



Agent Zero (Harlequin Romantic Suspense)

By Lilith Saintcrow

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One minute, Holly Candless is getting fifty-buck tips from her favorite hunky customer. The next, she's kidnapped, injected with something and rescued by Reese. Suddenly, they're on the run from the very government agency that wants Reese reprogrammed—and Holly dead. Keeping Holly alive is not only Reese's primary mission—it's his sole chance at love...and survival.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Lilith Saintcrow was born in New Mexico, bounced around the world as an Air Force brat, and fell in love with writing in second grade. She is the author of the Dante Valentine and Jill Kismet series, as well as the bestselling author of the Strange Angels YA series. She lives in Vancouver, Washington, with her children, dogs, and assorted other strays.

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Fourteen hours after the hit, he was out of the stink and the heat of Mosul, stitched up and stinging from the antiseptic, and the debrief was going...well. Or as well as could be expected, in this airless white-painted concrete-floored room with the one-way mirror on the east wall. There wasn't anyone behind the mirror—Reese would have outright smelled an onlooker—but that didn't mean there wasn't a camera. Recording him and combing frame by frame might give them an edge, and they weren't idiots.

Idiots couldn't build agents—it took civilian eggheads to do the drafting and drill instructors to do the training—but they could certainly *run* them.

Which explained Bronson, sort of.

"And that's it," Reese heard himself say, dully. Now that he was coming down out of redline, he felt the little vicious nips and bites all over him. Scrambling over the scorching clay rooftops to avoid mujahideen and other surprises, not to mention getting almost blown out of the safe house because his contact was compromised...it could have been much worse. The deepest of the cuts had already closed, with the almost painful itch of wounds sealing themselves faster than they should. "Target, secondary target, collateral."

"Collateral." Bronson was a hatchet-faced, bespectacled wall, but that's what they wanted in wrap-up. He'd debriefed Reese several times now, and it was always the same. No surprise, no affect at all. Bad skin, probably from the fried food coming off him in invisible waves, but a great poker face. Even his ties were all the same, a maroon that looked dirty under fluorescents.

If Reese hadn't been able to smell the fear on the man, he might even have believed him unaffected. "Nobody told me there'd be guests." *Armed, nasty guests. As well as not-so-armed, innocent ones.*

"Ah." A single syllable, that was all.

Reese decided to prod a little more. "In other words, I took out the entire installation."

"And?" Bronson's tone plainly said he considered that the whole point of the job, which was reasonable enough. From an operations point of view, that was.

Not from an agent's, but who ever asked one?

And if I needed a psych eval, now would be the time for you to suggest it. The physical evals had been daily during training, the psych ones every other day. Looking for a weak spot, checking for breakdown, degradation, a sign that the virus wasn't going to play nice forever.

There was a brassier note in the fearsmell now, and Bronson's eyelids flickered once. His blood pressure was probably spiking, if his pulse was any indication. Reese's was normal, nice and low. They wouldn't get anything from his vitals, not even if they had him strapped in—as long as he had enough spare concentration to keep everything flatline. Just another benefit from the happy little invaders.

Most of all, he suspected, they were looking for agents having trouble with the idea of infection. It did funny things to your head, after a while, even if the Gibraltar virus was what gave you an edge.

Bronson glanced down at the file in front of him. "We didn't have intel on the guests."

The hot wet scent of a lie smacked Reese in the face. What the hell, it wasn't like it mattered. "Sure." He took the water bottle, considered it. A whole lot of things were possible, if you got them going fast enough. He could ghost this idiot and get out the door. Go to ground. Become the Invisible Man.

They had to know he would be thinking about it, right? When you train a dog to dig, he goes and digs. Simple logic.

An obvious corollary to that was that the people who built him were the enemy, too. Or so close to enemy it didn't matter.

Bronson nodded, tapped a paper clip on the table-top. One of his little tells, meaning he was almost done. Probably unconscious, like most patterns, but if he was doing debriefs for program agents, or even just for any shadow-side operative, he obeyed the rules and had a classified box inside his head. "You're scheduled for eval in two days, but we can move it up for tomorrow—"

"Two days is fine," Reese answered with just the right note of rawness, giving them what they expected. How many other agents were there? It was a question he sometimes considered during long transit times, waiting to touch down in a whole new place and start causing havoc. "I'd have to come back for blood draws anyway. Might as well have it then. I'd like some rest."

"Any, ah, headaches? Physical degradation? Unwelcome thoughts?"

"No." A long swallow of water. He could tear the bottle open, get some sort of flimsy edge. There was the table, too. No great task to go straight over it, or even apply enough force to send the man against the bare concrete wall hard enough to rupture or break something internal. There was that paper clip, too, and Bronson no doubt had a pen. Reese's guns were checked, but he had the ceramic knife and his hands. As well as strength, and speed, and apparently the ability to not let little things bother him. "No more than usual."

That got a response. "What?"

Weren't you listening? "No physical degradation. No unwelcome thoughts other than the usual. You know, the ones that spring from killing people for my country. If I didn't have those thoughts, I'd be a program failure, now wouldn't I."

"Emotional noise is also a variable, agent."

"Then consider me at the lowest level of static." He eyed the brown paper of the file cover. How many of those had he seen so far? Each one full of dates and death. The question of when one of them would have his own dates and death was pretty much academic. He'd never expected to survive any of this. "Are we done?"

"You know this is just wrap-up. We had confirmation of the kills before you left the country. They'll be too busy fighting each other to give us trouble for a little while."

Probably not as long as you think. "Good." He pushed himself up, and Bronson actually flinched. The movement, small but definite, almost managed to get through the deadly exhaustion weighing down Reese's every nerve. As it was, he just set it aside for future thought. Like so much else. "Two days, blood drop."

"Try not to get into any trouble." The light winked off Bronson's steel-rimmed glasses, a sharp headache-making dart.

"Yessir." A sketched salute, and the door opened for him. Whoever was taping behind the one-way mirror must have thought he was all right to go, too.

A glare-white corridor lurked right outside, anonymous doors opening off either side, full of disinfectant and the colorless reek of pain. Another agent had been this way recently. Reese inhaled, filing the markers away—male, healthy, with the bright buttery note that generally meant blond.

The desk was manned by a petite civilian brunette with a pert smile, part of the subcontractor apparatus calcifying over every defense-spending teat nowadays. She switched her hips while bringing his clearance packet back, and if he hadn't been so tired he might have felt a faint flicker below the belt.

Don't think about that.

No use at all. He'd tried again in Paris, a good town for getting off if there ever was one, and paid half again as much when the inevitable happened. Failure to engage, failure to load, failure to take off.

There was a fix, and he knew right where to find it, though. Didn't he?

I said don't think about it. Christ. Focus.

The watch was set; he checked it against the clock behind the brunette's smile. Red silk shell, cute tartan skirt and the pulse in her throat fluttering a little. She smelled of recent exertion, probably a workout, and in the time it took him to check the wallet and slide it into his pocket, get the watch on and pick up the sunglass case while making small talk he knew her name was Donna, she was ovulating, she'd had one too many gin and tonics last night, and the patent-leather pumps she wore had been cheek-rubbed by a very affectionate cat. Probably Siamese.

He checked the watch again, ran a hand back over his dark hair. It wasn't perfect, but it was adequate. There was an hour and a half to kill, and the apartment to check. He'd only been gone two weeks, but it was good practice to force himself to make sure nobody else had gone in and looked around.

Reese gave Donna the lonely a smile, and got the hell out of there.

"He's cleared the base, sir." An anonymous male voice, a brief burst of static through the handheld receiver.

Bronson pressed the button, wincing at the thought of the next budget request forms to be filled out. "Ten-four. Eyes on the prize all the way."

"Affirmative. Red Rooster out." The man on the other end didn't sound happy about the overtime, but that

wasn't Richard Bronson's problem, no, sir. He turned the talkie off and set it in its lead-lined drawer, then leaned back in the creaking black ergonomic chair, settling with a sigh and regarding the screen on the other side of the room. The stack of paperwork wasn't enticing, but at least he had a good report.

Buried down here in this windowless black-walled office, it was hard to believe there was a world outside sliding toward chaos and terrorism, a world that needed people like him to fight the good fight and prop up democracy. There wasn't a lot of satisfaction to be had sitting behind a desk and pushing paper around, or in debriefing arrogant superhuman jarheads. He wondered, not for the first time, if he should bring a poster down here, something motivational. A kitten—*Just Hang On*.

And, like he did each time, he dismissed the thought as a little less than manly.

There was no sound from behind him, where she would be standing. There never was. He cleared his throat, made a mental note to have lunch delivered. He couldn't stop thinking about it. Sitting across the table from the Frankensteins gave him the willies. Their matter-of-fact recitations of the things they did, even with all the code words and jargon, wore on him. "Three?"

"Sir." Flat and neutral, her voice, just like a computer's. Despite that, it was pleasant; she had a light alto purr. Before she'd been...modified...it had probably been a phone-sex siren's song.

"Anything to add?"

"No, sir."

There rarely was, but he still asked. Sometimes it was good to have a ritual. Really, he liked hearing her, even if it might as well have been a recording. If there was such a thing as full success when dealing with modifying a human being, she represented it. The only trouble was the hands-off bit of the contract. If they could just make a more...physically amenable...version, the applications—and profit—of the induction process could be intriguing indeed.

The viral process, though, couldn't be sold. There was probably profit in it, but selling *that* to Commies or terrorists wasn't a good, red-blooded American thing to do. That was why Division had government oversight.

"Okay." He spent a few moments tapping at the pad, keying in passwords, the thumblock scan giving him a brief shiver, as always. The secure uplink began loading, and on the other end, a light would be flashing.

He was precisely on time. Control disliked tardiness.

The bluescreen came up, a smear showing as the scrambler ticked along a stripe at the bottom of the picture. The blurred figure sharpened, but only so far, enough to give you a headache if you stared for too long. Control settled into a chair as well, and the familiar click. Cigarette lighter, perhaps? Or recording equipment? Why would Control bother with analog when digital was so easy and secure?

Scrambled and modulated, Control's deep voice bubbled from the sleek speakers. "How's our boy, Bronson?"

"Which one, sir?" Always best to be precise. He'd learned that early on in this job.

A weirdly modulated laugh. "The one who just came back. The news is full of running and screaming.

Goddamn chickens, all of them."

Well, that was a good sign. It was the intended effect of sending Six out—that, and eliminating a troublesome rallying point for the opposition to some very important policies. "I've sent my notes, the feed of his debrief and analysis—"

"I know, Dick. I'm asking you for a verbal rundown. How's Number Six?"

"Just the same, sir. Low emotional noise, performs beautifully. Can't find a damn thing wrong with him or his work. The only problem is—"

"—his habit of going off by himself, yes." Control paused. "I interrupted. My apologies. You were about to tell me something else?"

How did the man do it? It was goddamn unreal.

Bronson's stomach rumbled a little. Maybe a salad would be better; his last doctor had clucked something stupid about cholesterol at him. "I have an analysis that says he's got more noise than he's showing."

"Yes, your pet actuary. I'm sure it's dressed up with percentages."

"Never been wrong before, sir." Really, once emotion was taken out of it, the human brain was a fine instrument.

The thought of a bacon cheeseburger cropped up. Maybe with onion rings. He could treat himself. Maybe he'd even send Three to carry it up from the front desk when it arrived.

A short silence. Whatever was going through Control's head was probably unpleasant, but at the moment Bronson didn't care as much he might. Finally, the voice came through the speakers again, a little sharper this time. "You want resources to keep following him around?"

"Yes, sir."

"Not as sure about your wonder boy as you used to be?"

As if this wasn't Control's project all the way, and the profits from the civilian side going into deep, deep crony pockets. The economic benefit to democracy was ancillary, but that was enough for Mrs. Bronson's boy Ritchie. "I believe in being safe, sir."

"Humph." Another slight click, a tapping noise. A pen against a desktop, maybe. "Granted. He's due back in two days?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want a full psych workup on him then. Let's see if your little insurance adjustor is right."

"Yes, sir."

"How's Eight?"

Bronson almost winced. "Still unfortunate."

"Still hiding that girl, huh? A shame. Well, as long as his performance doesn't suffer, he can keep going. They can't all be as bright as our boy Six."

"No, sir."

"Carry on, then." A sudden movement, and the screen blanked. Bronson held his breath until it powered down all the way. Then he exhaled. His armpits were damp.

After a short while, his chair squeaked a little as he turned. Across the office's dim interior, he could barely see the slim womanshape near the door, hair sleeked back, a gleam of her eyes, just the barest suggestion of the tailored blazer. Even if she wasn't as voluptuous as he might have preferred, she still had good legs, and he liked seeing them. "Lights, Three."

"Yes, sir." A brisk, efficient movement, and the sudden flood of light stung. He blinked, surveyed her legs again and once more noticed her depressing dearth of chest. She was getting skinny.

"Analysis, Three."

"Confusion, sir."

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