car is parked in the lot.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - DAY

This is the same room as in the opening sequence, with the maid. Everything looks to be at least thirty years old. And very ugly. Thick brown carpet, faded off-white walls, an orange arm chair next to a small table, dark green patterned comforter on the bed. An old television with large antenna and fake wood paneling; the kind that has a UHF knob. The sink is not in the bathroom, but next to it, in the back of the room. A single small face towel hangs on the wall next to it.

Zero and Arlo are crouched on opposite sides of the bed, preparing to move it--

ZERO

Okay. One, two, three!

With a bit of exertion, the two men LIFT the crummy old bed frame and turn it counter clockwise 90 degrees. They put it down and look at where it is.

ZERO (CONT'D)

Okay, a little more towards you. One, two, three...

They LIFT again and set it down.

ZERO (CONT'D)

Where are those pictures?

Arlo pulls the photocopies from his briefcase and hands them to Zero--

ZERO (CONT'D)

This is the one. Look--

CU-- The xeroxed photo.-- The photo is primarily of a book of matches, on the ground with a taped circle around it. But it also includes, Clarissa's dead body from the chest down, lying in a pool of blood on the floor, in that floral skirt. Very graphic. The corpse as discovered. Over the photo--

ZERO (CONT'D)

This here is a full sized bed. In 1972, there was no size called "full". There were doubles and queens. Full beds combine the width of a queen with the space efficient length of a double, and eventually replaced doubles in most of North America and Europe. Except for Quebec and Sweden.

(points to the fraction of the bed cropping the left side of the photo)

This is not a double. It's too long. It's a queen.

He looks to Arlo to respond, but finds a completely blank stare--

ARLO

Yeah?

ZERO

In other words, that bed then was longer than this bed.

ARLO

(melodramatic, sarcastic)

So, sometime in the last thirty years, someone must have replaced the bed!

Zero ignores him as he crosses the room to the distant wall and starts rapping on it with his knuckles--

ZERO

Hear that?

ARLO

What, did you find a secret room?

ZERO

It's a pipe. There was a big, radiant water heater over here.

Zero crosses back to the door--

ZERO (CONT'D)

So, Kragen busts into the room...

He is walking through Kragen's motions as he describes them--

ZERO (CONT'D)

The body was found face up, so she must have been facing him. She's standing right there. Right away, before she can scream-- pop, pop. She's down. No fight. It's over. So the question is- Once she was dead, why didn't he just get the hell out of here. For some reason, he had to stay in this room. Maybe he heard someone outside. But then, why wouldn't he just shut the door and wait until the coast clears? Instead, he proceeds to touch everything.

(racing around the room touching everything
he names)

The dresser... The bed post... The sink... The doorknob....

ARLO

What does the bed have to do with it?

ZERO

In 1972, it was against code to have a hotel bed within two feet of a door that opens inward, seven feet of a fish tank or lava lamp, or three feet of a radiant heater.

Zero darts around the room. Arlo just stares at him--

ZERO (CONT'D)

But imagine a bed longer than this one and a heater over here! Wouldn't clear two feet, much less three! And there's no way the inspector would have let that slide.

Arlo is lost as to the relevance of this, and gives him a look, "Yeah?"--

ARLO

Which means...?

ZERO

(as if it's obvious)

Which means that he may have moved the bed.

ARLO

(catching on)

Oh, I see. So, you're proposing that...

(now Arlo walks through it, though he obviously thinks it's ridiculous)

...He "busts" into the room. She's standing there. He shoots her. Twice. *Moves the bed...*

ZERO

(excited that Arlo is getting it)

Something like that!

ARLO

(this sounds ludicrous to him)

Why would anyone do that?!

ZERO

Hello! I- don't- know! I'm trying to figure out what Kragen took from the crime scene that he gave to his daughter, years later, to blackmail Stark with! Something happened in here! Something that involved his touching the dresser...

(frantically pointing to each spot)

...the bed post, and the sink! And probably involved his moving the bed!

ARLO

"Probably"?

ZERO

Probably! Someone else could have moved the bed!

The two stand there in silence for a moment, looking around.

ARLO

Maybe he was trying to kill a mosquito.

He pantomimes slapping at the dresser, the bed post. Zero doesn't notice because he has slipped into his own head, pacing the room, trying to figure it out--

ZERO

The dresser. The bed post. The sink....

It seems like maybe he has some idea, he reenters Arlo's world--

ZERO (CONT'D)

Steve, I think you need to talk to Mr. Stark. I have a couple of questions for him.

EXT. PORTLAND STREET - DAY

Stark walks out of an office building, with a group of EXECUTIVES. After they shake hands and part ways, he heads for his car across the street.

When he gets there, he unlocks the door, turns to wave at a passing car --one of the execs he just parted with-- and gets into the car, ass first--

INT. STARK'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

-- as Stark settles into his seat and straightens out, he turn sharply to the passenger side at the sound of--

ARLO

How do you pronounce the word "T-O-W-A-R-D-S"?

Unbeknownst to Stark, Arlo was waiting for him in the car. Stark JUMPS--

STARK

Jesus!...

ARLO

Sorry to startle you.

STARK

"Sorry to startle you"... My god, you'll give me a heart attack.

ARLO

I needed to talk to you right away.

Stark quickly recovers composure and looks around, paranoid--

STARK

You couldn't just call my office and make an appointment?

ARLO

He won't have it. "Never meet clients in the same place twice."

Stark tries to control his frustration, anxiety--

STARK

What do you need?

ARLO

I need to ask you some questions. Just drive.

Stark starts the car and fastens his seat belt. He looks over and realizes that Arlo's is already fastened. When he's pulled out of the space--

STARK

Do you know who's doing this?

ARLO

We think so.

STARK

Who is it?!

ARLO

Until he knows that his theories are correct and complete, he won't give names.

STARK

Guy's got a lot of fucking rules.

ARLO

You're telling me.

STARK

(a little frustrated)

So when will he know for sure?

ARLO

Hopefully very soon. But that is, in part, up to you. We need some information, here.

STARK

(irritable)

What kind of information? Regarding what?

ARLO

Okay, first of all, how do you pronounce the word "T-O-W-A-R-D-S"?

Stark is very confused--

STARK

Towards.

ARLO

And things that have wings and fly in the air-- what are they called?

STARK

You mean birds?

ARLO

He's right. They don't rhyme.

STARK

What are you talking about?!

ARLO

Nevermind. Okay, the other thing-- why'd you kill Clarissa?

SUDDENLY, Stark looks as if he's just been slapped hard in the face. The car SWERVES to the right and other cars HONK. Arlo quickly reaches over to the wheel and steadies the car.

INT. RED LION CONVENTION CENTER - DAY

Gloria stands at a table, talking to a CONVENTION EMPLOYEE, in a red jacket. She looks anxious--

GLORIA

Excuse me, I'm looking for a friend who's attending the convention. I was hoping you could tell me where he is.

EMPLOYEE

Name?

GLORIA

Nick Carmine.

The employee checks a long list--

EMPLOYEE

Carmine...

GLORIA

(concerned)

With a "c".

EMPLOYEE

I don't see him on the list...

This doesn't sit well with Gloria--

GLORIA

Really...

EMPLOYEE

Oh, here he is. Carmine.

Gloria looks relieved.

EMPLOYEE (CONT'D)

He's probably at the symposium right now. Would you like directions?

GLORIA

No. That's okay. I don't need to bother him. Just... making sure he's here.

EMPLOYEE

Okay.

Gloria starts to turn away, as CHUCK, an agitated middle aged CPA walks up to the table and addresses the employee in hostile tones--

CHUCK

Excuse me! Can you please tell me where the hell Corrodium is giving his speech?

This catches Gloria's attention, she turns abruptly--

GLORIA

What? What did you just say?

Chuck turns to Gloria and looks her over. He's embarrassed to have been yelling, and he quiets a bit--

CHUCK

Do you work here?

GLORIA

No. What did you say you were looking for?

CHUCK

I'm trying to figure out where Al Corrodium is giving his speech.

GLORIA

Al Corrodium?

CHUCK

You know, the home finance guy? The Corrodium-3 Deduction Legislation?

Gloria looks confused--

GLORIA

I thought Corrodium was some kind of chemical.

Chuck just looks at her for a moment. Then, after a beat, he gives a patronizing laugh; isn't that cute--

CHUCK

You're not an accountant, are you?

Gloria takes this in, thinking about what it means. Suddenly, she looks uneasy.

INT. RESTAURANT - DAY

Dark and mostly empty, but a classy joint. Arlo and Stark sit at a booth, in the back of the room. Stark has taken off his jacket, loosened his tie, and still he's sweating profusely. He caresses a half-killed glass of Scotch.

STARK

Have you ever been in love, Arlo?

Arlo just stares at him. He's not interested in the philosophy. Stark can see the lack of sympathy.

STARK (CONT'D)

I met her my sophomore year. I was nineteen. She was twenty five, I think. She was from New York, living in Cambridge. I met her at a demonstration. I had never seen anything like her. So angry. So smart. That night, I walked her home and she kissed me. For the first and only time...

ARLO

(impatient)

You know, you can just go straight to the part where you decide to kill her.

Stark flinches; he hates that expression. But he continues--

STARK

After that first night... I was hooked. Like some kind of an addict. Finally, she said that she didn't want to see me anymore. And... I suppose I became a bit obsessed. I would write her these... letters.

(coming back from the past)

But I never did anything to endanger her, or harm her...

ARLO

Unless you count killing her.

Stark is about to snap. He gets very quiet--

STARK

Watch yourself, Arlo.

There is a small, silent face-off and neither man will back down. Arlo becomes impatient with the exercise, and goes very cold--

ARLO

Please describe the circumstances surrounding your contracting her murder.

Reluctantly, he concedes--

STARK

In my final year of graduate school, I met my wife. Right after graduation, we moved back here, and got married, right away. I began to work with my father, at the company. I had all but forgotten about... Clarissa.

(he takes a beat, finding the words)

In the summer of '72-- we had been back for just over a year-- I got a letter. From her. She was here, in Portland. Her letter...

(choosing words very carefully)

It was a threatening letter.

ARLO

What was it? What was the threat?

STARK

I don't see that it makes a thread of difference...

ARLO

Mr. Stark-- What-did-the-letter-say?

Stark looks at him for a long beat, then very coldly--

STARK

She was accusing me of something.

Arlo gets it--

ARLO

Rape.

No response.

ARLO (CONT'D)

Did she want money?

STARK

No. She wanted to ruin my life. She said that I could expect a messy, and very public trial. She said that she had witnesses who would testify to... the nature of our relationship. She said that she was warning me, so that my wife could hear it from me, first.

Arlo takes this in, trying to figure out what to think--

STARK (CONT'D)

I knew that any jury would find me innocent. I felt certain of that. But I could not stand that kind of publicity. Nor could my family, as you can imagine. I saw my whole future flash before my eyes.

ARLO

So you hired Kragen Vincent.

Stark doesn't want to admit to this, but realizes there's no choice--

STARK

He said that for five thousand dollars, he could solve my problem.

Stark just stares into his glass, then to Arlo--

STARK (CONT'D)

And that's all I know about the subject... officer.

Arlo just stares at him. What a mess. This is why he hates this job.

ARLO

So, what's in that safe deposit box?

STARK

A tape that he made. An audio tape of our meeting. Me hiring him. With all of our names, clear as day.

ARLO

(confused)

Why didn't you just destroy it, years ago?

STARK

Because I don't know where it is. It's not my box. It's his box.

Arlo is just starting to understand--

ARLO

Go on.

STARK

A week after he got caught, a man showed up at my house in the middle of the night. He said that Kragen expected me to bankroll his defense. Through a middle-man, obviously. He also wanted money, for his family. Then the man played me a copy of the tape. He said that if I refused, Kragen would reveal the tape to the police. And he gave me the key to a safe deposit box. Said that in twenty five years, when Kragen got out, or at the time of his death, I would be given the location of the box.

(remembers)

He said, "In the meantime, hold on to this key with no lock, just as our friend will hang on to his lock with no key."

The two sit in silence for a moment, then--

ARLO

So, you kept this thing on your key ring?

STARK

I had it in a safe for twenty three years. That day, I was having the old safe replaced, with something more secure, state-of-the-art. I emptied it and put the key on my chain. That evening, my keys were gone. Somehow, that crafty bastard knew just the day to steal my keys.

Arlo thinks about those keys.

STARK (CONT'D)

I have no idea who it is. I've spent nearly half of my life speculating, obsessing about who knows what. I didn't sleep soundly for years.

ARLO

And now you do?

Stark glowers at him for a moment--

STARK

What do you want Arlo? You want me to look into your eyes and see the man I should have been? Because it won't work.

Arlo throws his hands in the air, and shakes his head--

ARLO

Hey, I just work here.

STARK

Tell me, Arlo, when someone is threatening you that way, or blackmailing you this way, what do you do? Tell me that.

ARLO

I don't know. It's never come up.

STARK

Well, imagine it. Some opportunistic piece of bird shit figures a way to compromise you. What do you do? You can't buy silence. You can only rent it. Because if someone has information, they will always have it. So the cost has no ceiling, and the fear has no end.

The alcohol is taking effect, stoking Stark's fire, very quietly--

STARK (CONT'D)

That's why some information, some knowledge ... is like a terminal disease. It's contagious... and it's fatal.

Arlo thinks about "the suspect"; it's all so ugly--

ARLO

So... we give you a name and you cross it out.

Stark bottoms out his drink, looking somewhat distant. Then, staring Arlo in the eyes--

STARK

I'm telling you, Arlo... you can't treat a terminal disease.

INT. ZERO'S OFFICE - NIGHT

We can see the detective's reflection, over the text on the computer monitor--

ZERO (VO)

Passion is the enemy of precision. Forget the misnomer "crime-of-passion."...

His eyes are completely focused and his typing never hesitates--

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

...All crime is passionate. It is passion that moves the criminal to act, that disrupts the static inertia of morality...

CUT TO:

INT. LIBRARY COMPUTER ROOM - DAY

Seven computers on a long desk, separated by partition. Gloria sits at one of the stalls, behind a computer, typing--

She has the same concentrated intensity to her that Zero has at his computer--

ZERO (VO)

...The Client's passion for this dead woman, had facilitated his downfall. And the Blackmailer's passion would facilitate hers. By following her passion, she would betray herself. And I would find whatever it was that she was hiding.

ON HER COMPUTER SCREEN-- " Mr. Stark, Instructions for payment. Tomorrow. 11AM..."

BACK TO:

INT. ZERO'S OFFICE - NIGHT

He continues to type--

ZERO

It is impossible to truly understand the finer points of what I've termed Complete Detachment, without being completely detached. So the reader will just have to trust me on this next point: When you live with no passion at all, other people's passions come into glaring relief.

CU-- His face, ice-cold.

INT. ZERO'S MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Shafts of sunlight periodically bust into the room, despite all of Zero's best efforts to keep it out.

CU-- A motel painting on the wall. A fishing boat docked at a wharf.

ZERO (OS)

Bullshit. Bullshit! Bullshit! Bullshit!!

ARLO (OS)

Oh! Would you...

SLAM! A vase with a flower in it FLIES into the wall next to the painting. It SHATTERS! Water splatters the wall and painting.

ARLO (OS) (CONT'D)

Jesus!

Arlo sits in one of the chairs at the table, cringing. Even though he's on the opposite side of the room, he holds his arms in the air, as if trying to protect himself.

ARLO (CONT'D)

Oh, for Christ's sake, control yourself...

Zero stands next to one of the beds. He probably grabbed the vase from the night stand next to him. He's enraged, screaming and gesturing like a mad man--

ZERO

Control myself? This is bullshit, Arlo! Haven't I been good to you? Haven't I been incredibly, mind-blowingly, fucking divinely generous as a fucking saint? You ungrateful fuck!

ARLO

Hey, hey, hey-- Watch it, alright!

Zero just looks at him for a moment, fuming, then like a five year old--

ZERO

Un-grate-ful-fuck!

ARLO

Shut up, Daryl!

Zero sits down on the bed, taking deep breaths. Finally, after several false starts, he finds the words--

ZERO

Why?

ARLO

I told you why-- I just can't live like this anymore. I can't do it to Jess and I can't do it myself. I'm sick of working for the Starks of the world, the lowest scum buying their way out of their mess...

ZERO

These people are victims of plots and they need our help!

ARLO

Oh, please! This guy is a murderer at large who needs our help!

ZERO

Hey-- "Their business equals their business!" We're not involved! It has nothing to do with us!

ARLO

Do you really believe that?

After a long pause--

ZERO

Aren't we the good guys?

Arlo looks as though he's just heard an offensive joke--

ARLO

What are you talking about?! Zero-- there are no "good guys". You realize that, don't you? And no innocent guys and no evil guys. There's just a bunch of guys.

Zero looks very angry, hurt--

ZERO

So what am I supposed to do? Start taking meetings? Talking to people?

ARLO

Maybe.

ZERO

Fuck that!

ARLO

Look, you'll figure out something. You're probably the best...

ZERO

Excuse me?

ARLO

(rolls his eyes)

You are the best, and you should do what you're best at. But for me, it's over after this case.

ZERO

I meant, what am I supposed to do without you?

Arlo is somewhat taken aback; he may not have anticipated this kind of vulnerability. And despite himself, he's slightly moved.

ARLO

You want my honest opinion? You should take all this money you've made and move to Europe. Find a nice girl or something. See the world. And I don't mean observe the world. I mean really go see what it's like.

Zero takes this in. It has meaning to him. Finally, after a long beat--

ZERO

What the fuck do you know? I'm the greatest private investigator in the world.

Arlo shrugs, then a bit cold--

ARLO

I'm gonna go check for safe deposit boxes under the name Kragen Vincent.

ZERO

I don't know if that's necessary. I think that's what Clearburg meant by "No boxer with the name Kragen Vincent." "No *boxes* with the name Kragen Vincent" It's a typo.

ARLO

Hm. Right. Vincent must have used some other name.

ZERO

That's what I think.

ARLO

Okay. Then maybe I'll go get a beer with my friend Bill.

He turns for the door, but half-way out--

ZERO

I said, "I think". You better check. Just to make sure.

ARLO

(trying hard to stay cool)
Fine. I will. But I hope you've heard me. When this is over, I'm gone.

He pulls the door closed behind him, leaving Zero alone. He looks very sad as he collapses onto the bed.

EXT. MOTEL PARKING LOT - SAME

Arlo is unlocking his car when--

STARK (OS)

Sorry to startle you.

Arlo whips around. He hadn't expected this. Stark has a very smug smile on his face--

ARLO

What are you doing here?

STARK

I followed you. When I got back to my car, this was on my windshield.

He hands Arlo an envelope, which Arlo takes--

STARK (CONT'D)

Another fucking payment. Tomorrow morning.

ARLO

Jesus... Did you make sure you weren't followed?

STARK

I wasn't.

ARLO

I told you how to get in touch with me. You really shouldn't have come here.

Stark gestures towards the motel room--

STARK

Is he in there?

Arlo doesn't respond.

STARK (CONT'D)

What if I walked into that room right now? Would Mr. Zero be happy to meet me?

Arlo looks him dead in the eyes--

ARLO

Go home. Right now. Make the payment tomorrow. We're very close. Just do what the letter says. This is how we'll know for sure.

STARK

(end of his rope)

How long am I supposed to just go along with it? I'm sick of cooperating. Usually it's every two or three weeks. Now it's every two days? Why so close together? Maybe this guy's getting nervous. What if he intends to kill me? Am I supposed to just play right into his hands? Maybe I should carry a weapon.

ARLO

(very deliberate)

No, you shouldn't. Look-- Don't panic. Just do it, one more time. And this will all be over.

Stark looks at him for a moment, considering, sizing him up--

STARK

How dedicated are you, really? Are you actually the humble servant, to the grave?

Arlo shakes his head, chuckling to himself--

ARLO

Your timing is impeccable.

STARK

How do you mean?

ARLO

Nevermind.

STARK

I'll bet you have ambition of your own. Maybe you hope that someday, you'll have your own firm.

ARLO

(laughs)

You've got me pegged! That's all I want-- to someday *be* Daryl Zero.

STARK

I'll give you a million dollars to sell out your boss. All you have to do is hand over your suspect, right now. Name and address.

This takes Arlo by surprise. He is silent for a moment--

STARK (CONT'D)

Where's the wise crack, Arlo? Where's that irreproachable strength of character that laughs at me so easily?

Arlo's eyes betray his contempt--

STARK (CONT'D)

Two million dollars. Cash. For a name and an address. We can go to the bank right now.

ARLO

You're willing to pay me two million dollars so that you won't have to do this thing tomorrow?

STARK

I'm willing to pay you five million dollars. How much does he pay you?

ARLO

Five million dollars so that you can kill someone, right away instead of a day later?

STARK

No. That's for two million. For five, you do it.

Arlo's eyes get wide as he realizes what's happening.

STARK (CONT'D)

Effectively, you and Daryl Zero are pushing the button, anyway. Assuming there actually *is* a Daryl Zero. This is the best way I can see to handle this. This way, your silence is guaranteed.

ARLO

What are you saying?

STARK

If you're not involved, it's too great a risk to let you walk away, Arlo.

Arlo interprets this--

ARLO
Are you threatening me?

There is a long beat. Yes, he is--

STARK
Five million dollars to finish it yourself. Two million to let someone else do it. If you don't want the job, I have three other men. The line forms to the right. Do you want it, or not?

Arlo looks at him for a long moment--

Stark is serious--

Then after a moment, Arlo puts his car keys in the door and unlocks it.

STARK (CONT'D)
Only an idiot would be so self-righteous as to walk away from five million dollars.

ARLO
Yeah, I know.

He climbs into the car and sits down in the driver's seat. He's about to close the door when--

STARK
What would happen if I walked into that room, right now?

ARLO
(as though it's ridiculous)
He's not in there, Stark.

STARK
What if I wanted to see for myself? What would happen?

ARLO
(very serious)
I'll shoot you.

Stark is surprised by this remark. Is he kidding? Does he have a gun? Arlo doesn't flinch, watching him.

ARLO (CONT'D)
Really. I will. I have a gun and everything.

STARK
Are you threatening me?

ARLO
Yeah. I'm threatening to kill you.

After a long moment, Stark starts to laugh. He respects Arlo, even though he may hate him. Then, he turns and walks toward his car-

Arlo just watches him go.

CUT TO:

ACROSS THE STREET--

Gloria's car. She's in it. Watching--

--Stark get into his car, Arlo watching him.

EXT. GLORIA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Zero's car pulls up to the curb, and parks. He gets out of the car, and walks up the path--

ARLO (VO)
She's planned another payment, for tomorrow morning.

ZERO (VO)
No shit?

CU-- A hand knocks on the front door--

ARLO (VO)
Daryl, is there any way she could be on to you?

ZERO (VO)
(hostile)
Don't be ridiculous. Go get a beer with your "friend".

Zero stands waiting, dressed up for the evening.

After a moment, the door opens. She smiles wide--

GLORIA
(very cheery)
Hey!

INT. JACK'S DINER- NIGHT

A fifties diner theme restaurant. Little jukeboxes on the tables and lots of bright colors. The staff wear powder blue uniforms, white aprons and hats. Dates and families fill the tables.

Zero and Gloria sit across from each other in a large booth, under a window, on opposite sides of a large milk shake, with twin straws. Both have their elbows on the table, eyeing each other and the shake. He takes a sip and as he does, SO DOES SHE. Their noses are inches apart. He freezes a moment. She sees this, and smiles at him, flirting. He manages to compose himself, and leans back, pulling away. After a long beat--

ZERO
Okay...

GLORIA

What?

He takes a long dramatic pause---

ZERO

Right before you jump out of the plane, you're standing there. You've got all that stuff on. You know what to do. You can't wait for the ride ... But is there a moment, each time, when you think-- "What if it doesn't open? What if this is the last thing I ever do?"

GLORIA

You're really stuck on this sky diving thing, aren't you?

ZERO

I'm stuck on... what makes you do very dangerous things. Things that might get you killed.

She reacts to this; what is he actually talking about?

GLORIA

Even the most dangerous things can be safe. As long as you're careful.

He leans in, trying to tell her--

ZERO

But there may be a limit to how many times you can fake-out death. There's such a thing as knowing the odds.

GLORIA

There's no reason to gamble, if you're just gonna play the odds.

ZERO

But the only people who ever walk away winners are the ones who know when to stop playing.

GLORIA

Quitting while you're ahead?

ZERO

Quitting before you're dead.

This takes her by surprise. What's he saying? She looks him over for a moment. Then she leans in, trying to explain--

GLORIA

You, me, anyone could walk out of here and get killed by some drunk in a pick-up. I could slip in the shower and break my neck. When your number's up... it's up. There's no sense to it. There's no justice. Innocent people suffer. And murderers get away with it.

Zero's ears prick up at this--

GLORIA (CONT'D)

The only rules are the rules we make up for ourselves. The ones we enforce. When my number comes up, whether I'm walking down the street or...
 (she looks at him, "extorting money")
 ...doing something else... that will be that. And until then, I'm gonna do what I need to do.

ZERO

What is it you need to do?

GLORIA

I need to... try to feel right.

Zero tries to hear the deeper meaning in this, as A WAITRESS approaches the table, and addresses them. We stay on Zero--

WAITRESS

Can I get you folks anything else?

GLORIA

I think that's it.
 (to Zero)
 Do you need anything?

ZERO

I'm okay.

Zero looks up at the waitress. She has bright red hair--

ZERO (CONT'D)

I'll take the check.

WAITRESS

You got it. I'll be right back.

She walks away.

GLORIA

When I was a little girl, I used to hope that someday I would look like that waitress.

ZERO

What?

GLORIA

My mother had hair like that. My natural mother.

CU-- ZERO'S EYES GET WIDE as he takes a deep breath. He wasn't prepared for this. He tries to stay calm--

ZERO

Really?

ARLO
 (to phone)
 We think so.
 (figures it out)
 You mean...

BACK TO:

INT. JACK'S DINER- SAME

Zero looks around, trying to be quiet--

ZERO
 She's Stark's daughter, not the hit man's. She *is* the evidence.

INT. JACK'S DINER - NIGHT

Zero reenters, and sits down at the table. He offers casually--

ZERO
 I must admit, I like this place.

Gloria just stares at him for a long moment, trying to see into him. The silence would make anyone uncomfortable. He's a little surprised--

ZERO (CONT'D)
 What?

After a moment--

GLORIA
 You said that you don't speak to your family.

Zero makes a face. This is not a topic he's eager to engage--

GLORIA (CONT'D)
 Why not? What happened? Was there a fight?

ZERO
 Um...

GLORIA
 I realize I'm prying, but... What can I say? I'm prying. I want to know about you.

He just doesn't know how to handle this--

ZERO
 Um... Okay...

She leans across the table to him--

GLORIA
 Just look me in the eyes, and talk to me.

After a long moment, he finds the words--

ZERO
 Alright... It's pretty grim...

GLORIA
 That's okay.

She means it. And he can see that. He thinks about how to put it--

ZERO
 Uhhh... My father.... was an abusive, evil man.
 (clear his throat, a bit icy)
 He killed my mother. While she was asleep. Then he slit his
 wrists.

Gloria is shocked, visibly shaken.

GLORIA
 Oh, my god...

ZERO
 I was away at summer camp. I was thirteen.

GLORIA
 Nick...

Long pause, nothing to say. He's wildly uncomfortable with this kind of vulnerability.

ZERO
 I don't talk about that... much. I used to, when it happened.
 Then one day, I woke up and... I don't know. Everything
 was different.

Across the table, she looks him straight in the eyes, completely focused on him. She struggles for the words--

GLORIA
 My god, Nick... You have to talk to people... sometimes... or
 you'll never...

Her gaze is powerful, but he doesn't avert his eyes.

GLORIA (CONT'D)
 Otherwise it's just so lonely.

EXT. JACK'S DINER - NIGHT

Zero pushes the door open for Gloria. She walks out, then he follows. They walk together, side by side, down the sidewalk, along the restaurant. Then after a moment-- **THEY TAKE EACH OTHER'S HANDS.**

From a distance, they look like any other couple walking down the street--

CUT TO:

INT. JACK'S DINER - SAME

-- THROUGH THE WINDOW we see them walk by, hand in hand. WE TILT DOWN to the table they just vacated. The milk shake with two bent straws. PUSH IN ON the tip-- and the receipt.

INT. GLORIA'S CAR - NIGHT

IN SILENCE, they pull up in front of her house. She parks and turns to him--

GLORIA
Thanks for dinner, Nick.

ZERO
Thank you.

She looks at him, pensively--

GLORIA
It's hard for me to tell what you're thinking. Who you really are. You're a little bit of a mystery to me.

ZERO
(swallows)
A mystery? I have no secrets.

After a long beat, she leans over and whispers very softly--

GLORIA
I have a secret.

CU-- Her hand reaches over and rests on his thigh. His breath quickens at the touch--

GLORIA (CONT'D)
Want to know a secret?

ZERO
(also whispering)
What...

CU-- Her lips, inches from his ear--

GLORIA
I'm gonna kiss you.

CU-- His eyes expand to saucer size, just as her mouth comes around and lands on his. VERY TIGHT, she takes his lower lip between hers. Then their open mouths brush lightly. And he moves, so slightly, to her--

WIDER-- They kiss, deeply, passionately.

INT. GLORIA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

In the dark room, standing by the foot of the bed, Zero and Gloria are entangled. Like an emaciated animal's first meal after winter, Zero's hands fairly shake and his breathing is heavy. He doesn't know where to begin, where to go next--

TIGHT ON-- His mouth lands on her neck, and she rolls her head back, enjoying him and all his attention--

TIGHT ON-- His hands move from her hips to her waist, feeling the shape, as though they had always wondered. One hand moves behind her, and under her shirt-- her spine, the small of her back...

She runs her hand from his stomach, up to the top button of his shirt. She unfastens the first button, and his breath skips. Then the second--

He closes his eyes, feeling--

She finishes the buttons of his shirt and pulls it off. He stands before her, white and bare. She smiles at him, moved somehow. She reaches up and touches his chest. His body recoils, very slightly, on impact. Then , very sexy--

GLORIA

Sometimes, what you're looking for is right in front of your nose.

Shocked and a bit disoriented at the moment, Zero doesn't know what she's trying to say--

ZERO

What?

In the way of an answer, she kisses his neck.

ZERO (CONT'D)

That's what I always say.

Then she moves away from him, leaving him standing there. She walks around to the bed and sits down, looking at him. After a long beat, she smiles at him--

GLORIA

Are you just gonna stand there watching, or are you gonna come over here and do something about it?

IN HIS EYES-- Fear, longing-- He's going to do something about it. He steps to her.

DISSOLVE TO:

LATER--

In bed now, still kissing. Devouring her inch by inch with his mouth, he is slow and gentle, very delicate--

HER FACE, lying on the pillow-- It feels good, and she puts a hand on his head. He touches a nerve and her other hand flies up over her head.

DISSOLVE TO:

LATER--

Shadows. In the midst, he lies on his back--

CU-- HIS FACE-- Eyes closed, somewhere between pain and euphoria. HER FACE slides into frame and kisses him. And he kisses her back.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. GLORIA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The house. Dark, silent and still.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. GLORIA'S BEDROOM - LATER

After. They lie together peacefully, awake. Very tender.

GLORIA

Nick?

He flinches slightly; the fake name doesn't feel right, now.

ZERO

Yeah?

GLORIA

I... I know you're leaving in a couple days and... and I'm just so glad we got to spend this time together.

He closes his eyes, feeling this--

ZERO

Me too.

GLORIA

I guess it's not possible for us to be together right now...

His ears prick up-- What is she really saying?

ZERO

Hmm?...

Her eyes focus and she chooses her words carefully--

GLORIA

I mean, with the distance and all...

We HEAR the end of this conversation over--

INT. GYM - DAY

CU-- Stark, on his treadmill, staring straight ahead. Huffing and puffing, sweating and struggling. Maybe a bit more than usual.

ZERO (OS)

Right.

GLORIA (OS)

Right now... there are obstacles. A lot of obstacles. But maybe, someday... there won't be.

DOWN THE LINE, Zero stands on a treadmill, walking. He's staring at Stark. Then he catches himself, and looks to make sure that Gloria didn't see him staring--

Gloria across the room on a bike--

He shuts off the treadmill, and the belt slows--

Zero gets off his machine and walks over to Gloria. She gets off her bike and towels her face. When he gets there--

GLORIA (CONT'D)

I gotta get going. So, I'll see you around six, at my place?

ZERO

(quietly)

Yeah. Soon as I'm finished with my meetings.

GLORIA

Good.

She kisses him. Slightly better than casual. He still hasn't gotten used to this.

GLORIA (CONT'D)

Bye.

ZERO

Bye.

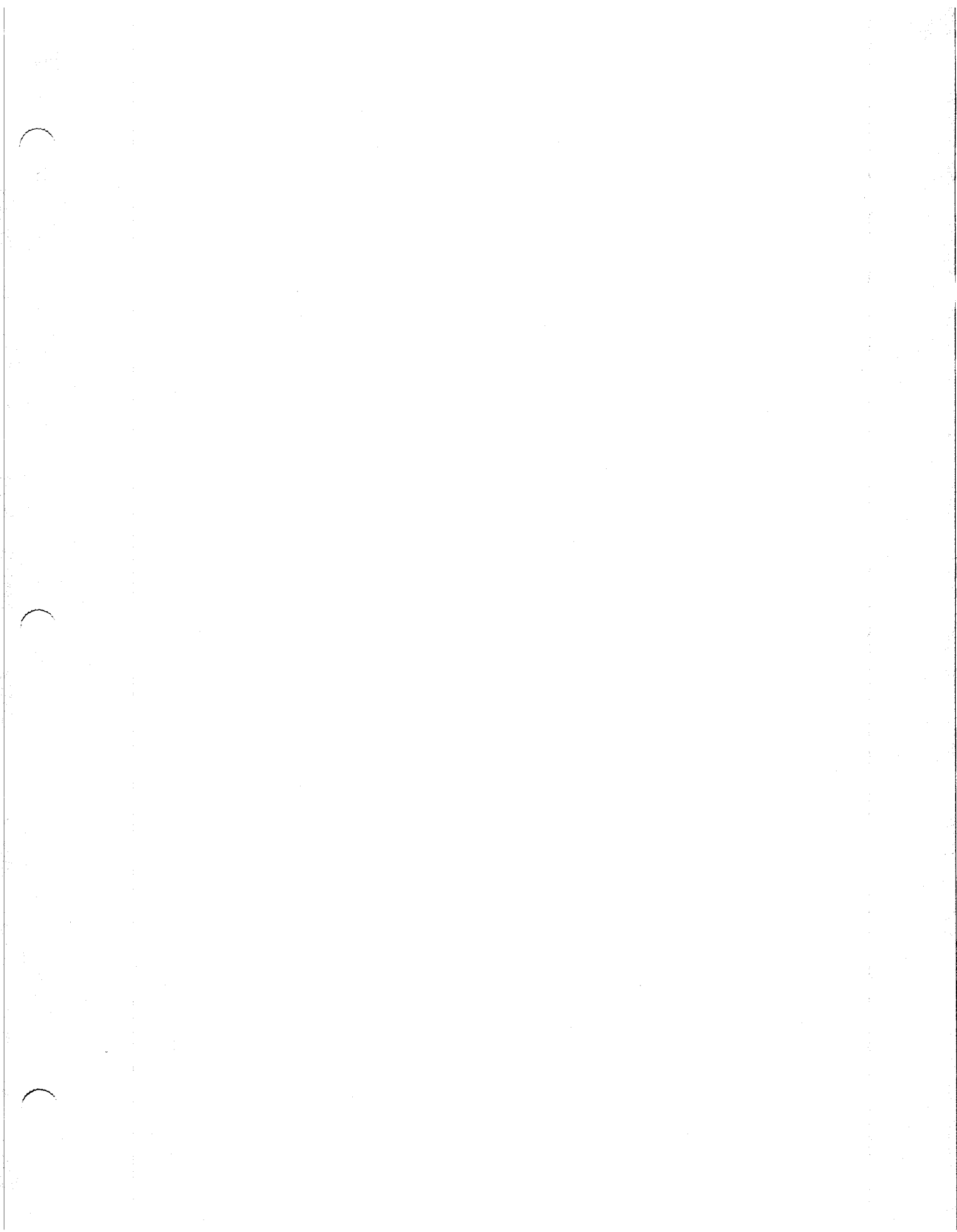
She runs off, toward the locker room. He just watches her go. His face looks somewhat pained.

EXT. PORTLAND OBSERVATORY - DAY

At the top of a beautiful, ever-green hill, a large, modern looking building overlooks the city. Next to the building is a large glass dome, which houses an enormous telescope. A large sign reads, "Center For Astronomical Discovery-- Planetarium and Observatory".

ZERO (VO)

"At this point, you will receive a sixth and final message on the pager. Get on the corresponding bus and take it to the end of the line..."



A large city bus rolls up the drive way to a stop, for unloading. Stark is the first to disembark, carrying a blue duffle bag. He looks as sweaty and stressed out as ever, frantically looking around, trying to figure out where he is--

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

"Get off the bus and find the near-by bank of outhouses. In the center unit, find two blue plastic garbage bags. Put the cash in one bag, and put this bag in the other. Then drop the double bag into the toilet..."

He spots the Andy Gumps and heads in that direction--

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

(aside to the reader)

For all of her grace, for all of her artful execution, I will never understand why she insisted on making everything so disgusting.

Stark enters the middle unit and shuts the door. Just after he does, the door to the next one opens-- Zero steps out. He is wearing a motor-cycle jacket and leather cap, and a large fake beard. It's the most elaborate disguise yet. And like the bandana get up, though it's a strange look to emulate, he looks quite different.

He exits the frame, in the direction pointed by a sign which reads, "Observatory".

INT. PLANETARIUM - DAY

The large room is pitch black. The milky way is being projected on to the dome ceiling. An astronomy lecture plays on a tape. Only a dozen or so people are here, listening, staring straight up.

ZERO (VO)

Anyway... "When you have done this, enter the building, and find the auditorium..."

Stark enters, squinting into the darkness. He pauses by the door, so his eyes can adjust.

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

"Enter and sit in the left aisle seat of the third row..."

WE TRACK DOWN THE AISLE a few rows-- Gloria sits, calmly, waiting. She senses Stark behind her, and listens for his next move.

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

"Wait through the rest of the program. You are not to be followed. You are not to be accompanied..."

Against another wall, under a glowing "Exit" sign, Zero stands in an emergency exit alcove, in full costume, hidden in the shadows--

Stark stands by the main entrance. His eyes have adjusted, but he isn't moving. He wipes the sweat from his forehead, and scans the room, squinting, trying to find his blackmailer.

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

"Any such violation will be considered a termination of our agreement."

Gloria is starting to become a little concerned. What's taking so long? She starts to turn for a look, but stops herself-- he's too close.

Zero stands watching, from across the room--

ZERO (CONT'D)

(under his breath)

Go on... Sit down...

Stark has gotten an attitude, suddenly. He's mad and sick of this. He's going to stand here and wait, and find the culprit. He steps down the aisle, a few steps, trying to make out faces. He stops *just a foot away* from Gloria--

CU-- Gloria's face-- She looks frightened, can feel him behind her--

Zero looks concerned--

Moving slowly, looking, Stark reaches into his coat, as though for a weapon--

ZERO (CONT'D)

(under his breath)

He has a gun...

Stark grows suddenly, self-conscious, maybe realizing that he's in plain view. His hand comes back out of his coat and he steps back up the aisle--

Zero takes a half-step toward them, on reflex. His expression reads, "What the fuck are you doing?"--

Stark stands by the entrance. He is panting now, unusually hard, holding his chest, sweating. He is about six inches from the wall, and we see that directly behind his back-- is a large, circular dimmer switch for the house lights. He stands up very straight and reaches back into his coat, as though he's about to draw--

Zero sees this and his eyes get wide, he looks to Gloria, then suddenly, he's heading for Stark, across the audience, *out of the shadows*--

Gloria is getting worried. She tries to resist... but can't help herself-- She TURNS AROUND to see where he is, sticking her head *out into aisle*--

Hand still in his coat, Stark sees the silhouette of Gloria's head swing into the aisle, staring back at him. He GASPS and staggers back a step, bumping the wall... and the LIGHT SWITCH.

SUDDENLY, the room is very BRIGHT. Everyone in the place reacts. It hurts their eyes--

ASTRONOMER 1

Hey! What the....!

The darkness is gone and everyone's just standing around, plainly revealed. Gloria and Stark make direct eye contact, and both GASP--

Zero, the biker, is struck dumb, just standing in the middle of the seats, obviously heading toward them.

Both Stark and Gloria turn toward him, confused by the whole thing--

Zero doesn't know what to do--

Then, SUDDENLY, Stark's face goes pale, as though he'd seen a ghost. He stares at Gloria. Then... HE COLLAPSES, slumped on the floor.

Everyone else in the room is still reacting to the sudden light, yelling to turn it off--

Both Gloria and Zero stand, mouth agape. Did Stark just die?

Gloria stands up, automatically. She stares at Stark, on the floor. She feels Zero watching her and turns to him. Seemingly fooled by the costume, she turns back to Stark--

One of the ASTRONOMERS notices Stark--

ASTRONOMER 2

Hey, that guy just passed out!

Gloria reacts to this, then stares at Stark for one more beat. Then, before she knows it, she's RUNNING up the aisle toward him--

GLORIA

Call 911! Go!

She reaches Stark at the top of the aisle and drops to her knees. She reaches under his neck, cradling it as she was trained to do. With her other arm, she gets under his opposite shoulder. She HOISTS him up, and lays him flat--

Zero just watches, stunned by the whole thing--

ZERO'S POV-- SLO-MO-- Gloria checks his pulse on the neck. She's not finding anything. She puts her ear to Stark's mouth-- no breath. She gives a solid heave to his chest. Checks his breath. Nothing. Another chest compression. Nothing. She reaches around, plugs his nose, pulls his chin down, and BEGINS MOUTH TO MOUTH--

Zero can't believe his eyes, and he drifts closer to the action, into the group that has gathered around--

She pulls her face away and gives him a couple light slaps to the cheek. Another chest compression. She looks up at the group around her, then DIRECTLY AT ZERO. Does she recognize him?

Zero makes eye contact and takes a step back--

ZERO'S POV -- still SLO-MO-- After a beat, she turns her attention back to Stark. And goes back to mouth to mouth. After a couple of breaths, she pulls away. HIS EYES BEGIN TO OPEN, groggy--

The 911 caller reenters--

ASTRONOMER 2

The ambulance is on the way!

CU-- Gloria's face-- She acknowledges this, but she doesn't even pause--

Stark is struggling to keep his eyes open. Again, she begins lightly slapping him back into consciousness. HE BLINKS and MOVES HIS HEAD a bit. Then he opens his eyes, awake for the first time. He is staring Gloria *straight in the eyes*--

She just stares back, without a word. He's dazed, but it's starting to come back to him.

Zero watches, entranced--

Stark just stares at Gloria, inches from his face. Is this the blackmailer?

GLORIA

Are you okay?

Stark doesn't react--

GLORIA (CONT'D)

Do you know your name?

Stark half-nods, dazed, he whispers--

STARK

Who are you?

GLORIA

That's right, sir. Who are you? Do you know?

STARK

(half-delirious)

Who are you?

The PARAMEDICS come rushing through the door. Gloria stands to greet them, out of breath--

GLORIA

Cardiac arrest. Just came to. I'm not sure he's stable. Give him a drip on the way in. And keep a close eye on him.

PARAMEDIC 1

Are you a doctor?

GLORIA

(shakes her head)

EMT.

(quietly, mostly to herself)

We almost lost one.

PARAMEDIC 1

Nice work.

GLORIA

Get him out of here.

The three medics get down on the ground and start talking to Stark. As they do, Gloria begins to drift away from the huddled group, some of whom congratulate her for her work. She steps back, catching her breath, settling down. Then she remembers something-- She starts looking around for that familiar biker. She checks behind her, all over the room. But he's gone. Satisfied that he's not here, she heads for the door.

CU-- Pressed up against the wall, in the exit alcove, not breathing-- Zero.

INT. ZERO'S RENTAL CAR - DAY

Zero stares out the window as Arlo drives. He still wears the jacket, but he's taken off the rest of the costume. There is a long silence.

ARLO

Do you think she recognized you?

ZERO

(not sure)

I don't think so.

Arlo just drives, respecting Zero's pensive moment--

ZERO (CONT'D)

She saved his life. She couldn't let him die.

Arlo looks to Zero. He hears the pain--

ARLO

Sometimes people do unexpected things.

They exchange a look-- Arlo is talking about him and Zero knows it.

ARLO (CONT'D)

You know, you could hand him over to the cops.

ZERO

I can't do that.

ARLO

He's scum, Daryl...

ZERO

Maybe, but he's also my client.

Long silence.

ARLO

So, what are you gonna do?

ZERO

I'm not sure...

After a moment--

ZERO (CONT'D)
...but this has to end.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ZERO'S MOTEL ROOM - DAY

In the darkened room, Zero sits at the table. His legs are crossed, his body tight, and his eyes closed. He sits this way for a long beat, then -- SUDDENLY, he raises his head. He has an idea.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BANK/ SAFE DEPOSIT BOX ROOM - DAY

A TELLER walks into a privacy booth carrying a safe deposit box. He sets it down on the table, and inserts the bank key. Then he leaves--

TELLER (VO)
What's the name on that box, sir?

ZERO (VO)
The name is Stark. Gloria Stark.

Zero enters and pulls Stark's keys out of his coat pocket. He finds the proper key, and slides it into the appropriate hole--

TELLER (VO)
According to our records, nobody's been to that box for more than twenty years.

ZERO (VO)
She lost the key.

TELLER (VO)
Where was it?

ZERO (VO)
Her father had it.

Zero opens the box-- and sitting inside, is a large reel-to-reel tape. Zero lifts it out of the box, and slides it into his pocket.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

The curtains are drawn. We PUSH IN on Stark lying in bed, sleeping. On a table near him, dozens of roses from well-wishers. When we have reached a CU, Stark's face falls into shadow--

Zero is standing at the foot of the bed, in the white medical coat of an orderly or doctor, holding a large box with a ribbon around it. It would be a very subtle disguise if he weren't

wearing black sunglasses in this dark room. For a long moment, he watches Stark sleep. Then, very quietly, under his breath--

ZERO

If you only knew...

CU-- Stark's eyes flutter, waking. His head bobs a little, unconscious and drugged. He tries to focus on the guy at the end of his bed--

STARK

(disoriented)

What's with the glasses?

Zero just stares at him for a long beat. Then, with careful deliberation, he reaches up and takes off the sunglasses, looking him straight in the eyes--

Stark is just confused by the whole thing--

STARK (CONT'D)

Do I know you?

Stark looks dazed, and suddenly realizes how lousy and groggy he's feeling. His eyes begin to flutter, and after a moment, he's passed out again.

When we cut back to the reverse, Zero is gone. But on a table, behind where he was standing-- the gift.

INT. ZERO'S CAR - MAGIC

Zero pulls up and parks in front of Gloria's house. He turns off the ignition and looks at the place for a minute, with very cautious eyes, almost regretful. Then he opens the door--

EXT. GLORIA'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Under the orange and blue evening sky, Zero walks slowly up the path to the door--

INT. GLORIA'S APARTMENT - MAGIC

The setting sun shines through the open window. Nobody is here.

Knocking at the door. No response. More knocking. The front door opens. Zero walks in--

He looks around. She's nowhere to be seen. He walks through the living room to the bedroom and pushes the door open--

ZERO'S POV-- The room has been ransacked. The closet is mostly empty, the drawers hang open, the photos are gone.

ZERO'S FACE-- He realizes what's happened. She's gone.

He glances into the bedroom, then walks back out into the living room. He looks around at all of the things she's left behind forever. Realizing he's one of them, he collapses onto the couch and puts his head back.

He sits in silence for a long moment.

THE PHONE RINGS. His head jerks up. Another ring. The machine picks up--

GLORIA
(on message)
Hi. It's Gloria. I'll call you back.

BEEP. There is a long beat. Zero waits. Then--

GLORIA (CONT'D)
(on machine)
Nick? Are you there?

Zero doesn't know what to do. He stares at the phone in front of him--

GLORIA (CONT'D)
Nick?

He decides to answer--

ZERO
I'm here.

CROSS-CUT WITH:

INT. AIRPORT - SAME

Gloria stands at a pay phone, with a bag over her shoulder, and another by her feet. Her expression is somber. After a long silence--

GLORIA
I'm about to get on a plane and be gone forever.

ZERO
I think that's a mistake.

GLORIA
I don't see any choice.

ZERO
What if I come find you?

GLORIA
You're so sure that you could?

ZERO
Thai Air. Flight 214, direct to Bangkok. Departs in a half an hour.

She looks stunned, scared. He's right. She looks around, maybe to see if she's being watched.

GLORIA
It's over. You figured me out. Nobody else got close.

ZERO

He doesn't know about you. He doesn't know that he has a child.

GLORIA

I know. She never told him. She wanted him to deny that he had ever touched her, then, at the last minute, "Surprise! Look who's a daddy!"

ZERO

I know. And a rapist. And a murderer.

(takes a deep breath, and begins)

He hires Kragen Vincent. Kragen decides to hit her in her motel room, late at night. He comes into the room, shoots her twice...

As he describes this event, we CUT BETWEEN-- FLASHBACK images of the MOTEL ROOM circa '72 and Zero in the motel room, walking through it. These images begin with Young Kragen firing two shots, and continue as described.

ZERO (CONT'D)

...She goes down, quickly and easily. What he doesn't realize is that you-- less than a year old-- are in the room. He didn't see you at first, because you were in this little crawl space she had made for you, between the bed and the wall. And even though there's a silencer on the gun, and the whole thing happens very quickly, you start to cry. Loud. So now, in order to get out safely, without drawing any attention, he has to kill the baby, too. But he can't do it. He panics. You're screaming, at the top of your lungs now, and he has to do something. So he picks you up. You stop crying. And once he holds the baby, it's a done deal. He's standing there with this infant in his arms and he decides he'd rather risk it all, risk life in prison, than leave you in that room. He knows that, in order to protect you from Stark, he has to remove every trace of evidence-- diapers; diaper bag, maybe; bottles; blankets. Something from the dresser, the bed post, the sink. He gets flustered. Leaves prints everywhere.

The CUT-AWAYS end as Zero continues--

ZERO (CONT'D)

...Sloppy as hell. He leaves the body, takes the baby, and hauls ass out of there. 'Cause he knows that he has to get you to his sister. Who's just gotten here, off the boat from Ireland. They're not legal yet, anyway. So if a child turns up, nobody's gonna go asking questions.

Gloria is speechless, stunned to be hearing it from someone else--

ZERO (CONT'D)

The rest is pretty straightforward. You grow up thinking that Vincent is your father. And that you're being raised by your aunt and uncle. Then, about a year ago, you figure it out...

GLORIA

Ten years ago.

ZERO

Ten years ago? Why did you wait ten years?

GLORIA

Kragen would never tell me who it was. Then, about a year ago, I figured it out.

ZERO

How?

GLORIA

Research.

Zero is a bit taken aback by this--

ZERO

Of course...

GLORIA

For twenty five years, Kragen sat in a cage while... this rat got to have a life. I needed to know who it was.

ZERO

Put the rat in the cage. Make him pay.

There is a long beat; she can't deny it--

ZERO (CONT'D)

It didn't bother you that this man, Kragen, killed your mother?

GLORIA

He saved my life. And he sacrificed his own so that I could have one.

ZERO

Right. So you start volunteering at the home, hoping you'll be able to keep an eye on him. You start writing letters. And he pays. And the rest is history.

Gloria just takes it all in--

GLORIA

You got the whole thing. You win.

ZERO

"Winning" is relative.

There is a long beat. He doesn't look happy.

ZERO (CONT'D)

You saved his life this morning.

GLORIA

I know. I guess a person can't escape their nature.

Zero thinks about this; it has resonance at this moment. Then--

ZERO

How did you know? About me?

GLORIA

Couple things. Corrodium. It's a guy not a chemical. Then the receipt last night...

ZERO

I know. I forgot to take it...
(more to himself than her)
"Passion is the enemy of precision."

GLORIA

What?

ZERO

I got sloppy.

On Gloria--

GLORIA

So, are you gonna come looking for me? Are you gonna tell him about me, so he can have somebody come kill me? He will, you know?

ZERO

I know.

GLORIA

So what do we do about this?

Zero thinks about this. After a long beat--

ZERO

There's a man sitting on a bench behind you. Next to the newsstand.

Gloria JUMPS at the words, she WHIPS around quickly--

-- as described, sitting on the bench with a magazine in his lap, is ARLO.

GLORIA

My god...

ZERO

Relax.

She looks terrified. After a long beat--

ZERO (CONT'D)

He has an envelope. With some fake identification and a few plane tickets. First to Equador, then wherever you want.

She starts to realize what's going on--

ZERO (CONT'D)

Keep moving the first few months. Stay out of Westernized countries at first, and don't carry too much cash on your body-- the magnetic strips trigger the response mechanism on the metal detectors. Give incorrect information, everywhere. And never use your real name.

(after a beat)

And be careful sky diving.

Gloria is moved, and suddenly very sweet--

GLORIA

Thank you.

Zero closes his eyes, emotional--

ZERO

Thank you.

GLORIA

If you knew I would be here... why didn't you come yourself?

ZERO

I'm not sure. I guess... I knew you were there... but I hoped you'd be here.

Gloria hears his voice straining for composure--

GLORIA

You know... you could join me.

ZERO

A person can't escape their nature.

GLORIA

No... That's what I thought.

He gathers his strength--

ZERO

You're the best I've ever seen.

GLORIA

So are you.

ZERO

I've never said the words before... to anyone.

Gloria tears a bit--

GLORIA
You don't have to. I love you, too...

ZERO'S FACE-- He may never have heard them, either.

GLORIA (CONT'D)
...Daryl Zero.

He is STUNNED by his name. He swallows hard. Before he can respond--

CLICK.

INT. ZERO'S OFFICE - NIGHT

The detective sits at his computer, writing his memoir--

ZERO (VO)
So ends my account of the case that I have named "The Case of the Man Who Got So Stressed-Out Over his Lost Keys That He Eventually Had a Heart Attack, And It Turned Out They Were In The Sofa All Along". When the client opened his gift the next day...

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY

Lying in bed, Stark opens the large gift box. When he sees what's inside, he does a double take, and gasps--

ZERO (VO)
...I suspect he nearly had another heart attack. I returned the first installment of my fee, as I had not given a complete explanation. Some questions are for answering. Others are better left to torture and torment, for all eternity. A nagging itch for the rest of his life seemed reasonable. Especially since I did solve his problem...

--he pulls out a small computer-printed note, "Case Closed"--

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)
He got the tape that he'd been waiting for, for so long...

--he reaches into the box, and withdraws the tape, staring at it, unable to believe it--

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)
...He wouldn't be throwing any more money down the toilet.
And-- I gave back his keys.

--Stark pulls his keys out of the box, shocked to see them.

In the box, stacks and stacks of cash-- Zero's fee.

CUT TO:

EXT. PORTLAND AIRPORT - NIGHT

Standing next to the parked car, Arlo and Zero talk--

ZERO (VO)

This did, in fact, prove to be my final work experience with my long time associate. Though, I have assured him that when he someday finds that he can't live without me, his position will again be available to him.

The two men SHAKE HANDS. Then Arlo picks up his bag, and leaves.

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

He thanked me and suggested that I not hold my breath.

Zero watches Arlo walk away.

CUT TO:

EXT. PARK - DAY

A large wedding procession APPLAUDS Arlo and Jess, as they kiss, husband and wife, very in love--

ZERO (VO)

I did manage to attend his wedding...

WE PAN ACROSS the crowd, everyone smiling and cheering. And in the back corner of the room, in a valet's uniform and large fake moustache, with his hair greased back-- Zero, looking truly happy for his friend.

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

...Though, I don't think he noticed.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

A very small gathering of people sits in the front rows of the church, in front of a casket--

ZERO (VO)

I also attended the funeral of the hit man, who died not long after these events described above...

Sitting in the back of the church, dressed in a discreet, black suit, looking very serious-- Zero.

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

For some reason, I felt a certain kinship with this man, whose life was forever changed after he failed to remain objective about the Lady Blackmailer ...

EXT. THE SKY - DAY

A small plane flies through a bright sky above--

ZERO (VO)

Which brings me to the other participant. I never made any attempt to find her. But if my suspicion is correct...

A small speck SUDDENLY flies out the side of the plane, and begins dropping towards the earth, at incomprehensible speeds--

ZERO (VO) (CONT'D)

... then she's flying through the sky even as we speak. "Plummeting towards the earth like a falling bird," to quote one of my favorite poets...

The speck seems to stop SUDDENLY, as a large orange parachute opens, and begins its graceful descent.

CUT TO FLASHBACK:

INT. PORTLAND ATHLETIC CLUB AND FITNESS CENTER - DAY

Zero stands atop his treadmill, briskly huffing and puffing, covering his fake distance. He looks across the room, and smiles--

ZERO (VO)

And as for me-- after investigating her, I found myself in better shape than ever before in my life...

-- Gloria sees him and smiles back.

INT. ZERO'S OFFICE - NIGHT

THE MONITOR'S POV-- Zero stares directly at us, typing--

ZERO (VO)

To me she will always be a singular, unforgettable event. The only time I ever took leave of my objectivity. Perhaps the most able blackmailer of her time, she was at once the worthiest opponent I've ever known, and the greatest ally. And the only woman I've ever...

He stops and backs up, erasing the last few words--

ZERO (CONT'D)

The only woman. Period.

Zero leans back in his chair and examines the text. As he writes this last bit, the camera begins to SPIRAL AROUND HIM, AWAY FROM HIM. Slow and close at first, then gaining speed and eventually circling him at a distance that seems to violate the walls of the room. In the center of it, he seems to be spinning, almost as fast as his mind spins--

ZERO (CONT'D)

She did for me, what I have done for so many-- Help solve a problem, first by observation, then by careful intervention. In other words--

CUT TO ECU of his face--

ZERO (CONT'D)

--"The Zero Effect".

He hits the period with a decisive punch, finished.

SMASH TO BLACK.

The End