

The background of the book cover is a photograph of the Washington Monument at dusk. The monument is a tall, slender, white obelisk that rises vertically from the bottom center towards the top. At its peak, two small, glowing red eyes are visible. The sky is a gradient of colors, from a deep blue at the top to a bright orange and yellow near the horizon, with some dark, wispy clouds. The monument's reflection is clearly visible in the dark water of the reflecting pool in the foreground. The overall mood is mysterious and ominous.

JACK MARS

HOUSE DIVIDED

A LUKE STONE THRILLER--BOOK #7

A Luke Stone Thriller

Джек Марс

House Divided

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Март Д.

House Divided / Д. Март — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
— (A Luke Stone Thriller)

ISBN 978-1-64-029196-6

“One of the best thrillers I have read this year. The plot is intelligent and will keep you hooked from the beginning. The author did a superb job creating a set of characters who are fully developed and very much enjoyable. I can hardly wait for the sequel.” --Books and Movie Reviews (re Any Means Necessary) HOUSE DIVIDED is book #7 in the USA Today bestselling Luke Stone thriller series, which begins with ANY MEANS NECESSARY (Book #1), a free download with over 500 five star reviews! A passenger jet is attacked in northern Africa by terrorists wielding RPGs, resulting in an enormous loss of life. Yet U.S. intelligence reports this is merely a distraction, a prelude to a worse terror incident. A cargo ship is pirated off the African coast, and terrorists are puzzled to find in its vast hold just one mysterious crate. It contains a weapon they do not understand—one of vital interest to Al Qaeda. It is a weapon, we learn, that will inflict catastrophic damage on the United States if not stopped in time. The weapon disappears deep into the heart of Africa, and as all hope seems lost to retrieve it, Luke Stone is summoned. Forced to cross deserts, to enter jungles, Luke and his team embark on a mad race across Africa, on a suicidal mission: to destroy the weapon before it is too late. A political thriller with non-stop action, dramatic international settings and heart-pounding suspense, HOUSE DIVIDED is book #7 in the bestselling and critically-acclaimed Luke Stone series, an explosive new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night. “Thriller writing at its best. Thriller enthusiasts who relish the precise execution of an international thriller, but who seek the psychological depth and believability of a protagonist who simultaneously fields professional and personal life challenges, will find this a gripping story that’s hard to put down.” —Midwest Book Review (re Any Means Necessary) Book #8 in the Luke Stone series will be available soon.

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Jack Mars

House Divided

Jack Mars

Jack Mars is the USA Today bestselling author of the LUKE STONE thriller series, which include the suspense thrillers ANY MEANS NECESSARY (book #1), OATH OF OFFICE (book #2), SITUATION ROOM (book #3), OPPOSE ANY FOE (book #4), PRESIDENT ELECT (book #5), OUR SACRED HONOR (book #6), and HOUSE DIVIDED (book #7).

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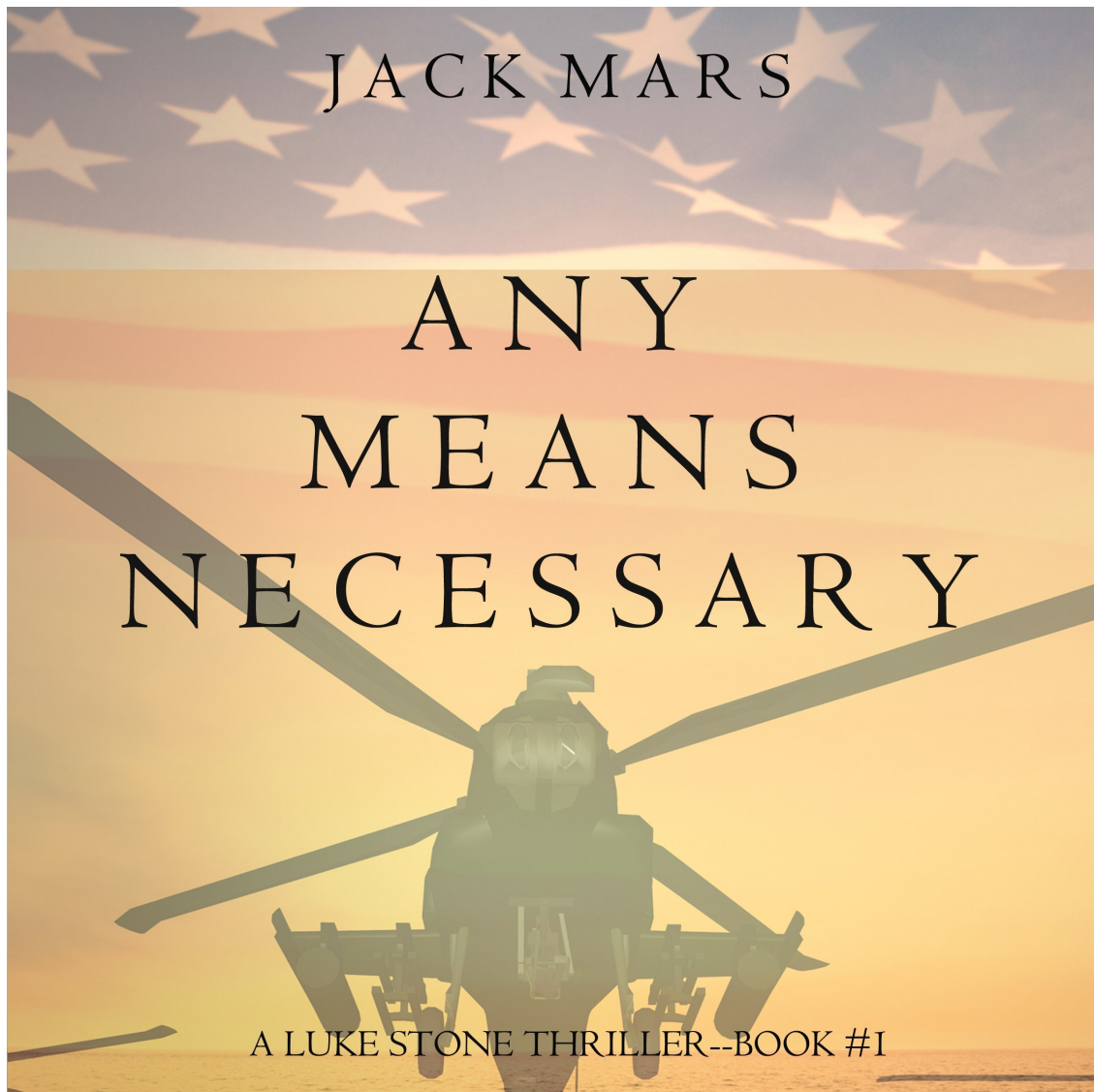
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“...a house divided against itself cannot stand.”
Matthew 12:25

CHAPTER ONE

January 28

11:05 a.m. Sinai Time (4:05 a.m. Eastern Standard Time)

Near Sharm El Sheikh International Airport

Sinai Peninsula

Egypt

“It’s coming,” the young spotter said, his voice edged with a hint of worry. “The plane is coming.”

A few feet away, Hashan al Malik sat cross-legged on the rugged ground, smoking the last of a Turkish cigarette. His long fingers were thin and dark, dirt embedded so deeply into them that they might never come clean. His face was leather. His thick beard was white, with a few streaks of black remaining, but his eyes were sharp and alive. His gaze was piercing. He had been alive a long time, and it was not an accident.

In the world of itinerant fighters for Allah – the martyrs, the mujahideen – he was often known as Alshaykh, the Arabic word for “the Old Man.” Today, he felt every minute of his years. He was certainly too old for this. His hands were cold – almost like ice – and his body was not much better. It was freezing up here.

He glanced at the spotter, a dark-skinned Bedouin in a light blue turban, who had spent his entire short life traversing these dry, barren mountains. The boy wore sandals on his bare feet. His cheeks were soft and clear – he could not grow a beard if Allah himself demanded it. He stood, gazing into the distance, his high-powered binoculars trained far to the north and west.

“Can you read the markings?” Hashan said.

The boy hesitated. “Moment... in a moment... yes.”

Hashan could just hear the airplane now, the noise of its engines fighting to be heard above the roar of the wind. He fancied he could almost hear the sound of the landing gear engaging.

“What does it say?”

“It says TUI?” the boy said, almost asking a question. Then, with more confidence: “Definitely. TUI.”

Hashan consulted the watch on his skinny wrist. It was quite a thing, that watch. Black and heavy, with a thick band, its big face set behind tempered glass. It was shockproof, waterproof, resistant to extremes of cold and heat, and perfectly accurate at high altitudes. If he sold the watch, the proceeds would feed an entire peasant family for a year – but the watch was more important than the family. The family could starve, but a man like Hashan needed to know the time.

As it happened, the time was right. In fact, the plane was twenty minutes late.

“That’s it,” Hashan said. “That’s the one.”

He took one final drag of the cigarette, then flicked it away with his thumb and forefinger. He stood and threw off his heavy, scratchy wool blanket. He allowed himself a few seconds to admire the jagged hillsides all around them, and the taller mountains just to the west salted with white snow. Two seconds, maybe three – there wasn’t much time. Already he could see the black speck moving through the sky, growing in size, coming their way.

He hefted the brown and green rocket launcher from the ground where it lay. It was a beautiful thing – a Strela-2, Russian-made surface-to-air missile system, liberated from the personal stockpiles of the recently departed Western stooge, Muammar Gaddafi.

Hashan moved quickly through his pre-firing preparations. The Strela could be reloaded, but not in the field. He was only going to get one try at this, so he’d better be ready. He removed the

covers and extended the sights, then mounted the tube on his shoulder. He activated the power supply to the missile electronics and waited a few seconds for the power to stabilize.

The launcher weighed heavily on his bones – he had made the boy carry it here.

Hashan's sixty-two years settled more heavily onto him than the rocket itself. He'd fought many wars in many places, and he was tired. Being sent here felt more like a punishment than an honor. Yesterday, he had hiked through these trackless mountains with this young local boy as his guide, and they had spent the night with no food, and no fire, huddled together on the frozen ground for warmth.

The journey had been difficult, but Hashan had been cold and hungry before, many times. Taking down jetliners with old Soviet shoulder-fired missiles was even more difficult. You must be an expert to do it, which Hashan was, but even then...

Even then...

He shook his head. Silly old man. Allah was the one who sharpened his sight. Allah steadied his hands. Allah guided the missile to its target.

Hashan was too tired even to pray. An image passed through his mind – Allah bathed in bright light, beckoning him to Paradise. He sighed. It would have to do. The Perfect One knew everything, including his most inadequate servant's intentions.

"Give me strength," Hashan muttered under his breath.

He positioned his right eye behind the iron sights, steadied the tube with his left hand, and applied half trigger with his right. It happened almost automatically, as if the launcher was doing it by itself. Hashan could now see the plane clearly enough – a big boat of a thing, like a fat bumblebee moving slowly left to right, coming down for a landing at the airport twenty miles south of here. The winter sun glinted off its cockpit windows as it approached.

It didn't matter what Hashan saw. The missile would decide if the shot was clean. Suddenly, a light appeared in his iron sights and a low buzzer went off. The missile had acquired an infrared signature from the plane. Hashan aimed the launcher in front of the plane, leading it just a bit. He planted his feet and fully depressed the trigger.

The missile left the tube with a WHOOOSH, the force of it rocking Hashan's slender frame. He watched it go, the front and rear fins popping out instantly. It seemed to fly away in slow motion, and he almost imagined that he could see it spinning.

"God is great," the boy said beside him.

Hashan nodded. "Yes."

That much was true, no matter whether the missile found its target.

* * *

Congressman Jack Butterfield of Texas lounged in a first-class window seat, simultaneously sipping a vodka tonic, watching the mountains pass below them, and listening to white-haired English billionaire Marshall Dennis prattle on beside him about some hedonistic misadventures he'd enjoyed in Ibiza as a young man.

"That's a riot, Marsh," Jack said, and he meant it. The whole trip had been a riot so far. This was the party plane. They had all started drinking in an airport VIP lounge before they left Gatwick. Everyone had roamed about the cabin at will for the duration of the flight, as though they were at a flying cocktail party.

And the young redheaded stewardess had just served him another drink, even though they were landing. Jack's eyes followed her as she moved up the aisle and stopped at the Egyptian Consul General's row. Boy oh boy, Jack would love to have a few misadventures with that stewardess.

He needed to think of a reason to call her back here.

"If it's okay with you," Jack said, "I probably won't share that story during the unveiling."

“Oh, I doubt a single person would be surprised,” Marsh Dennis said. “I’ve been the sporting type my entire life.”

“I know you have. Believe me when I say I’ve followed your – ”

Just then, the plane banked hard and lurched violently to the left. A voice came over the airplane’s public address system. Jack recognized it as the Oklahoma drawl of the pilot, an old US Navy vet Jack had briefly met when coming aboard. But the voice was different now. The man spoke fast and loud.

“Flight attendants! Prepare for emergency landing.”

Someone two rows back gasped.

The pretty red-haired flight attendant had fallen across the Consul General’s lap. The plane was banking so steeply, she was nearly upside down, her legs in the air. She could not regain her feet.

Jack Butterfield turned to Marsh Dennis. Everything seemed to slow down and take on a surreal cast. Marsh’s bloodshot eyes had opened wide, nearly round with sudden fear. For the first time, Jack noticed the deep lines in Marsh’s face – long, narrow slot canyons that undulated down his cheeks.

Jack glanced down at his own hand, holding his vodka drink in a plastic airplane cup. He hadn’t spilled a drop of it, despite the commotion. He felt a moment of absurd pride about that – he’d been drinking a long time. Hell, he was a Texas man.

“Hard stick right!” someone shouted over the speakers. “Hard right, I said. Oh God, it’s tracking us!”

Jack looked around for his seatbelt. He found it, clipped it in, and cinched it tight.

A moment passed.

“Prepare for impact,” someone said.

Impact?

Beside him, Marsh Dennis placed his weathered hands on top of the seat in front of him.

Somewhere behind them, far back in the main cabin, a sound came. Congressman Jack didn’t understand the sound. It was so loud, it was beyond his understanding. It was like a thunderclap, multiplied by a thousand. An instant later, the flight trajectory changed drastically. The plane was falling – a sickening plunge. A rushing sound came... there was nothing to compare it to.

Things went flying by now, sucked backward. The pretty redhead was one of those things. Her drink cart was another. After that, another person went – a fat man in a suit.

“Crash positions!” a booming voice shouted.

Jack screamed, but he couldn’t hear himself. He dropped his drink and clapped his hands over his ears.

The cabin of the plane was like a narrow tunnel in front of him. When it flipped upside down, he closed his eyes tight. In the midst of his terror, no thought came to him, only a dim awareness that whatever happened next, he did not want to see it.

* * *

“Here it comes,” Liz Jones said.

She stood with her advance hospitality team in the international VIP passenger greeting area in Terminal 1 at Sharm El Sheikh Airport. Her team all wore black and gold Dennis Hotels Worldwide uniforms. She wore a tan business suit.

The windows here were four stories high, giving a commanding view of the surrounding mountains, and the desert approach to the airport itself.

She felt a trickle of nervousness run down her spine – this one was a major deal. A planeload of heavy hitters was coming in, including Sir Marshall Dennis himself, and most of them were going to be roaring drunk by now. But Liz could handle it. She knew that about herself. She had run with the big dogs, all over the globe, for years and years.

“Let’s look sharp, everybody,” she said.

Suddenly, a young man in her group, a guy from Ireland, gasped. Then a young woman screamed. Now more people all over the lounge were screaming.

Liz stared out the window, her pretty middle-aged face numb, her brain frozen in shock. For a long moment, she could not understand what was happening out there. It didn’t make sense. The unfamiliar data simply did not compute.

On the other hand, somewhere deep inside her mind, she knew she had stored footage of what had just transpired. If she replayed it, she knew what she would see – the plane approaching over the mountains, then a flash of light on the right side of the plane about halfway back, just behind the wing. She had seen it happen in real time, but had been unable to process it. She had been psyching herself up for the disembarking, and didn’t realize what she was looking at.

The plane had cracked apart in midair. There were two pieces at first, then three, then four. The rear of the fuselage spun away like a boomerang. The front section came forward and down. It turned upside down, moving very fast, crashing into the foothills and spraying into a thousand shards. The wings disintegrated as they fluttered to the Earth.

Liz stared and stared. Now there were fires all over the hillsides. All around her, her team stood silently, statues in Dennis black and gold. Behind them, in the terminal, people were still screaming, and now people were running.

Several people had collapsed to the floor.

“Was that really the plane?” Liz said to no one.

CHAPTER TWO

4:35 a.m. Eastern Standard Time
The White House Residence
Washington, DC

The phone rang.

It made a funny sound, not so much a ring as a buzz, or a hum. But it was loud. Also, on each ring it lit up the early morning darkness in blue, like the siren lights on a police car. Luke Stone hated that phone.

He lay somewhere between asleep and awake. Images flashed in his mind. The past few years: an explosion at the old White House, the stately colonnade blowing apart, chunks of it flying up into the air; a gun and rocket battle in a vast open-air stadium in North Korea; Ed Newsam's fierce eyes, a container ship engulfed in flames behind him; Mark Swann, skinny and bearded in an orange jumpsuit, eyes vacant, chained to a group of other ISIS prisoners; Becca's pained and angry eyes, her face thin, her skin like paper... Gunner's big worried eyes, staring at him, looking to Luke for...

Luke opened his own eyes. Next to him on the bed table, in the dark of the Presidential bedroom, the infernal phone kept ringing. A digital clock sat on the table next to the phone. He glanced at its red numbers.

4:35. As he watched, it blinked and changed. 4:36.

"Jesus," he whispered. He had been asleep for three hours.

A female voice, thick with sleep: "Don't answer it."

A tuft of her blonde hair poked out from under the blankets. The heavy blinds were drawn, and if it weren't for the phone, it would be pitch-black in the room, just the way Luke liked it. But the phone kept throwing crazy blue light around the room.

"It's like a disco in here."

He picked up the phone. Mercifully, the stark blue light died.

"It's for you," he said, and held the receiver out to her.

A thin hand snaked out, took the receiver, and brought it back under the covers. She held it to the side of her half-hidden face, her eyes still sealed shut.

"Susan Hopkins," she said in a serious voice, as though she had been up for an hour, had already eaten breakfast, and was being interrupted while going over some important paperwork – the President of the United States never slept.

A thought came to Luke: *How many times?*

How many times had he, or she, been awakened in the middle of the night because something horrible had happened, or was happening right now, or was about to happen? How many moments of intimacy, of normalcy, of just plain life – something many people took for granted – had been cut short or even demolished by phone calls like this one?

Half-asleep, he allowed himself to imagine another world, one where they didn't have these jobs. The phone didn't ring in the middle of the night with terrible news. She was on TV in some capacity. He was a college professor. It was a busy life, but things could be scheduled, plans could be made, and they didn't have to hide their relationship.

He still worried about that part of it, maybe more than ever. The world seemed to have given them a free pass these past few weeks. Maybe it had been the influence of the holidays – people had their own lives and families to think about. Susan's daughters had come in from the West Coast. He and Gunner had spent a lot of time here at the Residence over a few days. It had been awkward at first – Gunner was a little younger than Michaela and Lauren, and he had no experience dealing with

the rare bird children of some of the richest people on Earth. Even so, they had all settled in together a little bit, and had a weird sort of *Brady Bunch Christmas*. It even snowed on Christmas Eve.

And somehow, some way, it all stayed out of the media. When Luke dropped Gunner back at his grandparents' house, there were no news trucks parked outside. No reporters called Luke at his office, pressing him about his close advisory relationship with the President. It was quiet on the media front – too quiet. Whenever he asked Susan how this was staying out of the news, she just smiled mysteriously and said:

“Don't worry. We have our methods.”

But he *was* worried. The situation gnawed at him. Mostly, he was worried about Gunner. The boy was growing up, and Luke wanted him to have something like a normal life. God knew he deserved it after everything he'd been through. He was still with Becca's parents, and that was fine – if anything, they had been more cordial than usual just lately. They were nothing if not social climbers, and their former son-in-law was now quietly dating the President.

Truth be told, Luke would love nothing more than to have Gunner move back in with him. But he was still in the spy game, and running his own agency now. It was a lousy thing to admit, but he just didn't have time to raise a son right now. If Gunner moved in with Luke, the boy would spend a lot of time on his own. For now, Luke made every effort he could to be a presence in Gunner's life.

Luke shook his head, clearing the wandering thoughts away. Under the blankets, Susan was listening intently. For a moment, Luke held out hope that maybe this call wouldn't be so bad. Heck, maybe it was even *good* news – something so good that it just couldn't wait until morning. What would that be?

“Oh God,” Susan said, the tone of her voice dashing any hope he might have had. She took a deep breath and let out a long exhale. “All right. Look. I was asleep until a minute ago. Give me about a half hour to take a shower and have a bite to eat. In the meantime, start pulling together the usual suspects.”

Susan paused while the person on the other end spoke.

“Okay. Thanks.” The hand snaked out again and gave the receiver to Stone. Luke placed it back in its cradle.

“Bad?” he said.

“Yeah.”

She still hadn't made any attempt to surface from under the covers. Luke's eyes had already adjusted to the darkness, and she looked like a small child under there – one who didn't want to get up and go to school.

“Plane crash in the Sinai Peninsula,” she said. “It's a real mess. Jack Butterfield was on board. So was Sir Marshall Dennis and about sixty other people of varying degrees of importance. We don't have the whole passenger list yet.”

She pulled back the covers. Her head was propped up on one elbow, her eyes open now and staring at him. They were blue eyes, framed in thick eyelashes. Her hair was beginning to get long. Gone was the conservative (and famous) Hopkins Bob, or Hopkins Helmet, depending on whether you loved her or hated her.

She was getting maybe just a little daring for official Washington, embracing her feminine side more than she had.

“Survivors?” Luke said.

She shook her head. “No.”

She sighed.

“I've known Hatchet Jack Butterfield for fifteen years. He was a fool and he was a drunk and he was a good ol' boy – not my favorite combination. But he was also a decent man, very smart, and very close to the intelligence agencies and the Pentagon.”

“I know who he was,” Luke said.

She shook her head slowly. “I’ve known Marshall Dennis since I was a teenager. He was also a fool and a drunk, and he spent way too much time pawing at teenage girls, but...” She paused.

“Eh, forget it. Nobody’s going to miss Marsh Dennis. His ex-wives are probably all on the phone with their lawyers right now, directing them to make inquiries about the will.” She gestured at the phone. “That was Kurt Kimball.”

Luke nodded. “Of course it was.”

Suddenly, she slid out of bed. In the dim light, he watched her pad naked across the room. One last fleeting image of a different life passed through his mind – a life where it wasn’t time to get up yet.

“I need you at this meeting,” she said. “As much as I hate to say it, the Special Response Team should be in on this one.”

“Because of Jack Butterfield?” Luke said.

Yes, Butterfield was close to the intelligence community in the sense that he liked to visit their offices, listen to their stories, and play with their toys. In exchange for being treated like one of the big boys, he pushed their budget requests through Congress. The hatchet in Hatchet Jack came from his passion for cutting after-school activities and social programs for poor people.

Luke had been expecting a call, and then a visit, from Hatchet Jack one of these days. He didn’t look forward to playing footsie with Jack Butterfield, but it had to be done. The SRT was the President’s pet agency, but Congress made the budget decisions.

Well, he supposed that particular visit wouldn’t be happening now. Luke smiled inwardly. He would never have wished any harm upon Congressman Butterfield, and especially not on the other passengers, but...

He stood, went over to the bay window, and pulled back a corner of the heavy drapes. The forecast had called for snow, and it had been right. It came down heavy, blown by gusting winds. It looked like there were several inches on the ground already.

“It’s snowing,” Luke said. Now he did smile. “To coin a phrase, the morning commute is gonna be a mess.”

“That plane was brought down, Luke. Kurt thinks it was a targeted assassination. Worse, he thinks it might be the start of something bigger.”

CHAPTER THREE

5:17 a.m. Eastern Standard Time
The Situation Room
The White House, Washington, DC

“I’ve already seen the photographs,” an intern said.

“Gruesome. Corpses and body parts strewn across the hillsides. To think that Marshall Dennis is one of them. God. We studied him in an entrepreneurship class when I was at Wharton. He was amazing – a real force of nature. You wouldn’t think a guy like that would ever die. Like, he wouldn’t allow it, or something.”

Luke was riding in an elevator packed with White House staffers and intelligence people. He glanced at the one who had spoken. The guy was very young, tall and fit, in a blue suit jacket and dress shirt with an open-throated collar, and a flop of blond hair nearly obscuring his face. He reminded Luke of New Wave rock bands from the 1980s.

The kid hadn’t been speaking to anyone specific, just all the elevator riders in general. He had made an announcement of sorts: he had seen the pictures already. Briefly – very briefly – Luke wondered which wealthy campaign donor the kid was the son or nephew of.

The elevator opened into the egg-shaped Situation Room. People who arrived there for the first time were often surprised at how small it was. When a crisis came, like now, for example, and the place started to get crowded, it could give a claustrophobic fits. It was hyper-modern and set up for maximum use of space, with large screens embedded in the walls every few feet, and a giant projection screen on the far wall at the end of the table. Tablet computers and slim microphones rose from slots out of the conference table in the center of the room – they could be dropped back into the table if the attendee wanted to use their own device.

Every plush leather seat at the table was already taken. The seats along the walls were filling up with young aides and assistants, most of them chatting among themselves, tapping messages into tablets, or speaking into telephones.

The young people were excited. Their futures were full of hope, and their eyes were bright with ambition. The fact that they had been awakened and summoned to an emergency meeting this early in the morning only underscored to them how important they were.

Down in the center of the room, where the actual decision-making would happen, the faces were decades older and the eyes were less bright. Susan Hopkins sat at the closest end of the oblong table, in a high-backed chair with the Seal of the President on it. At the far end stood big, chrome-domed Kurt Kimball, Susan’s National Security Advisor. A sprawl of tired-looking men and women took up the seats between them.

Susan and Luke always staggered their arrivals to emergency meetings like this. It was a tactic meant to obscure the fact that they had just awakened in bed together. One glance from Kurt told Luke all he needed to know: they weren’t fooling anyone – at least not anyone who mattered. Luke took a seat in the back row along the wall.

He watched Susan, just slightly below him and to his left. She held a large white coffee mug in one hand. She looked good – slim and fit in a dark blue pantsuit, her hair just a little bit wild. Susan could make the most conservative outfit look sexy. She was talking seriously to her chief-of-staff, Kat Lopez.

Stone looked Kat up and down. Long black hair, pretty face, dark almond eyes, and a tall, full-figured body hidden inside a blue business suit – she looked almost as good as Susan. Her eyes were tired, though, and were starting to show crow’s feet at the edges. Kat was not as young as she looked, and the demands of the job were putting some wear and tear on her.

Suddenly Kurt clapped his big stone hands. He had played basketball in college. His hands were enormous. Kurt himself was big, but his hands looked like they were on the wrong body.

“Order, everybody! Come to order, please.”

The place quieted down. A couple of aides continued to talk along the wall. It was early morning, people were drinking coffee, revving up, starting their day. This was a place for talkers. Quiet, introverted young people didn’t usually end up working at the White House.

Kurt clapped his hands again.

CLAP. CLAP.

CLAP.

The last one sounded like an unabridged dictionary slamming onto a marble floor.

The room went dead quiet.

“Good morning, everyone,” Kurt said. “Thank you for arriving quickly. You all know who you are, so we’re going to skip the introductions.” He paused and looked at Susan. “Madam President?”

“Mister National Security Advisor?” she said.

“Are we ready?”

Susan shook her head. “No. But that never stopped us before.”

Kurt glanced at the young woman sitting just to his left. Luke recognized her as Kurt’s long-time aide. She still wore her hair in the Hopkins Bob that Susan had recently abandoned. “Amy, let’s start with Sharm El Sheikh.”

On the large screen behind Kurt, and the smaller screens around the room, a photograph of an airport terminal appeared. The terminal’s roof was rounded and billowy, almost as though it were a tent. In the foreground of the photo was a ten-story control tower. In the background and fading into the distance were jagged red and brown mountains.

“This is Sharm El Sheikh International Airport,” Kurt said. “It’s the third busiest airport in Egypt, and serves the Sinai Peninsula, particularly the Red Sea tourist resorts located in the south. A little over an hour ago, it was the site of a devastating plane crash in which eighty-three people perished. This includes sixty-eight passengers, twelve cabin crew, and the three pilots on the flight deck – everyone on board the plane.

“Among the passengers were Sir Marshall Dennis, OBE, founder and chief executive of Dennis Hotels Worldwide, as well as the *Loose Lips* magazine publishing empire. Also on board were United States Representative from Texas Jack Butterfield, and Egyptian Consul-General to London Ahmet Anwar. The flight was a charter from London, carrying a group planning to celebrate the opening of a new Dennis Hotel on the Red Sea, a joint venture with the Texas-based Bonanza Hotel Group and the Egyptian government itself.”

Kurt paused for a moment and looked around the room. “The plane was arriving, and exploded in midair on its final approach to the runway. All indications are that it was foul play. The plane was three years old and had passed all recent safety inspections with no red flags. This suggests that either a bomb was planted on board, or the plane was hit by hostile fire, possibly a shoulder-fired rocket launched from the mountains you see in the photo. There were no Egyptian military in the vicinity at the time, and satellite footage shows no unauthorized use of Egyptian airspace. So there’s no chance someone fired on them by accident.”

“Which way are we leaning?” Susan said. “Bomb or rocket fire?”

“Rocket fire,” Kurt said without hesitation. “The plane was operated by TUI Airways, the largest charter flight company in the world, with an excellent safety record and a reputation for stringent background checks of employees. The flight departed from Gatwick Airport, which maintains tight security and has no history of lapses or breaches. Of course, the investigation into the personnel who loaded or were in contact with the plane before departure is just beginning. But for the moment, I am going to go out on a limb and say I have no reason to believe that a bomb was placed on board.”

Kurt looked at a man in military dress greens sitting at the conference table. He was thin and sinewy, square-jawed, with a gray flattop haircut. His hand was raised just slightly. Luke recognized him instantly.

“General?” Kurt said.

“Frank Loomis with Joint Special Operations Command,” the man said. “You’re not out on a limb. Without divulging too much, it’s safe to say we have people on the ground in Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. Our early intelligence suggests that this was an attack by Wilayat Sinai, probably with an assist from out-of-towners. Maybe Al-Qaeda, maybe ISIS. Furthermore, we’re showing that...”

Kurt held up a big hand in a STOP gesture. Heavy hitters visited here a lot, and they were accustomed to running things. But they tended to find out that this was Kurt Kimball’s domain. He called the tune and you danced to it.

“Okay, General. Let’s take this one step at a time, and get everyone here on the same page. It’ll make life easier down the road.”

The general grunted, possibly in agreement, possibly in frustration.

“Amy, bring up the Sinai Peninsula, please.”

On screens all over the room, maps of the Sinai Peninsula appeared, sandwiched between the vast landscape of Egypt proper to the west, the Mediterranean Sea to the north, Israel to the northeast and the sliver of the Red Sea directly to the east. Luke knew the terrain well.

“The Sinai Peninsula is the upside-down triangle you see here. Nominally part of Egypt, it’s been a political football throughout human history. From 1968 until 1980, it was occupied by the Israelis in the aftermath of the Six Day War. Border tunnels are routinely discovered between the north of the peninsula and the Gaza Strip, suggesting steady movement of fighters and materials between those two places.

“The local population are nomadic Bedouins, Sunni Muslims, elements of whom have become increasingly radicalized in recent years, particularly as Red Sea tourism in the south and east has grown.”

A middle-aged woman in a business suit raised a hand. “Do you suppose this is because beach resorts bring Western culture, like alcohol, dancing, and women in bikinis?”

Kurt shrugged. “I’m sure that offends some sensibilities. And I believe that is probably the reason Marshall Dennis seems to have been targeted specifically. His resorts have a reputation for a certain brand of hedonism, and his magazines are known for salacious celebrity gossip and scantily clad young models.”

“Marshall Dennis was a pig,” the woman said.

A few people laughed. Luke rolled his eyes. It might be a little early in the morning to climb up on a soapbox. Anyway, the man was dead.

“People have strong opinions about Sir Dennis,” Kurt said. “But no matter his faults, to be clear, an element of this is economic as well. The Bedouins have been pushed off ancestral lands to make way for new development, and a class of well-paid Egyptian and international workers have been flying in to work at the resorts, causing an infrastructure building boom and driving up the prices of nearly everything. This is far from the first terrorist attack in that region.”

He glanced at his aide. “Amy, can we see the list?”

On the screens, a typed list appeared. There was very little graphic design. Each entry had a title in bold, and a brief description underneath. The list began to scroll down, giving a sense of its length – perhaps thirty or forty entries, all of them attacks.

“We won’t do this exhaustively,” Kurt said. “You can all see how many incidents there have been. We’ll just jump in here and there. December 2013 – an attack on an Egyptian police compound killed sixteen recruits. March 2014 – multiple cross-border rocket attacks on Eliat, Israel, activated the Israeli Iron Dome defense system. All but one rocket was intercepted, ten people were injured,

and there was one death from a heart attack. February 2015 – a bus was bombed along the Red Sea coast, killing three Korean tourists and the Egyptian driver. A message afterwards warned all tourists to leave Egypt.”

Kurt sighed. “And of course, the big one. Metrojet flight 9268 exploded on October 31, 2015, soon after departing Sharm El Sheikh. The flight was full of Russian tourists, and two hundred twenty-four people died, which was everyone on board.”

He paused. “In part, the opening of a new Dennis Hotel was a demonstration by the Egyptian government that they had finally subdued the Wilayat Sinai, and the Red Sea resorts were open for business again.”

“I guess that theory is out the window,” someone said.

“At the risk of sounding ignorant,” Susan said, “who are these people, this... Wilayat?”

Kurt nodded. “Of course. Wilayat Sinai, or ISIS in the Sinai Peninsula, are the group formerly known as Ansar Bait al-Maqdis, or in English, the Supporters of the Holy House. Ansar was a loosely organized group of Salafist terrorist cells carrying out attacks in the region from the early 2000s. Since 2011, the Egyptian government has taken aggressive steps to eradicate those cells. In response, Ansar has affiliated itself with ISIS, making a formal oath of allegiance in 2014. We have widely corroborated intelligence that as ISIS loses the territory it once controlled in Iraq and Syria, it sees the lawless tribal lands – mainly open desert and mountains – of the Sinai as an attractive possible base of operations.”

General Loomis interrupted. “Of course they do. Which I think brings me to my original point.”

“Yes, General,” Kurt said. “I think we’re ready for your input now.”

Loomis nodded. “Thank you. As much as this plane crash is a terrible thing, the chatter we’re privy to suggests that this isn’t the actual attack. It’s a magician’s sleight of hand, designed to get us looking in one direction, while the real trick takes place elsewhere.”

“What evidence do you have to support that?” Susan said.

The general shook his head. “Madam President, I’m not at liberty to discuss our top secret intelligence, or its sources, in a meeting like this one. I think you must know that.”

Susan looked sharply at the general. “General Loomis, as you must know, it’s my prerogative to declassify intelligence on a whim, if I so desire. I’m obviously not going to do that. But in the interest of getting people in this room moving, it might be helpful if you would at least share where and when the real attack might take place.”

The general shrugged. “Madam President, if I knew that, you’re the first person I would tell.”

CHAPTER FOUR

12:01 p.m. West Africa Time (6:01 a.m. Eastern Standard Time)
125 Nautical Miles Southeast of Lagos, Nigeria
Gulf of Guinea
Atlantic Ocean

“It’s sitting up high, baby,” the gunman to Crazy Eddie’s left said.

“Yo, Killem, we gonna be eating good tonight,” the man to his right said. “Fine young chicken.” The men around them laughed.

Killem. That was one of Eddie’s nicknames. Short for Killem Dead – not just a nickname, but also his personal motto.

The men were riding in a small armada of speedboats – a dozen old go-fast Cigarettes. The boats were like something from a *Mad Max* movie, if it took place on the water. They were tricked out with racks of giant 350-horsepower outboard engines, and plated with welded-on scrap steel. There were no windshields – the driver of each boat watched the sea ahead through narrow slits cut in the metal. One of the boats, the slowest and biggest of the group, had a flying deck welded on above it – mounted on top was a heavy machine gun liberated from a Nigerian military depot.

The sun beat down, its harsh glare reflecting off the vast ocean waters.

“They gonna fight for it?” the first man said.

Eddie glanced around at his speedboats. Every one of them had six men on board, and every man was bristling with weapons – AK-47s and Uzis mostly, but also a couple of grenade launchers. Everyone had handguns, everyone had knives or machetes. The men themselves were rock stars, stone killers, and they looked the part. Kevlar body armor, wraparound aviator sunglasses, Stars & Stripes bandanas tied on their heads.

“Better not,” Eddie said.

Up ahead, maybe a mile away, was the object of their affection. An ancient freighter ship moved slowly, on a heading to the north and west. The thing was big, looming ten stories high, lumbering along like a derelict. It was an indeterminate color – mostly a mix of rust orange and the tattered remains of a dark green paint job it must have had decades ago. The speedboats approached from the rear, and thick white lettering was barely legible along the stern —*LADY JANE*.

Lady Jane was sitting up very high in the water indeed. To some, that would suggest the freighter was empty of cargo. But to others – people like Crazy Eddie Killem Dead – it suggested something else entirely. *Lady Jane* had been docked in an unregulated Congolese port for a long time. Now it was on the move with empty holds.

What was it carrying?

What sort of cargo found its way out of the lawless, war-torn bush in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and into the hands of smugglers on the coast? Precious metals like coltan and gold, certainly, but some things were even better than that.

“Diamonds,” Eddie said under his breath, not realizing he was going to speak at all.

“Yeah, baby!” the man next to him said. “Yeah!”

Diamonds were small, and they were light. A pocketful was worth a lot of money. A couple of pounds hidden inside a false wall on an old freight ship might be worth tens of millions of dollars. More than that? Eddie didn’t dream that big.

No. It would be a couple of pounds, if that. Getting the crew of the ship to show you where they were hidden – that was the trick, wasn’t it?

Eddie smiled. He had convinced people to talk before.

The ship loomed. Closer now, much closer. The speedboats slowed as they approached the massive freighter. The boat with the flying deck moved to the right, training the heavy machine gun on the upper decks of the *Lady Jane*. So far, there was no movement up there.

There was an emergency ladder bolted to the stern, about two stories above the water. Below there, the ladder had been cut away to discourage pirates – pirates like Eddie and his men. That was okay. Each one of these speedboats had an extendable aluminum ladder that would reach the bottom of the emergency ladder. From there, it was another two-story climb to the first deck. Easy, if the occupants were agreeable.

If not...

Eddie lifted a bullhorn to his lips. He flipped the ON switch with one finger, and a few seconds later, his voice boomed across the water.

“*Lady Jane, Lady Jane*, lay down your weapons and prepare for boarding.”

On the very top deck, two dark hands appeared from behind a metal parapet. The hands waved a large white fabric – maybe a piece of bed sheet – meant as a surrender flag. Eddie didn’t trust that flag. Not yet.

“All unarmed men will be spared,” he said into the bullhorn. “Anyone who fights will be killed. Do not test us.”

A voice boomed from the ship. They had a bullhorn of their own.

“We have nothing you want.”

Eddie grinned broadly. Nothing?

“We will see for ourselves.”

* * *

If there was going to be a problem, it would happen now.

The first speedboat had tied up to the ship. Eddie watched from about a hundred yards away. The speedboat looked like a children’s toy next to the freighter.

A silver aluminum ladder extended from the speedboat to the sheared-off bottom of the freighter’s emergency ladder. The seas were calm – bounding a little bit, but easy enough for climbing.

One man went up the silver ladder, then another, both moving like spiders. By the time the first man reached the emergency ladder, AK-47 strapped to his back, a third man had climbed onto the silver ladder, and was on his way up.

Three men high in the air. Three men out over nothing, perfectly exposed.

“Steady now,” Eddie said into the bullhorn. “Don’t do nothing stu – ”

Suddenly, a man popped up from behind the low metal wall ringing the lowest deck. He leaned over the top of it with a machine gun. The ugly blat of automatic gunfire ripped through the quiet of the day.

DUH-DUH-DUH-DUH-DUH. DUH-DUH-DUH-DUH-DUH.

The two men on the silver ladder collapsed, their bodies falling to pieces. Their bloody remnants dropped into the ocean, food for the sharks.

The first man clung to the emergency ladder, trying to wedge his head and upper body beneath one of the iron rungs. So far he had been spared.

The man on the deck leaned way out, aiming to pick off the last climber.

Eddie pointed at the gunman.

“Kill that man,” he said into a black walkie-talkie.

Instantly, a burst from the heavy machine gun on the fishing boat shredded the man into Swiss cheese. No, that was too kind. It liquefied him. The recoil from the heavy gun made the fishing boat rock crazily, but the gunner was an expert. He tilted the gun up and down, training his fire on that

deck. The metal of the low wall came apart like cardboard. Holes appeared in it, and an instant later, it crumpled like a tin can.

The first climber was still alive, once again inching his way to the top. Two more men had climbed from the speedboat onto the silver ladder.

“More!” Eddie shouted. “I want more men on that boat.”

Hell, he would go himself. Seeing his men murdered got his blood up. He shouted at his driver to approach the ship. The first speedboat was already pulling away. As his boat pulled in, the boat’s aluminum ladder began to extend. Eddie was on it before the boat was even tied up.

The ladder rose at a forty-five-degree angle to the freighter. He moved across it, climbing quick as a cat, even as the rickety ladder rattled and trembled. More guns sounded. He glanced to his right. The fishing boat was hosing the top decks of the ship with heavy machine gun fire.

“Good!” he shouted. “Rip them up.”

Eddie had almost reached the heavy steel emergency ladder. It was about four feet away, coming closer, then drifting away. He leapt across the gap, then started climbing again, this time straight up in a vertical line.

In less than a minute, he climbed two more stories. He took a deep breath and poked his head over the top. Three of his men were here – still alive and holding this corner of the deck. Very good. They could bring all the men up this way.

Eddie glanced down. Four more men were making their way up behind him. Eight heavily armed fighters would soon be on board, with more on the way. The smugglers on the ship probably never had more than a dozen men to begin with.

He slid over the railing.

His men were crouched at the edge where the walkway turned, staring back at him. Two smugglers lay on the catwalk, barely even corpses, their bodies eviscerated by machine gun fire.

Eddie barely glanced at them. Dark black men, small, Congolese, probably Hutus. Africans yes, but savages. Eddie Killem Dead was Kanuri. That was a heritage to be proud of. These men were trash.

“Let’s go,” he said to his own men. “Let’s finish it.”

He had an Uzi strapped to his back. He unslung it and turned the corner. Fifty yards ahead, a spray of bullets shredded the walls. The fishing boat was still strafing the side of the freighter. Two more men lay dead on the walkway. Beyond them was dizzying blue sky and dark sea.

Eddie and his men moved up the walkway, boots making a metallic sound on the steel mesh below them. The catwalk itself shuddered with each step they took – it felt like it might separate from its frame. This freighter was in bad shape.

Up ahead, a new white flag stuck out from a porthole and waved on a stick. Maybe this was the real surrender, maybe it wasn’t.

The bullhorn was strapped to Eddie’s shoulder. He pulled it down and held it to his lips. “Throw your weapons out!” he said. “All of them.”

An AK-47 slid out of the next porthole. Then a nine-millimeter semiautomatic handgun. A machete. Another gun. They clanged and clattered as they hit the catwalk.

Eddie waved his men ahead.

“Blow it,” he said.

The first man took a grenade from his vest pocket, pulled the pin, and tossed it through the porthole. Frantic shouts came from inside. Eddie’s men ducked back. A second passed. Two.

BOOOOOM.

A flash of red and orange light came through the portholes. Now someone inside there was screaming. Eddie moved to the first porthole and glanced in. The cabin was on fire. Several bodies and body parts were strewn about the floor. Two men seemed to still be alive. One was quiet and breathing heavily, his chest heaving. He would be dead soon. The other one was shrieking, eyes wild.

Eddie looked at one of his men and made a slicing motion across his own throat. The man nodded and slid in through the ragged porthole. A moment later, the screaming stopped.

Eddie moved quickly, sprinting up a set of ironwork stairs. Eight men were with him now. The hostile boarding was complete. No one would hold this ship against them. He grinned at the thought of it.

His crew was *efficient*, man. Killers.

They came to the pilot house, which was all windows. There were three men inside. Eddie could look inside and see them clearly. They didn't even try to keep Eddie and his boys out. What good would it do?

Eddie simply opened the door and walked in.

The men were small and middle-aged, each one wearing a tan uniform. They looked like government officials of some kind. It was a joke. They were smugglers, sailing an old, decrepit freighter, wearing stolen or fake uniforms. Most of the equipment in this pilot house seemed broken, useless. Eddie smiled at them.

"Who is the captain?"

The three men stared, uncertain.

"Tell me, or I will kill all three."

The man in the middle, the smallest and oldest of the three, nodded. He was perfectly bald. His hands were large and his skin was dark black. His face was deeply lined. "I am the captain."

Eddie nodded. He glanced at his own men.

Two gunshots rang out, and the men flanking the captain instantly sank to the floor, both dead before they reached it.

The smell of gunpowder rose in the room.

"Where are the diamonds?" Eddie said now.

The captain was calm. He hardly seemed surprised at the death all around him. By the looks of him, he had been alive, and at sea, a long time. He was probably accustomed to this sort of thing. He lowered his hands and shook his head.

"There are no diamonds."

"No diamonds?" Eddie said, his grin broader than ever. "Are you certain?"

"Yes. There is nothing that you might want."

"Why did you fight then? What were you trying to protect?"

The captain shrugged. "Ourselves. Because you are dirty Nigerian pirates. We knew you would slaughter us if you captured the ship."

"What is on board here?" Eddie said. "Surely there is something."

"I will say it again," the captain said. "There is nothing here that you want. And you will be happier if you leave it where you found it. I assure you of this."

Eddie laughed. "Something important, then. Show me."

They went below decks. The captain walked Eddie and his men through hold after empty hold, moving ever downward into the bowels of the ship. There were no signs of life, not even rats. There were also no signs of cargo – just dark, rusty, empty holds swept clean.

Finally, they entered a large room. A tall bulk loomed in the darkness. Eddie's men didn't need to be told what to do. They put the flashlights on it.

As they approached, the thing became clearer. It was a large steel box, gunmetal gray. The edges were welded together. It wasn't clear how to open it, other than perhaps cutting it with a blowtorch. There were Cyrillic markings on the outside – CCCP. That was interesting. The initials of the old Soviet Union. That meant this thing had been kicking around for more than twenty years. It towered above their heads.

"What is it?" Eddie said softly, his voice echoing through the cavernous hold. "A weapon of some kind?"

“I don’t know,” the captain said.

Eddie looked at him sharply. “You don’t know what it is?”

The man shook his head. “It is not my job to know. It’s none of my business.”

This thing had gotten everyone on his ship killed, and pretty soon, it would get him killed, too. But somehow it was none of his business.

“Who is your client?”

The man stared balefully, perhaps imagining the torture he would endure until he offered satisfactory answers.

“If I tell you, they will kill me.”

Eddie shrugged. “Yes, but if you don’t tell me...”

“You will also kill me.”

“I killed all your men,” Eddie said. “You are only alive because I say so. Your only hope is to tell me. Perhaps you can avoid your client. Maybe for a short while, maybe forever. But avoid me? It’s too late for that.”

“Your life will be forfeit if I tell you,” the man said.

Eddie smiled. How many times had his life been forfeit?

“Tell me anyway.”

CHAPTER FIVE

6:51 a.m. Eastern Standard Time
Headquarters of the Special Response Team
McLean, Virginia

Not even 7 o'clock, and there were half a dozen private cars in the parking lot, to go with the four black agency SUVs. The lot had already been plowed once, and a groundskeeper was out snow-blowing the walkways.

That's what Luke liked to see – people ahead of the game. Technically, the place didn't open until nine.

He held his identification to the scanner, and the big glass front doors unlocked. He stepped out of the blowing snow and into the main atrium. It was open and airy, with tall bamboo trees reaching toward the three-story ceiling. Everything was new and beautiful and high-tech. A stone waterfall greeted people as they entered, etched into the stone a message from Abraham Lincoln: *Those who are ready to sacrifice freedom for security ultimately will lose both.*

To Stone, it seemed that Lincoln was speaking to him personally. An agency like the Special Response Team was designed for rapid action, at times unfettered by the bureaucracy, the guidelines and the laws that slowed others down. The goal was security, of course, protection of the innocent, but there had to be a balance – they were not a law unto themselves. It was important to remember that.

He glanced around the lobby before heading to his office. It was hard to believe. *I had to pinch myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming.* Wasn't that what people said sometimes? Stone didn't go in for that sort of thing, generally speaking, but in this case it was true.

The new SRT headquarters were the old headquarters from years before, but gutted, stripped to the studs, and totally transformed. From the outside, the squat, three-story glass and concrete building looked utterly drab and functional, like a state university building from the 1970s, or an old Khrushchev-era Russian apartment complex.

But the brand new black Bell 430 helicopter hunched on the pad, with a bright white SRT logo on its side, might give a hint what you'd find inside the building. There were offices on the first and second floors, and a state-of-the-art conference room and command center that was nearly a match for the Situation Room at the White House.

It had every technological innovation from Mark Swann's fever dreams – including its own server farm, an encrypted network from which Swann could easily access spy satellites and data surveillance programs like ECHELON, and a small dedicated room for piloting drones. The workout center (complete with cardio equipment, weight machines, and a heavily padded sparring room) and the cafeteria were on the third floor. The soundproof gun range was in the basement.

The agency had twenty employees, the perfect size to respond to unfolding events fast, light, and with total flexibility. The new SRT was in its infancy, and they were still building teams and working to entice superstars away from private organizations, other government agencies, and the military.

Spun off from the FBI and now organized as a sub-agency of the Secret Service, the arrangement limited Luke's interactions with the federal bureaucracy. He reported directly to the President of the United States, which at the moment seemed to be working out just fine.

Trudy Wellington poked her head out of her office as Luke passed. She was sitting in her wheeled office chair, and had rolled it to the doorway.

"Luke, I have something for you," she said.

He glanced down at her and did a pretend double-take. "Don't you have a home?"

She smiled and shook her head. "You know where my home is."

Trudy was his science and intelligence officer, and her office was ten feet from his. Trudy looked slim and beautiful as ever in a green boiled wool coat and blue jeans. She had done away with the big, round, owlsh red-rimmed glasses she used to hide behind. Now her pretty blue eyes were front and center. Those eyes always seemed to watch Luke closely.

Trudy was a mystery wrapped in a conundrum. For years, Luke had relied on her for intel and scenario spinning. But things had gotten complicated. After the Mount Weather disaster, after the original SRT boss, Don Morris, was implicated in a plot to overthrow the United States, it turned out Trudy had been in the midst of a long affair with him. She was arrested and held without bail under suspicion of conspiracy to commit treason. That should be enough to disqualify any person from working in intelligence again. Even worse, after she got out of jail, she disappeared. Her whereabouts during the year she was missing was something she refused to talk about. Things were complicated.

Even so, Luke had hired her to work at the new SRT anyway. Trudy and Luke had had their own brief dalliance during the Ebola crisis, something they never talked about and seemed to have put in the past. And Trudy was valuable for her ability to gather intelligence, and to make sense of it when she did. She was, to Luke's mind, the best in the business.

"Okay," Luke said. "What do you have for me?"

"It's something from Swann."

"Swann is here?" Luke said.

She shook her head. "Of course not. It's seven o'clock in the morning. But he's awake and he sent it to me a few minutes ago. As you know, we've got a short list of people we're keeping tabs on. One of these is a man named Mustafa Boudiaf."

Trudy turned into her office and picked up her tablet off her desk. Luke followed her to the threshold. She scrolled through some information.

"Mustafa Boudiaf," she said. "He lives in Baltimore. Sixty-three years old, American citizen, born in Algeria during the Algerian War of Independence. He came to this country when he was nine. He spent much of his childhood in Algiers, and witnessed atrocities committed by both the French and the FLN."

"How do we know that?" Luke said.

Trudy shrugged. "We listen to his telephone conversations."

Luke nodded. "Okay."

"Boudiaf appears to be a fundraiser for Islamic extremist movements in North Africa. Swann has tracked him moving large sums of cryptocurrencies on the dark web, and to a lesser extent, across popular crypto trading platforms like Coinbase. Those platforms are unregulated, but easy enough to watch."

"What's his cover?" Luke said.

"He's an Uber driver, works nights mostly, often late nights. We believe he meets with donors and other people in his networks under the pretense of picking up fares. Once in the car, they're free to talk for as long as the ride lasts. Swann has tracked him taking fares up to Philadelphia, northern New Jersey, and New York. He routinely drives into DC and out to Norfolk."

"All right," Luke said. "I'll bite. Why is he on our radar today?"

Trudy raised an index finger.

"This morning, at four twelve a.m., just minutes after the plane crash in the Sinai, Boudiaf answered a phone call. Swann said he's been unable to trace back the call, but it came from outside the United States. The man who called spoke in Arabic. He kept it brief. He said a phrase that, translated into English, means, *It is done*. Then he hung up."

"Interesting," Luke said. "But probably not enough on its own."

"That was one," Trudy said. "The second thing is that Mustafa Boudiaf is preparing to leave the country. Three days ago, a moving van pulled up to his house in Baltimore. The workers took a lot of furniture, boxes, and electronic equipment out of the place and drove off with it. Instead of taking

the stuff to another house, they took it to a storage facility – a storage facility outside Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.”

“Odd,” Luke said.

“Swann says that two nights ago, Boudiaf purchased one-way plane tickets for himself, and his family, to Algiers. The flight is tomorrow night out of JFK, assuming the snowstorm lets up. The house he lives in is a rental. Very soon, Mustafa Boudiaf is going to be gone, and it’ll be like he was never here.”

“What’s your gut?” Luke said.

Trudy nodded. “He was involved in taking down that plane. Maybe in a small way, maybe in a large way. At the very least, he had prior knowledge the attack was coming. Now he’s leaving.”

“I was just at the White House,” Luke said.

Trudy’s eyes flashed... something. Luke couldn’t tell what it was.

“It was a Situation Room meeting. There was a general there from the Joint Special Operations Command. He said they think this plane crash was a prelude to something larger, and was maybe even designed as a decoy. Could Boudiaf be leaving because the next attack happens here?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Trudy said.

Luke nodded. “Let’s pick him up. Can we get an assist from local law enforcement?”

Trudy shook her head. Her hair bobbed the slightest amount. “Not a chance. Too risky. The Baltimore PD is trying to live down a lot of bad publicity right now. There’s no way we’ll get an arrest warrant based on what we have, especially not at a moment’s notice. So the cops up there won’t touch this – it’s exactly the kind of thing that if played wrong, looks like a human rights violation.”

“Well, let’s play it right then. How many people in Boudiaf’s house?”

“Seven.”

Luke’s shoulders slumped. “Seven people?”

Trudy nodded and raised her eyebrows. “Boudiaf has a young wife and a five-year-old daughter. He has an adult son from a previous marriage, who lives in the house with his own wife and young son. And Boudiaf’s adult nephew lives there, too.”

“So two children live in the house?” Luke said.

“Yes, and they’ll probably be home today because of the snow.”

Luke rolled his eyes. “Terrific. Plus two other adult males.”

“Yes,” Trudy said.

“What do we suppose Boudiaf is doing right now?” Luke said.

“Given the late hours he tends to keep, we suppose he’s sleeping.”

“Then let’s get on it. If you don’t mind, give Swann a kick in the butt for me and get him in here.”

* * *

“Big effort here. Big effort. Now’s the time, and you are the man.”

Ed Newsam lay on his back under the bench press machine. His tree trunk legs were draped in black sweatpants, and a black T-shirt hugged his broad chest. Words were stenciled across the T-shirt in white lettering: THE BEATINGS WILL CONTINUE. Once upon a time, the saying used to go “The beatings will continue until morale improves,” but Ed’s morale was doing just fine.

His MP3 player pumped old Public Enemy through expensive earphones. His body was soaked in early morning sweat – he’d been in here since 6:30. And he had the bench machine set to 380. One good rep, that’s all he asked. Better than good – pure, perfect, no hesitation on the press up, and nice, long, negative resistance on the way down. Something to get the sweat exploding out of his pores.

“Show me what you got,” he said to no one but himself, and pushed the bar. The weight slid upward, inch by inch. He held it for a second at the top, then began his slow descent. His arms

trembled crazily. His wrists creaked like they would snap in half. The veins in his arms bulged. He could feel the blood rushing into his head – it felt like his brain might explode.

Finally, he let it go – the weight came down with a crash of metal.

Beautiful.

Ed was changing his lifestyle. His recent trip to Iran with Luke Stone had scared him a little bit. He and Stone had nearly died half a dozen times. Ed didn't want to die – he wanted to live to see his two daughters grow up. But he was thirty-six years old, and not getting any younger. He hadn't mentioned it to anyone, but the truth was there: he had felt old and slow on that mission.

And yet, he didn't want to give up being in the field. During his time on the FBI Hostage Rescue Team, they had started using him as a trainer and a supervisor, rather than an agent and an operator. That was a wrong turn.

This... this was a right turn.

Right after the holidays, he had cut back on, and then cut out, the bread and pasta and the apples pies and the cookies. He had broken up with his first true love, McDonald's – they just weren't seeing eye to eye anymore. And he had committed to getting in here to the gym before work at least three days a week. His workouts had always been brutal. Now they were approaching monstrous.

He loved it here.

He loved being back on the Special Response Team, and loved what they had done with the old place under Stone's leadership. The gym was brand spanking new, and had everything Ed needed, from combat ropes to pull-up racks to a 400-pound squat machine to a heavy bag. If he got in here early enough, he often had the place to himself.

The energy of the new SRT had Ed feeling an enthusiasm he hadn't experienced in a while. And Stone seemed as jazzed as Ed. Gone were the beard and the Wildman haircuts. Gone were the haunted eyes and the pained expressions.

Luke had never let himself go physically – he was always tip-top in that regard, better than a man in his forties had any right to expect. His resistance to physical aging seemed almost superhuman. But Stone's collapsing marriage, his divorce, and then his ex-wife's death, had sent him into a psychological wilderness, and for a while it seemed like he might never return.

But now he was back. And he was on fire. It was a good thing. Stone's commitment gave Ed the confidence he needed to invest himself in this organization. The SRT would not survive without Stone one hundred percent dialed in, and that's where Stone was right now. When Ed had agreed to take this job, Stone had promised him he wouldn't go off grid again, and so far he had been as good as his word.

"Think of the devil, and he will appear," Ed said.

Stone had just walked into the gym. He strode across the new rubber flooring, making a bee line for Ed. Stone was clean shaven and sported a crew cut on his head. His eyes were sharp and alert. He wore tan slacks and a dress shirt, cinched with an actual tie. The tie had a caricature of John Lennon on it – Stone was even developing a signature fashion style. He wore business attire to work, but the ties were often whimsical, and sometimes they were plain ridiculous.

Stone smiled and said something to Ed.

Ed took his headphones off. "Sorry? I didn't hear you."

Stone shook his head. "I said, what are you shouting at?"

Ed smirked. "No you didn't."

Stone laughed. "Come on, man. Buy you a coffee? We have a lot to talk about."

* * *

"How's the girls?" Luke said.

They were sitting in the SRT's full-service, two-meal-a-day cafeteria. The cafeteria was Luke's idea – he felt that having on-site food available would tend to get people in here earlier in the morning, and keep them here at lunch. If people were inside SRT headquarters when they ate, and even when they worked out, things would happen – ideas would spark, connections would be made. That's what Luke wanted from his people.

So far, the idea was working exactly as planned. Today was a heavy snow day, and it was only 7:30. Even so, the room was already bustling with a handful of eager beavers, getting their breakfast.

Ed shrugged. "Good. Growing up too fast." He was slouched in his chair, still in his workout clothes, stirring organic coconut oil into his coffee instead of creamer.

"Cassandra's got me jumping through hoops to see them, but what else is new? It's nothing I can't handle. She petitioned the court to have me reveal my whereabouts at all times. I told them my whereabouts were often classified information, and thankfully the judge took my side on that one.

"Then Cassandra up and moved to the suburbs south of Richmond over the Christmas break. She claims the schools are better down there, safer, and that's probably true. But it's not good for the girls to move around like that. Also, it's not lost on me that the judge told her not to leave Virginia, so she moved as far away as humanly possible, while still remaining in the state. I used to have a twenty-mile roundtrip to see my girls, and now it's more like two hundred miles."

"Cassandra's a beautiful woman," Luke said. Truer words were never spoken. Ed's ex-wife was tall and statuesque. It was if Naomi Campbell hadn't been discovered, had never become a supermodel, and Ed had married her. And had children with her.

Then got divorced.

Now Ed smiled. "That's how they get you to stick your leg in the trap."

"It's the most natural thing in the world," Luke said.

"Been this way since the dawn of time," Ed said. "But I'm guessing that you didn't interrupt my workout to discuss the travails of men and women."

Luke shook his head. "No. You watch anything about this plane crash in Egypt?"

"How could I not?" Ed said. "They weren't saying much about it, though. The casual TV watcher could be forgiven for thinking it was a normal plane crash. Just one of those unfortunate things that happen sometimes."

"It wasn't," Luke said, sipping his own black coffee.

Ed smiled. "Tell me something I don't know."

"I was at the White House this morning."

Now Ed's smile was nearly ear to ear. "I said tell me something I don't know."

"There was an emergency meeting," Luke said. "Kurt Kimball thinks the plane was brought down by a rocket attack, targeting Marshall Dennis specifically. He was about to open a hotel on the Red Sea there."

Ed stared at this coffee, thinking about that. His face clouded. He swirled the coconut oil around and around.

"Okay."

"General Loomis was at the meeting," Luke said.

"Frank Loomis?" Ed said. "JSOC?"

"You know him?"

Ed shrugged. "I was on loan to him from Delta one time. The operation got about as FUBAR as possible. He nearly got a bunch of us killed. I'll tell you about it one day."

Luke nodded. "He was playing coy this morning. Said his intelligence people told him the attack was a decoy, a cover-up for something bigger. When the President pressed him on how he knew that, or what the next attack might be, he said he –"

Ed finished the sentence for him. "He wasn't at liberty to discuss that."

"Exactly," Luke said.

“So what’s our role in this?” Ed said.

“There’s a guy up in Baltimore. Trudy and Swann think he’s dirty, and that he’s about to skip town. I’d like to grab him today before he disappears. See what he has to say. We’ll never get an arrest warrant, at least not on short notice, so...”

Ed smiled. “You want me to go up there and bag him?”

Luke shrugged. “I’d say a team of six should do it. Ride with a couple of your best people to make sure it gets done. But also bring a couple of your newbies. I’d like to watch them in action, see what we’re looking at.”

“What’s the situation on the ground?” Ed said.

“It’s a house. Swann has the details. There are two women in there, and two children. Three adult males. All we want is the subject, who is in his sixties. I’d say tumultuous entry, move fast, bag him and bring him out. Try not to break anything.”

“In other words,” Ed said, “don’t kill anyone.”

Luke nodded. “That’s right.”

“You’re a very gentle man,” Ed said.

Luke smiled. “I try to be.”

“Okay. Consider it done.”

CHAPTER SIX

8:40 a.m. Eastern Standard Time

Westgate

Baltimore, Maryland

“Do you have a look at this place?” Ed said into his microphone.

Mark Swann’s deep, throaty voice came over his speaker. “You mean real time?”

Ed shook his head. “No, I mean back in 1978. Yes, real time, Swann.”

“Of course not. I can’t see anything. I don’t have a drone in the air on a day like today, and even if I could put one up, the cloud canopy is too low. All I can see is coming from your body cameras.”

“So you can’t see what’s going on in the backyard.”

“Not at the moment, no. But you have that aerial map, right? And the floor plan?”

Ed sighed. “Yes.” They were going in blind.

“Then you should be good.”

Ed was sitting in the back of a white van, parked thirty yards up the street from the house where Mustafa Boudiaf lived. The van had an orange, yellow, and green SMECO logo on it, with a lightning bolt through the middle. SMECO was the shortened version of Southern Maryland Electrical Cooperative, an electric company that didn’t even serve this area.

Three people were in the van with him, members of his team. They were dressed the same as him – in black long-sleeve fleece shirts, heavy tactical vests, and cargo pants lined with lightweight Dragon Skin armor. Pulled over the tactical vests were yellow reflective vests with the SMECO logo – just like electrical workers out to fix a power outage on a snowy day would wear. On their heads were white combat helmets with hinged facemasks, currently in the up position. A person not sure of what they were looking at might imagine those helmets were hardhats.

Ed glanced out the rear window. It was a relatively affluent neighborhood. The house was tan stucco, nondescript, two stories tall, set back on the other side of a wide lawn from the road. A bay window faced the street, next to a red front door. On the right side was a driveway with a black Lincoln Town Car in front, and maybe some kind of Toyota in back. On the left side was a narrow alley between properties. A long hedge lined the front sidewalk.

Everything – the hedge, the two trees on the front lawn – was brown and bare. The snow was blowing pretty hard.

Ed was calm. He looked at his people.

Two of them were young, early to mid-twenties. That would be Rodriguez and Stamos. Ed had taught Rodriguez at Quantico – she was one of his best students. She was the fittest person there, could knock out more pull-ups than Ed himself. She could run a five-minute mile, then follow it up with a hundred pushups and another five-minute mile. And she was serious – dead serious. Maybe a little too much. She wanted very badly to prove herself.

Right now, her eyes were like saucers. She looked like she needed to go to the bathroom.

“Rodriguez, you’re with me, girl. Ain’t nothing to this. We’re just utility workers, knocking on doors during a power outage. We’ve got a clipboard. The door opens, whoever answers, we take them down. You secure them, I move on. Got it?”

She nodded. “Got it.”

“Stamos, Anderson, you guys move up that alleyway and connect with Marshall and King on the back porch. Stamos, you and King are swinging hammer. You get the word, I want to see you hit that thing with all you got. Two hits max, I want that door open. One is better.”

Stamos nodded. He looked less nervous than Rodriguez, but still pretty green. “I got it.”

“Of course you do. This ain’t your first rodeo, man. So stop acting like it. You got nothing to prove to me. Just do your job the way I know you can.”

“Okay.”

Ed looked at Anderson, then shook his head and smiled. Anderson was thirty-two, and had come to SRT out of Delta Force. He needed a shave. His eyes were hard, but his body language was relaxed. He was probably bored. They had hired him, more than anything, out of Luke’s nostalgia for Delta. Ed doubted he would last. There were wars going on out there in the world, and mercenary work was where the money was.

“You know what to do, man.”

Anderson nodded. “Yeah.”

He addressed the whole group. “Look. There are women and children in there. Job One is to bring the subject out, but Job One-A is to do it with no loss of life. Non-lethal force is the motto for today. That said, don’t anybody let yourself die in there. If they want a fight, you give them one. Understood?”

Everyone understood.

Ed spoke into his mic. “Marshall, King, where are you?”

A voice came through his speakers. “We’re in the neighbor’s yard, just on the other side of the wooden fence. Waiting for go.” Marshall was former FBI. King had come from a SWAT team in Newark, New Jersey.

“You guys heard all that? You on my page?”

“We got you, Ed. Nobody dies today. Not them, but especially not us.”

Ed nodded. “Good.” He took one deep breath. He tried to let whatever tension was in his body release into the universe.

“All right. In and out in ninety seconds, kids. Let’s hit it.”

* * *

“Here they go.”

A dozen video screens were mounted on the wall in Swann’s office. Six of them were currently active, each showing the view from the body camera on each of the SRT agents about to hit Mustafa Boudiaf’s house.

“Office” was a generous term for Swann’s strange kingdom. There were four desks, each with at least three video monitors on top. Three tall computer server racks were bolted to the wall across from the video screens. Wires snaked all over the floor. Everywhere – on the desks, on the floor – were pieces of electronic equipment, with LED lights blinking in red and green and white.

There was one long window; the shelf below it seemed to have a force of magnetism that drew empty Coca-Cola and Red Bull cans to itself.

Swann sat in a chair in front of the video screens, Luke and Trudy standing perfectly still behind him. The screens showed a bizarre jumble of imagery, each screen marked with the last name of the person whose point of view was showing.

The screens marked NEWSAM and RODRIGUEZ both showed a snowy walkway, and a red door at the top of some steps. ANDERSON showed an alleyway, a house to the right and bushes to the left. ANDERSON was moving fast. STAMOS showed the same view, except with a tall man in a yellow safety vest running just ahead, slipping and sliding just a bit in the snow. MARSHALL and KING showed a tall wooden fence, then the POVs went right over the top of it. Now there was a tan house with a wide back porch covered in snow.

“Agents converging,” Swann said. “Anytime you’re ready, Ed.”

The camera marked NEWSAM was right in front of the red door. A hand reached out and its index finger pressed the doorbell.

Ding-dong!

The camera marked STAMOS showed a thin black man, also in a yellow reflective vest, and with his visor in place now, standing with his fist in the air. Then the camera turned to a back door.

Luke held his breath. They were about to take that door down with a battering ram. Then they were going to throw a stun grenade in, a so-called flash-bang. Both of these things would make loud noises. Luke didn't love loud noises. The flash-bang would make one hell of a loud noise.

Just then, he got a text on his phone. It vibrated in his hand; he had set it to silent mode. He glanced down. It was Gunner.

Hi Dad. Where r u?

"Spell out your words!" he said in his mind. The simplified Orwellian language kids used in texts drove him crazy. Still, he let it drop.

He texted back. *At work. Where are you?*

Snow day 2day. Wanna get lunch?

Luke smiled. Did he want to get lunch with Gunner? Of course he did.

"Back porch, go!" Swann said, nearly shouting. "Go! Go! Go!"

On the screen marked KING, two men reared back and swung the battering ram.

* * *

"Help you?" the man who answered the front door said.

He was a young guy in a blue T-shirt and red track pants, flip-flops on his bare feet. His brown eyes were flat and more than a little annoyed. His hair stood up in tufts. He had a full beard.

"Yes, hello," Ed said. He indicated the clipboard in his left hand, and tiny Rodriguez standing to his right. "We're from the electric utility. We've been getting reports of power outages from the storm in this neighborhood. We need to come in and check your smart meter to see if your system is working properly."

The guy made a sort of grimace. "What? Why would you have to –"

Suddenly, there was a loud noise somewhere deep in the house.

BAM!

The guy turned halfway around. It sounded like something in the kitchen had —

Ed punched him in the side of the head. He didn't rear back – he just uncorked it from halfway. It wasn't hard enough. The guy's eyes were dazed, but he was still conscious and on his feet. Ed stepped in, slid a foot behind the guy's legs, and shoved him onto the floor.

"Rodriguez!" he shouted and ran past the guy. Somewhere, in his peripheral vision, through the eyes in the back of his head, he saw Rodriguez jump on the guy, already turning him onto his face and zip-tying his hands, almost in one movement.

Ed walked down the hallway, moving fast. His Glock had appeared in his hands.

"Flash-bang coming!" someone shouted inside his helmet. "Flash-bang coming."

He stopped, shut his eyes, and ducked back.

Even behind closed eyes, he could see the flash. Even with his ears protected by sound cancellers, he could hear and feel the explosion.

BOOOM!

Somewhere down the hallway, a child started crying. A young woman appeared, carrying a baby in her arms. She ran past Ed, her face frozen in terror.

Up ahead, four large men suddenly swarmed into the house, shrieking, "Down! Down! Get DOWN!"

The stairs to the upper floor were to Ed's left. He bounded up them, two at a time. If the floor plans were correct, the master bedroom was to the right. He turned that way at the top of the stairs. He could feel, rather than see, another man right behind him. There was a door straight ahead.

He ran at that door full speed. Surprise was everything today. Speed was everything. He hit the door without slowing down, giving it his right shoulder, blasting through it. It was a cheap wooden door – it looked nice, but there was nothing to it.

Ed came crashing into the room head first, rolling to the ground. A bald man in a sleeveless T-shirt and boxer shorts was crouched on the ground in front of him, pawing through a box.

He turned. He held a small revolver in his hand – an old .38 special.

A shadow flew over Ed, reached the old man, and knocked his gun sideways just as he fired it. BANG!

Then the old man was on his back, the shadow now resolved into a man – a man with a yellow reflecting vest on. The SRT man – it was Anderson, the former Delta operator – put a forearm across the old man's throat. The .38 caliber slid away across the floor.

"I think this is the subject," Anderson said over his shoulder.

Ed stood. "All clear?" Ed said into his microphone. "Give me your all clears."

"All clear."

"All clear."

"All clear."

"Anybody hurt? Anybody down?"

"We've got two young guys trussed up downstairs," a voice said behind him. Ed turned and it was King. "They're down, but not hurt. Rodriguez corralled the women and kids and has them in the living room."

Ed glanced at the bed. It was an old rickety cot. The blankets were kicked all over the place. A pair of eye shades was on the floor. The old man had probably been asleep just a minute ago.

Anderson had zip-tied him and was in the process of putting a black canvas bag over his head.

"Mustafa Boudiaf?" Ed said.

The old man shook his head. "Who wants to know?"

Ed turned back to King. He looked right into King's body cam. He smiled pretty for the folks back home.

"You seeing this, Stone? Smooth as glass. Hard, fast, totally devastating. No chance for meaningful resistance. *That's* how you do the tumultuous entry."

CHAPTER SEVEN

11:45 a.m. Eastern Standard Time
McLean, Virginia

They met in a diner just across from the famous one-arch McDonald's. The place was ten minutes from headquarters. Luke was there early, nursing a coffee. He sat in a booth at a big bay window, half-watching CNN on the big TV mounted behind the serving counter.

Luke had just spent two hours with Mustafa Boudiaf. He was having trouble getting it out of his mind.

The one place in the SRT headquarters where smoking was allowed was the interrogation room. They had given Boudiaf coffee and cigarettes, and he had drunk and smoked the entire time. But that didn't soften him up any.

Boudiaf wanted a lawyer. Boudiaf wanted a phone call. Boudiaf wanted to know if he was under arrest. Boudiaf had apparently watched a lot of television.

"What do you know about the plane crash in Egypt?" Ed said.

The sight of a giant black man looming over him didn't seem to hold any terror for Boudiaf. He shook his head. "I don't know anything about a plane crash. I was asleep when you invaded my home."

"Where did all your furniture go?" Ed said.

Boudiaf shrugged. "I am very poor. That's America. I work all the time, but I have no money. I don't have any furniture. What you saw is all I have."

Luke nearly laughed. "What if I told you we know you sent all your furniture to Pennsylvania three days ago? That's a strange thing to do, isn't it? Send your furniture and all your belongings inland? Why would someone do that?"

Luke paused.

"Is that what you were doing?"

Boudiaf looked at him. "Who are you, please?"

"It doesn't matter who I am."

"It does because I will have your job."

Luke shook his head. "You're not the first person who has told me that."

"You must charge me with a crime or release me. Since I have committed no crime, there is nothing to charge me with. You are breaking your own laws."

Luke shrugged. "I know you're in a hurry because you have a plane to catch tomorrow night."

Boudiaf made no attempt to conceal it. "Yes, I do. I am going home."

"I thought this was your home."

"You're a very foolish man."

Suddenly, Ed hit the jackpot. "You're going to miss your plane," he said quietly, and in a matter-of-fact tone.

That idea set Boudiaf off. "You must release me!" he shouted. "You're dead men, do you understand? You're all dead men!" Then he stopped and took a deep breath, seeming to realize what he had just done.

"Why are we dead men?"

Boudiaf shook his head. "I don't know."

"How are we going to die?"

"I don't know that, either."

Boudiaf's shoulders slumped, and his body language changed. A moment before, he had been wired, sitting tall, ready to resist. Now he settled into his chair, seeming to resign himself to a terrible fate.

“I must get a message to my family.”

Ed nodded. “We will send it. That I can promise you.”

“If you are being honest, then give them this message. If I am not released, they must get on the plane without me, and leave me behind.”

Boudiaf wanted his family to get out. Before *what* happened?

Now, in the diner, the car pulled up. It was a black Lincoln Navigator SUV with smoked windows, moving slowly and carefully on the snow-slicked streets. Sometimes it was easy for Luke to forget that Gunner’s maternal grandmother was a descendent of the man who had invented floor varnish in the mid-1800s; his product was still in use more than 150 years later. Of course, the original fortune had been diluted over succeeding generations, but Gunner’s grandparents had a lot of money.

Gunner attended private school and lived in a large stone mansion at the end of a long driveway. A driver took him anywhere he wanted to go. He wasn’t breathing the rarified air of the billionaire elite like Susan’s girls, but...

It was good. Luke wanted only the best for Gunner, things he would never have if Luke’s good civil servant’s salary was paying the way. And as much as Luke wanted to see him every day, it was good that Gunner lived in a place where people were always home. He couldn’t have that with his father – Luke was away from home a lot.

He watched as the boy stepped out of the car, slammed the door, and without a backward glance picked his way through the snow toward the front door of the diner. He wore a long coat of gray wool, heavy boots, and a red scarf wrapped around his throat. He was tall and thin. He reminded Luke of a young English gentleman.

Luke smiled. The kid was trying on personas. It’s what kids did.

Gunner came in, pausing in the foyer to stomp snow and slush off his boots. He moved through the aisle with easy grace and slid into the booth, across the table from Luke. His eyes were big and blue and he was grinning.

“Hi, Dad,” he said.

“Hi, Gunner. What’s the smile about?”

Gunner shrugged. “No school today. What’s your smile about?”

Luke shrugged. “Having a surprise meal with my favorite person.”

The waitress came over, a woman of about forty-five. “This is who you were waiting on?”

Luke nodded.

She put a hand on the side of her face, as if to block Gunner from hearing what she said. “He’s good-looking.”

Now everyone was smiling. “Maybe a little young, though,” Luke said.

She winked at Gunner. “That’s okay. I can wait. You guys ready to order?”

They ordered eggs, pancakes, sausages, the works. Gunner had orange juice. Luke stuck with a bottomless cup of coffee. Then they settled in. Luke was mindful of the time, but on the other hand, he had been up and working since before five a.m., and what was more important than time with his son?

“I saw that plane crash on the news this morning,” Gunner said without preamble. “An American congressman got killed.”

Luke nodded. “Yeah. That’s tough.”

“Are you going there?”

“Egypt?” Luke said.

Gunner shrugged. “I don’t know. Wherever the plane crash was.”

“It was in Egypt,” Luke said. “I don’t know if I’ll go there. No one has asked me to. And there isn’t necessarily any reason for me to go.” Luke could hear the evasiveness in his own answer. “They’re still investigating the reason for it.”

Gunner was shaking his head. “The show I saw said it was probably a terrorist attack. The host said he was ninety-nine percent sure.”

Luke smiled again. This smile was a little more rueful than before. “Well, if a TV host says he’s ninety-nine percent sure of something, then it must be true.”

“Would you consider not going, if I asked you?”

Luke nodded. “I would consider it. But I would also ask you to realize that I have a job to do.”

“Dad, what if I told you I wanted to join the military?”

That’s the way it was this kid. He had a sharp mind, and it made sharp turns. It was hard to know sometimes what was around the next corner.

“Well, I would tell you that if you still feel that way five years from now, then I would help you explore your options. But I would also want to explore your motivations. There are easier ways to get in shape. And if you think you want to do it because it looks like fun, I can tell you right now that it isn’t. The idea of fun will go right out the window the first time a drill sergeant is screaming at you and breathing down your neck during a ten-mile run before breakfast, or the first time you’re face down in the cold mud while they’re lobbing live rounds over your head. And the first time actual bad guys are trying to kill you, using innovative and surprising methods that were never discussed during your training? That will not be fun.”

Gunner shook his head again. On his face was the ghost of a smile. “I would just do it so you can worry about me the way I worry about you.”

Game. Set. Match.

Luke was temporarily without any kind of answer. The kid could do that to you.

“Anyway, here’s some good news,” Gunner said, instantly changing the subject. He could do that, too – get you on the ropes, then suddenly let you go again. He was a little bit like a cat playing with a mouse.

“Let me have it,” Luke said.

“You know how Nana and Grandpa love their skiing. Well, we’re going out to their condo in Colorado for a few days. So that will be nice. I like skiing.”

Luke nodded. He couldn’t imagine how much skiing Rebecca’s parents still managed to do at this point, but so be it. “When are you leaving?”

“Tonight,” Gunner said. “So I’m going to miss another day of school. You know how they are. They think school is for poor kids.”

Luke smiled. Gunner had razor-sharp insights. It was like he could cut into people’s minds and crawl around inside. Luke thought back to Boudiaf, trying desperately to get his own family out of town. Luke’s family – one person – happened to be leaving anyway. That was a very good thing. Whatever was happening, at least Gunner would be nowhere near it.

Across the way, Susan’s face appeared on the TV screen. The camera panned backward, taking in her full body, standing at the podium. She was still wearing the blue suit from this morning. In his mind’s eye, Luke pictured her jumping out of bed nude, in the pre-dawn darkness, to face another trying day. He sighed.

On the screen, Susan looked as beautiful as ever, perhaps less formal than in the past. Less Presidential? A person might say that. The camera pulled back even further, showing the crowded press room at the White House.

Luke stared hard at the room. Feelings washed over him, and it was important not to look away. That was the room where Luke had taken a bullet for Susan, and where Marybeth Horning has been assassinated. For an instant, Luke saw Horning’s head come apart, and his side began to itch where the bullet had penetrated.

Susan was about to speak.

Gunner’s eyes darted back and forth between the TV and Luke’s face.

“Do you love Susan?” he said.

“That’s a difficult question to answer,” Luke said. “We’re both adults. We’ve both had a lot of ups and downs. We both have demanding jobs – she probably has the most demanding job in the entire world.”

“Do you love her the way you loved Mom?”

Luke looked at Gunner then. He shook his head slowly. “I will never love anyone the way I loved your mom. Except for you. I love you just as much.”

He nodded at the truth of what he had just said. Whatever he and Susan had, and it was great, and it was important – it wasn’t the same as what he and Becca once had. He imagined that Susan could say something similar about herself and Pierre. Leave it to a thirteen-year-old boy to clarify all that for him.

On the TV screen, Susan stepped to the microphones.

“Good afternoon,” she said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

12:15 p.m. Eastern Standard Time
The Press Briefing Room
The White House, Washington, DC

“Good afternoon,” Susan said. “I don’t have a lot of information for you, so I’m going to keep my remarks brief.”

She stood at the podium. She looked out at about fifty reporters and about as many cameras and microphones, which she knew would bring her face and her words to nearly every corner of the globe. She had long ago stopped worrying about that.

For a brief moment, she let her gaze wander the room. It was a bleak winter morning. People did not look like they wanted to be here. Neither did she. The news was bad, and she didn’t want to be the one to deliver it. But the situation demanded leadership, and so...

“As you all know, about four a.m. our time, and eleven a.m. local time, a chartered plane crashed on its approach to the Sharm El Sheikh airport in the Sinai Peninsula, Egypt. On board were United States Congressman Jack Butterfield of Texas, as well as other close friends of ours, including Sir Marshall Dennis of the United Kingdom, and the Egyptian Consul-General to London, Ahmet Anwar. A total of eighty-three people died on board that plane, including twenty-seven Americans, as well as people from ten other countries. There were no survivors.”

Susan paused. Cameras whirled and clicked in the quiet.

“Video surveillance footage from the airport, as well as our own satellite data, have now confirmed what many of us suspected all along – the plane was brought down by a surface-to-air missile fired from the surrounding mountains. We condemn in no uncertain terms this cowardly attack on innocent people, and we stand united with the international community in our resolve to defeat the agents of terror.”

Already the reporters were gabbling and muttering, readying themselves to shout questions at her. This, even though they had been informed beforehand that she was taking no questions.

“We offer our sincere condolences to the families of the victims. Our thoughts and prayers are with you.”

Susan’s breath caught in her throat. For a moment, she surprised herself by fighting back tears. She thought she had gotten past this sort of thing, that she had become so hardened by tragedy, it didn’t reach her emotions anymore. But she was wrong. The crash of that plane, the loss experienced by the families of those on board, triggered something in her – the losses of so many people these past several years, her own losses, and her fears of more.

A sudden image came to her – that of her daughter Michaela, held by gunmen, tied up and secured to a catwalk nearly fifty stories above Los Angeles. She shook that away. It was replaced by the briefest, most fleeting image of an explosion underground, a big steel door blowing outward, and flames engulfing the big Secret Service man walking just in front of her – the Mount Weather disaster.

Everyone in the room was staring at her now.

She stopped following the prepared speech and wandered off script. “In a very real sense, we don’t just stand with you, we are you. This isn’t to minimize anyone’s personal pain, but we’ve all been through the wringer in recent years. We’ve lost family, we’ve lost friends – I’ve lost some of my very best friends on Earth – and we’ve lost the feeling of a secure and sane world that we once had. But we’re going to get that feeling back, and we’re going to pass it on to our kids and grandkids. These terrorist atrocities are going to stop!”

Despite themselves, some of the reporters and TV crew people began to clap.

“We do not yet know who the perpetrators of this attack were. But I promise everyone in this room, and everyone around the world, that we will find out, and when we do, we will act swiftly to bring them to justice. I also reiterate to you that we are working hard, together with our many allies and friends, to create a world where incidents like this do not happen.”

There was near-silence now. She was beginning to repeat herself. That’s what you get for veering away from the prepared remarks.

A heavyset, bearded man in the front row raised a meaty hand. Susan did not acknowledge it, but he spoke anyway. “When you say ‘bring them to justice,’” he said, “do you mean a court of law?”

Susan knew the reporter well, but at the moment, his name escaped her. It was that type of day. “When we know more, you will know more,” she said.

A flood of questions came. Everyone was talking at once, and Susan could barely differentiate one word from the next. Her Secret Service detail began to hustle her from the stage. She leaned into the microphone one last time.

“Thank you,” she said.

She moved through the heavy green door to stage right, big bodies flanking her on every side. Kat Lopez stood in the corridor, holding a clipboard. Their eyes met.

Susan shook her head. “I thought that went rather well,” she said.

CHAPTER NINE

7:31 p.m. West Africa Time (1:31 p.m. Eastern Standard Time)
Millennium Koko Gentlemen's Club
Lagos, Nigeria

"Right on time, just like I said."

Crazy Eddie sat with three of his men at a round table in a plush VIP section on the second story of the upscale club. Through a glass partition, he could watch the action down on the floor. It never stopped. Though it was just early evening, there were three girls on stage, all nude except for high-heeled shoes, all working the poles.

Good, strong girls, he knew them to be. Acrobats. Athletes. Eddie had been living here at the club in the overnight suites for months, and he believed he had sampled just about every girl who worked in the place. Black girls from here in Nigeria and neighboring countries, white girls from Russia and Eastern Europe, Asian girls from Cambodia and Thailand – Eddie loved them all.

Lights flashed in purple, soft blue, and orange. Heavy bass pumped, but Eddie felt it more than heard it – the glass wall did a good job of canceling the sound. Down below, another group of men had just entered the club – half a dozen men wearing white and blue kaftans with matching pants, and kufis on their heads. They all wore heavy beards, almost comically so, as if the beards were fakes glued to their faces.

They were speaking with the two large bouncers at the door, but everything seemed to be in order. Eddie had already paid their way in – no need for a three-thousand-naira entry fee to be a deal breaker, or to result in a sudden massacre.

"Ready, boys?" Eddie said. "Let's be ready to welcome our guests. Watch their clothes. Watch for guns."

Eddie raised a hand and snapped his fingers, gesturing for the two waiters standing by the door to bring the champagne out. It was Eddie's way of being funny. His guests were Salafi Muslims and would never dream of drinking alcohol. Indeed, they would probably enjoy murdering people who did.

And the naked girls? Dancing? That brought the whole thing to another level. Just holding this meeting here at the club was another way of being funny. Eddie being Eddie, was what some people called it.

The visitors were coming up the red carpeted stairs now and Eddie could see that two of them were among the most wanted men in Nigeria – wanted dead or alive. Preferably dead. The others were big men, bodyguards.

One of the bodyguards slid open the glass partition door and the group came in. Eddie rose from his seat at the table, as did his men. From the corner of his eye, he saw a couple of his boys with itchy fingers – they were anxious, ready to reach inside their jackets and pull their guns.

"Steady," he said. "This is a friendly visit."

The leader of the men came straight to Eddie. He was short and thin, with a long, thick beard that was showing streaks of gray. His skin was deep black and the skin of his face was lined with creases and furrows. This man had spent a lot of his time in the great Sahel, the sun beating down on him.

"Yisrael Abdul Salaam," Eddie said, extending his arms outward. "Welcome to my home."

"*As-Salaam-Alaikum*," the man said.

Eddie shook his head and grinned. "Whatever you say, man."

"Edward," the smaller man said, "I've known you since you were a boy, and you've always been trouble. But this..." He gestured at their surroundings. He eyes were sharp and he was not smiling.

“This is the devil’s work. I should kill you for causing me to walk through a den of immorality such as this.”

Now Eddie stopped smiling. The last thing he wanted was a lecture from a religious fanatic. “The world is changing,” he said. “This is the new Nigeria. Fast money, fast life, beautiful places, beautiful women. You and your god are relics of the past. And the clock is ticking.”

Yisrael’s eyes never wavered. “Before you die, may Allah cause your dirty tongue to be severed from your mouth.”

Now that the pleasantries were out of the way, Eddie gestured at the table. “Shall we sit and talk for a moment?”

Yisrael nodded. He sat at the table and Eddie sat across from him. The rest of the men stood. Eddie didn’t even bother to offer Yisrael a flute of champagne. He was no longer in a funny mood. He glanced around. The men were tense. Could a five-minute meeting take place without a gunfight? That was the major concern. Yisrael, of course, was no suicide bomber. He was too important for that.

“I understand you stole something today,” he said.

Eddie shook his head. “I found something.”

“And you don’t even know what it is.”

That was true. There was no sense denying it. “And you do?”

Yisrael nodded. “Of course. It belongs to friends of ours.”

Now Eddie did smile, a ghost of a grin. “Oh? My understanding was you no longer had friends.”

Yisrael slammed his small fist on the table. All around them, the startled gunmen jumped. And twitched. But did not pull their guns.

“Why did you invite me here?” Yisrael said.

“To personally offer you this thing that I found. Because I’m sentimental and you are my countryman and my tribal brother, after all. But if you don’t want it, I’m sure I can strike a deal with these friends of yours.”

“These friends of mine will put your head on a pike.”

Eddie nodded slowly. “Yeah. I see that. But do you want this thing or not?”

Yisrael’s hard, deep-set eyes stared at him. They seemed to become everything. The soft pastel colors of the club, the flashing lights, the thumping bass, even the gunmen standing nearby – all of it seemed to drop away.

“I do. Very much.”

“It will cost you a million dollars in cash,” Eddie said. “Can you manage that amount? I know your friends can do that and much more. It is an expensive item. I lost two friends today acquiring it.”

Yisrael smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “A pity. They died for money.”

“Better than your men,” Eddie said. “Who die for a fairy tale.”

Suddenly, a tall man in a white kaftan had a gun in his hand. He was a broad man, very dark, with very big hands. He pointed the gun directly at Eddie’s head.

“Allah forbids this talk!” he shouted, and for an instant Eddie thought he might really pull the trigger. *Words*. The man would kill and die for mere words. Well, if it happened, at least it would be... abrupt.

But a second later, all of Eddie’s men had their guns out. The barrel of one was an inch from Yisrael’s scalp. And Yisrael’s men had their guns out. Guns pointed everywhere in the room, a forest of guns. That’s what Eddie got for even trying to talk to these people.

“Can you pay the money or not?” he said.

Yisrael sat back and smiled. Now he seemed relaxed. Perhaps he couldn’t relax unless murder was in the air. “I think we are not so poorly off as you suppose. Three hundred and fifty million naira, and you get to keep your head for the time being. It sounds like a wonderful deal for you. You would not enjoy meeting my friends.”

Eddie shook his head. “Dollars,” he said. “A million American dollars.” He smiled again, but it didn’t feel authentic. People like Yisrael could really ruin a good mood.

“I’m a citizen of the world. What good are naira to a man like me?”

CHAPTER TEN

2:05 p.m. Eastern Standard Time
The Oval Office
The White House, Washington, DC

"I can't believe we're about to take this meeting," Susan said.

She didn't say what she thought inside: *I want to wring Stone's neck.*

Instead, she looked at Kat Lopez, who was perched in a high-backed chair across the Oval Office sitting area from her. Kat looked fresh and relaxed. Like Kurt Kimball, Kat was an Energizer bunny – she just kept going and going and going.

"Give me the details," Susan said.

"ARTS," Kat said. "A Return To Sanity. More than thirty thousand members across the United States, and growing. Their headquarters are here in Washington, and they have a committed pool of donors across the United States, especially among wealthy people in the Bible Belt. They were founded and originally funded by Midwest corn magnate Nathan Davis. As a lobbying organization they are growing in influence, especially among conservatives in Congress. They raised and spent over fifteen million dollars in the last fiscal year, not counting another five to ten million raised by their nonprofit arm, the American Family Education Foundation."

"And Lucy?" Susan said.

"Lucy Pilgrim," Kat said without hesitating. "Current president of ARTS. Sixty-seven years old. Lucy was a hippie and a political activist from her earliest days – birth control, environmentalism, anti-nukes. In the mid-1970s, she and a group of her followers used to go topless in Central Park every Sunday for three straight summers. If men could do it, so could women."

Kat paused.

"What's good for the gander..." she said.

"Right," Susan said, almost laughing. "Is good for the goose. That was clever. Do you even know about that, or is it just on your cheat sheet there?"

Kat shrugged. "I learned all about Lucy while I was in college. Women's studies. She came and spoke one time."

Susan shook her head. "She's something else."

Kat raised a hand. "At some point, Lucy must have gotten religion. Or maybe it was always there, and she wasn't eager to talk about it. In any case, she's been president of ARTS for eight years. There is some talk that she is going to step down in the near future. She was diagnosed with an aggressive form of Parkinson's disease two years ago. It hasn't seemed to slow her down any, but you should realize that we may be dealing with a lame duck."

Susan leveled her sternest gaze at Kat. "We're not going to deal at all, Kat. What deal are we going to make? This is an organization that wants American women to stay home and have more children, am I right? Because of some misguided idea about keeping immigrants out?"

Kat nodded. "I doubt they'd put it that way, but yes, more or less."

Susan shrugged. "We're taking this meeting as a favor to the Vice President and nothing more. Let's get it over with so we can get on with the rest of our day."

Kat went over to the large closed-circuit TV monitor hanging on the wall and turned it on. It was an eyesore, but it made a convenient way to communicate with her Vice President, Stephen Lief. It had been there since his inauguration more than a month ago. But since then, Susan had begun to think she and Stephen weren't going to be doing all that much communicating after all. Only a short time in office, and he had immediately begun to overstep his bounds.

Lief's bespectacled face appeared on the giant screen, sitting in the upstairs study at the Naval Observatory. *Susan's study*. Arrgh. That irritated her. The study was her favorite room in the best home she had ever had. He sat there like he owned the place.

Stone!

She could blame Luke Stone for Stephen Lief. Or she could blame herself for going along with it. Or she could blame human biology, and the love endorphins released by physical intimacy – they made your brain lose its reasoning ability.

Susan had known Stephen a long time. In her Senate days, he was the loyal opposition across the aisle from her, a moderate conservative, unremarkable – pig-headed but not deranged. And he was a nice man.

But he was also the wrong party, and she had taken a lot of heated criticism from liberal quarters for that. He was landed aristocracy, old money – a Mayflower person, the closest thing that America had to nobility. At one time, he had seemed to think that becoming President was his birthright. Not Susan's type; entitled aristocrats tended to lack the common touch that helped you connect with the people you were supposedly there to serve.

It was a measure of how deeply Luke Stone had gotten inside her skin that she considered Stephen Lief at all. He was Stone's idea. She could remember the exact moment Stone brought it up to her. They were lying together in her big Presidential bed. She had been pondering out loud about possible Veep candidates, and then Stone said:

"Why not Stephen Lief?"

She had almost laughed. "Stone! Stephen Lief? Come on."

"No, I mean it," he said.

He was lying on his side. His nude body was thin but rock hard, chiseled, and covered with scars.

"You're beautiful, Stone. But maybe you better let me do the thinking. You can just recline there, looking pretty."

"I interviewed him at his farm down in Florida," Stone said. "I was asking him what he knew about Jefferson Monroe and election fraud. He came clean to me very quickly. And he's good with horses. Gentle. That has to count for something."

"I'll keep that in mind," Susan said. "The next time I'm looking for a ranch hand."

But she had chosen him after all. There was something about conservatives and liberals coming together and rebuilding trust in government. There was something about Stephen being able to work magic in Congress, and finally getting an infrastructure bill passed – something the country needed. But so far the reality of Stephen Lief had been altogether less impressive than the fantasy.

An idea for Stephen Douglas Lief began to take shape in Susan's mind. He was going to do a month or so traveling the western United States on a chili-tasting tour. He could start as far east as Ohio, sample some world-famous Cincinnati chili, best when smothering hot dogs to death, then move south and west to Louisiana, Texas, Arizona, and southern California.

It was hardly a punishment assignment – these were pleasant places to be in winter. What's more, he would get to develop an iron stomach, and Susan was sure that a man like Lief, a graduate of stuffy East Coast schools like Choate, Princeton, and Yale, would love to get out on the road and meet some regular folks for a change. Susan made a mental note of it – Kat would assign someone to start scheduling this important outreach tour as soon as this conversation was over.

Sitting next to Lief on the TV screen was Lucy Pilgrim. She looked frail and older than her years – a far cry from the young beauty of her street activist days. In her mind's eye, Susan caught a black-and-white newspaper image of a young Lucy shouting into a bullhorn at some rally or another – young, energetic, very pretty with long straight hair hanging down to her waist, in faded skintight blue jeans and a flower shirt. Time caught up with everybody sooner or later.

"Hi, Susan," Stephen Lief said. "I want to thank you for taking this meeting."

Susan shrugged. “Of course. I’m sure you both understand that it’s a difficult day and I’ll need to – ”

Lief cut her off. “Of course we understand. Jack Butterfield was a friend of mine. I’m going to Texas in the morning, to be there when the body arrives.”

“*You should stay for the chili,*” Susan almost said, but didn’t.

Instead, she looked directly at Lucy Pilgrim. “Hi, Lucy, how are you?”

“Susan, nice to see you. Thanks for chatting with me.”

“Well, you’ve had a quite a champion there in the former Senator from Florida. He wouldn’t take no for an answer, as I understand it.”

“Stephen and I go way back.”

Susan just stared at the screen. She glanced at Kat, thought about introducing her, then thought better of it. Why prolong this with niceties?

“Lucy, what can I help you with? I’m the President of the United States, as I think you probably know. I don’t make legislation. There’s really no sense in lobbying me.”

Lucy shook her head. As she did so, Susan could see the effect that slight movement had on the woman’s body. It seemed like her entire frame followed along with the head shake, then continued for another second or more. The effect was subtle, but noticeable. And that was almost certainly while on medications that worked to control the tremors.

Susan sighed. Life. It went like that. Money was very, very nice to have, but health was true wealth.

“Susan, I just want to share with you what we’re doing, and see if there’s any point of intersection where we may be able to benefit each other.”

“Lucy, you may or may not realize that I’m in the midst of an international crisis right now.”

Lucy nodded. “And I think you’re handling it beautifully. I watched your remarks on the TV news a little while ago. I was struck as always by your ability to inject powerful emotions into your connection with the people. But like all crises, this one will pass. And our domestic problems will still be there. International crises don’t make domestic problems go away.”

“Or vice versa,” Stephen Lief offered, somewhat awkwardly.

“Exactly,” Lucy said.

Susan almost smiled. This could very nearly be a skit on a late night comedy show.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s hear it.”

Lucy launched into it.

“Susan, times have changed since when you, and especially I, were young women. You may not think about this on a daily basis because it doesn’t seem pressing to you, but we are sitting on a demographic and cultural time bomb. In each successive generation, white women of what we’ll call child-bearing age continue to delay the decision to have children. Women of the so-called Generation X represented a radical break with the past – one out of every six chose not to have children at all. This would be a remarkable development in itself, if it had been temporary. But so-called Millennial women are on pace to double that figure, and are even delaying marriage itself. It gets worse the further down we go. Young girls in high school, when polled about their desire to have children, place it very low on their list of priorities. Marriage is at the bottom of that list.”

Susan stared into the TV screen.

“We are not replacing ourselves, Susan. A society dwindles and dies when it doesn’t replace itself. Much more preferable is if a society continues to grow. A growing economy needs people to feed it. And continued leadership in all areas needs – ”

Susan held up a hand. “Correct me if I’m wrong, Lucy. But as far as I can tell, our population grows in leaps and bounds each year. We’ve got well more than three hundred twenty million people, projected to reach three hundred fifty million by...” Susan trailed off for a moment. “Kat, do you happen to have the numbers on that?”

Kat shook her head. “No, not off the top of my head, but I’m sure we can get them.”

Lucy was shaking her head sadly. “Immigrants,” she said. “And the children of immigrants. The only reason this country is still growing is because we are importing people from elsewhere. It is not a good way to grow a population. The Roman Empire found that out, much to their dismay.”

Susan stared blankly at the screen. She searched for a response, and didn’t find one. She didn’t enjoy being left speechless.

“I’m pretty sure we’ve always done it this way,” Susan said, finding her voice. She wasn’t sure where this was heading, but she already suspected that she didn’t like it. “Even the *Mayflower* came from elsewhere, as I recall it. You remember the Statue of Liberty, don’t you? *Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free...* Does any of that ring a bell with you?”

Lucy was shaking her head again, emphatically this time, setting off a chain reaction throughout her thin body that Susan could not look away from.

“We’re not against immigrants, Susan, if that’s what you’re worried about. What we’re against is cultural dislocation. We’re against losing sight of what it means to be an American. We want to preserve that. And so we feel that our job is to encourage young American women to have more children, and to help create an environment conducive for them to do so.”

“I think young women might be more interested in exploring the other options available to them right now,” Susan said. “I think that, at the moment, options for women may be the best they’ve ever been.”

Now Lucy raised a hand. “There’s a grain of truth to that,” she said. “But only a grain. Modern women are getting caught up in the rat race, and it’s a trap. Not everyone gets to win that race, Susan. Not every woman gets to be a high-priced fashion model, a Senator, and then President of the United States. Not everyone marries one of the richest men on Earth.”

Lucy stared into the screen. Next to her, Stephen Lief’s owl eyes went deer-in-the-headlights wide. Suddenly, he looked like this meeting was not such a hot idea, like he might even prefer to be somewhere else.

He needn’t have worried. The day after meeting his friend’s corpse in Texas, he was going to be in Cincinnati, surrounded by TV cameras and well-wishers, with a bib around his neck, eating hot beef and tomato gruel off the top of a frankfurter.

“Women can easily waste their youth chasing a mirage, when they could have spent that time getting married, creating a home, and building a family. You and I can help them by developing new incentives like tax credits for in-home child care, expansion of food programs to help with grocery bills, even one-time federal payments per childbirth.”

Lucy was putting forward a strange mix of right wing and left wing ideas. She wanted white women to get married and have more babies, and she wanted the federal government to pay for it. Susan wondered if in Lucy’s mind, that sort of largesse would be extended to women of color.

Susan was on the verge of asking that question, but shook her head instead. “I’m not the Appropriations Committee, Lucy. I don’t make the budget, I just sign it. You know how these things are done.”

“If you championed this cause, you don’t think people would sit up and take notice?”

Susan half-nodded. If she suddenly began to champion the cause of women staying home, pumping out babies, and making dinner for their husbands, people would definitely notice. Mostly, this was because it would go against everything she had ever stood for. It was time to cut this off.

Susan had never become accustomed to lobbyists and their over-the-top pitches during her time in the Senate. When she was Vice President, she was widely seen as powerless, so the lobbyists left her alone. And as President, she mostly kept them at arm’s length. If she ever needed a reminder why, this conversation would serve.

“Lucy, I can promise you we’re going to do everything we can.”

Lucy was an old hand at this. She must have caught the tone in Susan's voice. "I hope so, Susan. I hope so. Thank you for listening. I'd love to buy you lunch one day."

Susan smiled. "I'd love it, too. I'm a big admirer of yours. I always have been. We'll do it just as soon as I'm out of office."

Lucy nodded. "Okay."

Kat went to the monitor and turned the device off. She let out a long exhale and looked at Susan. She raised her eyebrows. The rest of her dark, pretty face was carefully neutral. She pursed her lips, but didn't crack a smile.

"I got a text from Kurt during that. People are assembling in the Situation Room in half an hour. He needs you there. There's been new intelligence about the plane crash."

The air went out of Susan like a tire with a knife plunged into its side. "Okay. But before I do that, we need to talk about Stephen Lief's schedule for the next few weeks. I've got something important I need him to do."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

2:55 p.m. Eastern Standard Time

The Situation Room

The White House, Washington, DC

The gathering was much smaller this time.

Haley Lawrence, the Secretary of Defense, was there, with two aides seated behind him. General Frank Loomis of JSOC was there again. Luke Stone was there, this time sitting in a leather chair at the conference table. Half a dozen others were there, along with a few aides and assistants sitting along the walls behind them.

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