

PRIMARY TARGET

THE FORGING OF LUKE STONE--BOOK 1

JACK MARS



The Forging of Luke Stone

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Primary Target

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2018

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Primary Target / Д. Марс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
2018 — (The Forging of Luke Stone)

ISBN 978-1-64-029471-4

“One of the best thrillers I have read this year.” --Books and Movie Reviews (re Any Means Necessary) In the much-anticipated debut of a new series by #1 bestseller Jack Mars, when elite Delta Force soldier Luke Stone, 29, joins a secretive government agency, he is dispatched on the mission of a lifetime: a whirlwind race across Europe and the Mid-East to save the President’s daughter before she is beheaded by terrorists. In PRIMARY TARGET (Book #1), we see the forging of one of the world’s toughest—and most lethal—soldiers: Luke Stone. A 29 year old veteran who has seen enough battle to last a lifetime, Luke is tapped by the Special Response Team, a secretive new FBI agency (led by his mentor Don Morris) to tackle the most high-stake terrorism operations in the world. Luke, still haunted by his wartime past and newly married to an expecting Becca, is dispatched on a mission to Iraq, with his new partner Ed Newsam, to bring in a rogue American contractor. But what begins as a routine mission mushrooms into something much, much bigger. When the President’s teenage daughter, kidnapped in Europe, is ransomed by terrorists, Luke may be the only one in the world who can save her before it is too late. PRIMARY TARGET is an un-putdownable military thriller, a wild action ride that will leave you turning pages late into the night. It marks the long-anticipated debut of a riveting new series by #1 bestseller Jack Mars, dubbed “one of the best thriller authors” out there. “Thriller writing at its best.” --Midwest Book Review (re Any Means Necessary) Also available is Jack Mars’ #1 bestselling LUKE STONE THRILLER series (7 books), which begins with Any Means Necessary (Book #1), a free download with over 800 five star reviews!

ISBN 978-1-64-029471-4

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Jack Mars

Primary Target: The Forging of Luke Stone—Book #1 (an Action Thriller)

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). He is also the author of the new FORGING OF LUKE STONE prequel series, which begins with PRIMARY TARGET.

Jack loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.Jackmarsauthor.com to join the email list, receive a free book, receive free giveaways, connect on Facebook and Twitter, and stay in touch!

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AGENT ZERO (Book #1)

CHAPTER ONE

March 16, 2005

2:45 p.m. Afghanistan Time (5:15 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time)

Bagram Air Base

Parwan Province, Afghanistan

“Luke, you don’t have to do this,” Colonel Don Morris said.

Sergeant First Class Luke Stone stood at ease inside Don’s office. The office itself was inside a glorified corrugated metal Quonset hut, not far from where the new runway was going in.

The air base was a wonderland of constant sound—there were earth movers digging and paving, there were construction workers hammering together hundreds of plywood B-huts to replace the tents that troops stationed here had previously lived in, and if that wasn’t enough, there were Taliban rocket attacks from the surrounding mountains and suicide bombers on motorcycles blowing themselves up at the front gates.

Luke shrugged. His hair was longer than military guidance. He had a three-day growth of beard on his face. He wore a flight suit with no indication of rank on it.

“I’m just following orders, sir.”

Don shook his head. His own flattop haircut was black, shot through with gray and white. His face could have been carved from granite. Indeed, his entire body could have been. His blue eyes were deep-set and intense. The color of his hair and the lines on his face were the only signs that Don Morris had been alive on Earth for more than fifty-five years.

Don was packing the meager contents of his office into boxes. One of the legendary founders of Delta Force was retiring from the United States Army. He had been handpicked to launch and manage a small intelligence agency in Washington, DC, a semi-autonomous group within the FBI. Don was referring to it as a civilian Delta Force.

“Don’t you dare call me sir,” he said. “And if you’re following orders today, then follow this one: decline the mission.”

Luke smiled. “I’m afraid you’re no longer my commanding officer. Your orders don’t carry a lot of weight these days. Sir.”

Don’s eyes met Luke’s. He kept them there for a long moment.

“It’s a deathtrap, son. Two years after the fall of Baghdad, the war effort in Iraq is a total balls-up. Here in God’s country, we control to the perimeter of this base, the Kandahar airport, downtown Kabul, and not a whole lot else. Amnesty International and the Red Cross and the European press are all screaming about black sites and torture prisons, including right here, three hundred yards from where we’re standing. The brass just want to change the narrative. They need a win in capital letters. And Heath wants a feather in his cap. That’s all he ever wants. None of that is worth dying over.”

“Lieutenant Colonel Heath has decided to lead the raid personally,” Luke said. “I was informed less than an hour ago.”

Don’s shoulders slumped. Then he nodded.

“No surprise there,” he said. “You know what we used to call Heath? Captain Ahab. He gets fixated on something, some whale of a thing, and he will chase it to the bottom of the sea. And he’ll be happy to take all his men with him.”

Don paused. He sighed.

“Listen, Stone, you have nothing to prove to me, or to anyone. You’ve earned a free pass. You can decline this mission. Hell, in a couple of months, you could leave the Army if you want and come join me in DC. I’d like that.”

Now Luke nearly laughed. “Don, not everybody around here is middle-aged. I’m thirty-one years old. I don’t think a suit and tie, and lunch at my desk, is quite my speed just yet.”

Don held a framed photograph in his hands. It hovered above an open box. He stared down at it. Luke knew the photo well. It was a faded color snapshot of four shirtless young men, Green Berets, mugging for the camera before a mission in Vietnam. Don was the only one of those men who was still alive.

“Me neither,” Don said.

He looked at Luke again.

“Don’t die out there tonight.”

“I don’t plan to.”

Don glanced at the photo again. “No one ever does,” he said.

For a moment, he stared out the window at the snowcapped peaks of the Hindu Kush rising all around them. He shook his head. His broad chest rose and fell. “Man, I’m going to miss this place.”

* * *

“Gentlemen, this mission is suicide,” the man at the front of the room said. “And that’s why they send men like us.”

Luke sat in a folding chair in the drab cinderblock briefing room, twenty-two other men sitting in the chairs around him. They were all Delta Force operators, the best of the best. And the mission, as Luke understood it, was difficult—but not necessarily suicide.

The man giving this final briefing was Lieutenant Colonel Morgan Heath, as hands-on and gung-ho a commander as there was. Not yet forty years old, it was clear that Delta was not the end of the line for Heath. He had rocketed up to his current rank, and his ambitions seemed to point toward a higher profile. Politics, maybe a book deal, maybe a stint on TV as a military expert.

Heath was handsome, very fit, and over-the-top eager. That wasn’t unusual for a Delta operator. But he also talked a lot. And that wasn’t Delta at all.

Luke had watched him a week earlier, giving an interview to a reporter and a photographer from *Rolling Stone* magazine, and walking the guys through the advanced stealth and navigational capabilities of an MH-53J helicopter—not necessarily classified information, but definitely not the kind of thing you want to share with everyone.

Stone almost called him on it. But didn’t.

He didn’t, not because Heath outranked him—that didn’t matter in Delta, or shouldn’t—but because he could imagine ahead of time Heath’s response: “You think the Taliban read American pop magazines, Sergeant?”

Now, Heath’s presentation was up-to-the-minute technology for ten years earlier, PowerPoint on a white backdrop. A young man in a turban and with a dark beard appeared on the screen.

“You all know your man,” Heath said. “Abu Mustafa Faraj al-Jihadi was born sometime around 1970 among a tribe of nomads in eastern Afghanistan or the tribal regions of western Pakistan. He probably had no formal education to speak of, and his family probably crisscrossed the border like it wasn’t even there. Al Qaeda runs in his veins. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, by all accounts he joined the resistance as a child soldier, possibly as young as eight or nine years old. All this time later, decades of nonstop war, and somehow he’s still breathing. Heck, he’s still rocking and rolling. We believe he’s responsible for organizing at least two dozen major terror attacks, including last October’s suicide attacks in Mumbai, and the bombing of the USS *Sarasota* at Port of Aden, in which seventeen American sailors died.”

Heath paused for effect. He eyed everyone in the room.

“This guy is bad news. Getting him will be the next best thing to taking down Osama bin Laden. You guys want to be heroes? This is your night.”

Heath clicked a button in his hand. The photo on the screen changed. Now it was a split image—on one side of the vertical border was an aerial shot of al-Jihadi’s compound just outside a small village; on the other side was a 3-D rendering of what was believed to be al-Jihadi’s house. The house was two stories, made of stone, and built against a steep hill—Luke knew it was possible that the back of the house emptied into a tunnel complex.

Heath launched into a description of how the mission would go. Two choppers, twelve men on each. The choppers would set down in a field just outside the walls of the compound, unload the men, then take off again and provide aerial support.

The twelve men of A-Team—Luke and Heath’s team—would breach the walls, enter the house, and assassinate al-Jihadi. If possible, they would carry the body out on a stretcher and return it to base. If not, they would photograph it for later identification. B-Team would hold the walls and the approach to the compound from the village.

The choppers would then touch down again and extract both teams. If for any reason the choppers could not land again, the two teams would make their way to an old abandoned American forward fire base on a rocky hillside less than half a mile outside the village. Extraction would take place there, or the teams would hold the former base until extraction could occur. Luke knew all this by heart. But he didn’t like the idea of a rendezvous at that old fire base.

“What if that fire base is compromised?” he said.

“Compromised in what way?” Heath said.

Luke shrugged. “I don’t know. You tell me. Booby-trapped. Staffed up by Taliban snipers. Used by shepherders as a place to gather their flock.”

Around the room, a few people laughed.

“Well,” Heath said, “our most recent satellite images show the place empty. If there are sheep up there, then there’ll be nice bedding and plenty to eat. Don’t worry, Sergeant Stone. This is going to be a precision decapitation strike. In and out, gone almost before they realize we’re there. We’re not going to need the old fire base.”

* * *

“*Madre de Dios*, Stone,” Robby Martinez said. “I got a bad feeling about this one, man. Look at that night out there. No moon, cold, howling winds. We’re going to catch some dust, for sure. We’re going to catch hell tonight. I know it.”

Martinez was small, slim, razor sharp. There was not a wasted ounce of meat on his body. When he worked out in shorts and no shirt, he looked like a drawing of the human anatomy, each muscle group carefully delineated.

Luke was checking and rechecking his pack and his weapons.

“You always got a bad feeling, Martinez,” Wayne Hendricks said. He was sitting next to Luke. “The way you talk, a man would think you never saw combat before.”

Hendricks was Luke’s best buddy in the military. He was a big, thick-bodied hunk from the redneck wilds of north central Florida who had grown up hunting boar with his dad. He was missing his right front tooth—punched out in a bar fight in Jacksonville when he was seventeen, and never replaced. He and Luke had almost nothing in common except football—Luke had been the quarterback on his varsity squad, Wayne had played tight end. Even so, they had clicked the minute they first discovered each other in the 75th Rangers.

It seemed like they did everything together.

Wayne’s wife was eight months pregnant. Luke’s wife, Rebecca, was seven months along. Wayne had a girl coming, and had asked Luke to be her godfather. Luke had a boy coming, and had asked Wayne to be the boy’s godfather. One night, while drunk at a bar outside Fort Bragg, Luke and Wayne had cut open their right palms with a serrated knife, and shaken hands.

Blood brothers.

Martinez shook his head. “You know where I been, Hendricks. You know what I’ve seen. I wasn’t talking to you, anyway.”

Luke glanced out the open bay door. Martinez was right. The night was cold and windy. Frigid dust blew across the pad as the choppers prepared for takeoff. Clouds skidded across the sky. It was going to be a bad night for flying.

All the same, Luke felt confident. They had what they needed to win this. The helicopters were MH-53J Pave Lows, the most advanced and most powerful transport choppers in the United States arsenal.

They had state-of-the-art terrain-following radar, which meant they could fly very low. They had infrared sensors so they could fly in bad weather, and they could reach a top speed of 165 miles per hour. They were armor plated, to shrug off all but the heaviest ordnance the enemy might have. And they were flown by the US Army 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, code name Nightstalkers, the Delta Force of helicopter pilots—probably the best chopper pilots in the world.

The raid was scheduled for a night with no moonlight so the helicopters could enter the operation area low to the ground and undetected. The choppers were going to use hilly terrain and nap-of-the-earth techniques to reach the compound without appearing on radar and alerting any unfriendlies—especially the Pakistani military and intelligence services, who were suspected to be cooperating with the Taliban in hiding the target.

With friends like the Pakistanis...

The low-slung buildings of the air base and the larger flight control tower squatted against the staggering backdrop of the snow-capped mountains. As Luke stared out the bay door, two fighter jets took off a quarter mile away, the scream of their engines nearly deafening. A moment later, the jets reached the sound barrier somewhere in the distance. The takeoffs were loud, but the sonic booms were muted by the wind at high altitude.

The chopper’s engine whined into life. The rotor blades began to turn, slowly at first, then with increasing speed. Luke glanced along the line. Ten men in jumpsuits and helmets, not including himself, were all compulsively checking and rechecking their gear. The twelfth, Lieutenant Colonel Heath, was leaning into the cockpit at the front of the chopper, talking to the pilots.

“I’m telling you, Stone,” Martinez said.

“I heard you the first time, Martinez.”

“Good luck don’t last forever, man. One fine day it runs out.”

“I don’t worry because it ain’t luck in my case,” Wayne said. “It’s skill.”

Martinez sneered at that.

“A big fat bastard like you? You’re lucky every time a bullet *doesn’t* hit you. You’re the biggest, slowest thing out here.”

Luke suppressed a laugh and went back to his gear. His weapons included an HK416 assault rifle and an MP5 for close quarter fighting. The guns were loaded and he had extra magazines stuffed in his pockets. He had a SIG P226 sidearm, four grenades, a cutting and breaching tool, and night vision goggles. This particular night vision device was the GPNVG-18, far more advanced and with a much better field of view than the standard night vision goggles offered to typical servicemen.

He was ready to rock.

Luke felt the chopper taking off. He glanced up. They were on the move. To their left, he saw the second helicopter, also leaving its pad.

“You guys are the luckiest men alive, as far as I’m concerned,” he said.

“Oh yeah?” Martinez said. “Why’s that?”

Luke shrugged and smiled. “You’re riding with me.”

* * *

The chopper flew low and fast.

The rocky hills buzzed by below them, maybe two hundred feet down, almost close enough to touch. Luke watched the inky darkness through the window. He guessed they were moving at over a hundred miles per hour.

The night was black, and they were flying without lights. He couldn't even see the second helicopter out there.

He blinked and saw Rebecca instead. She was something to behold. It wasn't so much the physical details of her face and body, which were indeed beautiful. It was the essence of her. In the years they'd been together, he had come to see past the physical. But time was passing so fast. The last time he had seen her—when was that, two months ago?—her pregnancy had just been beginning to show.

I need to get back there.

Luke glanced down—his MP5 was across his lap. For a split second, it almost seemed alive, like it might suddenly decide to start firing on its own. What was he doing with this thing? He had a child on the way.

“Gentlemen!” a voice shouted. Luke nearly jumped out of his skin. He looked up, and Heath stood in front of the group. “We are approaching target, ETA approximately ten minutes. I just got a report from base. The high winds have kicked up a bunch of dust. We're going to hit some weather between here and the target.”

“Terrific,” Martinez said. He looked at Luke, all the meaning in his eyes.

“What's that supposed to mean, Martinez?” Heath said.

“I love weather, sir!” Martinez shouted.

“Oh yeah?” Heath said. “Why's that?”

“It ramps the pucker factor up to twelve. Makes life more exciting.”

Heath nodded. “Good man. You want excitement? It looks like we might be landing in zero-zero conditions.”

Luke didn't like the sound of that. Zero-zero meant zero ceiling, zero visibility. The pilots would be forced to let the chopper's navigation system do the sighting for them. That was okay. What was worse was the dust. Here in Afghanistan it was so fine that it flowed almost like water. It could come through the tiniest cracks. It could get into gearboxes, and into weapons. Clouds of dust could cause brownouts, completely obscuring any unfriendly obstacles that might be waiting in the landing zone.

Dust storms stalked the nightmares of every airborne soldier in Afghanistan.

As if on cue, the chopper shuddered and got hit with a blast of sideways wind. And just like that, they were inside the dust storm. The sound outside the chopper changed—a moment ago the loud whirr of the rotors and the roar of the wind was all you could hear. Now the sound of the spitting dust hitting the outside of the chopper competed with the other two sounds. It sounded almost like rain.

“Call the dust!” Heath shouted.

Men were at the windows, peering outside at the boiling cloud.

“Dust at the tailwheel!” someone shouted.

“Dust at the cargo door!” Martinez said.

“Dust at the landing gear!”

“Dust at the cockpit door!”

Within seconds, the chopper was engulfed. Heath repeated each call out into his headset. They were flying blind now, the chopper pushing through a thick, dark sky.

Luke stared out at the sand hitting the windows. It was hard to believe they were still airborne.

Heath touched a hand to his helmet.

“Pirate 2, Pirate 2... yes, copy. Go ahead, Pirate 2.”

Heath had radio contact with all aspects of the mission inside his helmet. Apparently, the second helicopter was calling him about the storm.

He listened.

“Negative on return to base, Pirate 2. Continue as planned.”

Martinez’s eyes met Luke’s again. He shook his head. The chopper bucked and swayed. Luke looked down the line of men. These were hardened fighters, but not one of them looked eager to continue this mission.

“Negative on set-down, Pirate 2. We need you on this...”

Heath stopped and listened again.

“Mayday? Already?”

He waited. Now he looked at Luke. His eyes were narrow and hard. He didn’t seem frightened. He seemed frustrated.

“I lost them. That’s our support. Can any of you guys see them out there?”

Martinez looked out the window. He grunted. It wasn’t even night anymore. There was nothing to see out there but brown dust.

“Pirate 2, Pirate 2, can you read me?” Heath said.

He waited a beat.

“Come in, Pirate 2. Pirate 2, Pirate 2.”

Heath paused. Now he listened.

“Pirate 2, status report. Status...”

He shook his head and looked at Luke again.

“They crashed.”

He listened again. “Minor injuries only. Helicopter disabled. Engines dead.”

Suddenly, Heath punched the wall near his head.

“Dammit!”

He glared at Luke. “Son of a bitch. The cowards. They ditched. I know they did. It just so happens their instrumentation failed, they got lost in the storm, and they crashed seven miles from a Tenth Mountain Division bivouac. How convenient. They’re going to *walk* there.”

He paused. A breath of air escaped him. “Doesn’t that beat all? I never thought I’d see a Delta Force unit DD a mission.”

Luke watched him. DD meant *done deal*. It meant disappearing, laying low, bowing out. Heath suspected that Pirate 2 had pulled the plug on the operation themselves. Maybe they had, maybe they hadn’t. But it might be the right thing to do.

“Sir, I think we should turn around,” Luke said. “Or maybe we should set this thing down. We have no support unit, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen a storm...”

Heath shook his head. “Negative, Stone. We continue with minor edits. Six-man team raids the house. Six-man team holds the village approaches.”

“Sir, with all due respect, how is this chopper going to land and take off again?”

“No landing,” Heath said. “We’ll fast rope down. Then the chopper can go vertical and find the top of this storm, wherever it is. They can come back when we have the target secured.”

“Morgan...” Luke began, addressing his superior officer by his first name, a convention he could only get away with in a few places, one of them being Delta Force.

Heath shook his head. “No, Stone. I want al-Jihadi, and I’m going to have him. This storm doubles our element of surprise—they’ll never expect us to come out of the sky on a night like this. Mark my words. We’re going to be legends after this.”

He paused, staring directly into Stone’s eyes. “ETA five minutes. Make sure you have your men ready, Sergeant.”

* * *

“Okay, okay,” Luke shouted over the roar of the engines and the chopper blades and the sand spitting against the windows.

“Listen up!” The two lines of men stared at him, in jumpsuit and helmets, weapons at the ready. Heath watched him from the far end. These were Luke’s men and Heath knew it. Without Luke’s leadership and cooperation, Heath could quickly have a mutiny on his hands. For a split second, Luke remembered what Don had said:

We used to call him Captain Ahab.

“Mission plan has changed. Pirate 2 is one hundred percent SNAFU. We are pressing forward with Plan B. Martinez, Hendricks, Colley, Simmons. You’re with me and Lieutenant Colonel Heath. We are A-Team. We will move into the house, eliminate any opposition, acquire the target, and terminate. We are going to be moving very fast. Go mode. Understood?”

Martinez, as always: “Stone, how you plan to make this a twelve-man assault? It’s a twenty-four-man—”

Luke stared at him. “I said *understood?*”

Various grunts and growls indicated they understood.

“No one resists us,” Luke said. “Someone shoots, someone so much as shows a weapon, they’re out of the game. Copy?”

He glanced through the windows. The chopper fought through a brown shit storm, moving fast, but well below its max airspeed. Visibility out there was zero. Less than zero. The chopper shuddered and lurched as if to confirm that assessment.

“Copy,” the men around him said. “Copy that.”

“Packard, Hastings, Morrison, Dobbs, Murphy, Bailey. You are B-Team. B-team, you support and cover us. When we drop, two of you hold the drop spot, two hold the perimeter near the gates of the compound. When we go inside, two move forward and hold the front of the house. You’re also the last men out. Eyes sharp, heads on a swivel. Nobody moves against us. Eliminate all resistance, and any possible resistance. This place is bound to be hotter than hell. Your job is to make it cold.”

He looked at them all.

“Are we clear?”

A chorus of voices followed, each of differing depth and timbre.

“Clear.”

“Clear.”

“Clear.”

Luke crouched on a low-slung bench in the personnel hold. He felt that old trickle of fear, of adrenaline, of excitement. He had swallowed a Dexedrine right after takeoff, and it was starting to kick in. Suddenly he felt sharper and more alert than before.

He knew the drug’s effects. His heart rate was up. His pupils were dilating, letting in more light and making his vision better. His hearing was more acute. He had more energy, more stamina, and he could remain awake for a long time.

Luke’s men sat forward on their benches, eyes on him. His thoughts were racing ahead of his ability to speak.

“Children,” he said. “Watch for them. We know there are women and children in the compound, some of them family members of the target. We are not shooting women and children tonight. Copy?”

Resigned voices answered.

“Copy that.”

“Copy.”

It was an inevitability of these assignments. The target always lived among women and children. The missions always happened at night. There was always confusion. Children tended to do unpredictable things. Luke had seen men hesitate to kill children and then pay the price when the children turned out to be soldiers who didn't hesitate to kill them. To make matters worse, their teammates would then kill the child soldiers, ten seconds too late.

People died in war. They died suddenly and often for the craziest reasons—like not wanting to kill children, who were dead a minute later anyway.

“That said, don't die out there tonight. And don't let your brothers die.”

The chopper rolled on, blasting through the spitting, shrieking darkness. Luke's body swayed and bounced with the helicopter. Outside, there was flying dirt and grit all around them. They were going to be out there a few moments from now.

“If we catch these guys napping, we might have an easy time of this. They're sure not expecting us tonight. I want to drop in, acquire the target inside ten minutes, and load back up within fifteen minutes.”

The chopper rocked and bucked. It fought to remain in the air.

Luke paused and took a breath.

“Do not hesitate! Seize the initiative and keep it. Push them and push them. Make them afraid. Do what comes naturally.”

This after just telling them to watch for children. He was sending mixed messages, he knew that. He had to get on script, but it was hard. A dark night, an insane dust storm, one chopper down before the mission even started, and a commanding officer who would not turn around.

A thought went through his mind, laser fast, so fast he almost didn't recognize it.

Abort. Abort this mission.

He looked at the two lines of men. They looked back at him. The normal enthusiasm these guys would show was sorely lacking. A couple of sets of eyes glanced out the windows.

Sand was spraying against the helicopter. It was like the chopper was a submarine under water, except the water was made out of dust.

Luke could abort the mission. He could overrule Heath. These guys would follow him over Heath—they were his guys, not Heath's. The payback would be hell, of course. Heath would come for him. Don would try to protect Luke.

But Don would be a civilian.

The charges would be insubordination at best, mutiny at worst. A court martial was practically guaranteed. Luke knew the precedents—a lunatic, suicidal order was not necessarily an unlawful order. He would lose any court martial case.

He was still staring at the men. They were still staring at him. He could see it in their eyes, or thought he could:

Call it off.

Luke shook that away.

He looked at Wayne. Wayne raised his eyebrows, gave a slight shrug.

Up to you.

“All right, boys,” Luke said. “Hit hard and fast tonight. No screwing around. We go in, we do our jobs, and we get right back out again. Trust me. This won't hurt a bit.”

CHAPTER TWO

**10:01 p.m. Afghanistan Time (1:01 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time)
Near the Pakistan Border
Kamdesh District
Nuristan Province, Afghanistan**

“Go!” Luke shouted. “Go! Go! Go!”

Two thick ropes descended from the bay door of the chopper. Men dropped down them, then disappeared into the swirling dust. They could be a thousand feet in the air, or ten feet above the playground.

The wind howled. Biting sand and dirt sprayed in. Luke’s face was covered by a ventilator mask. He and Heath were the last ones out the door. Heath wore a similar mask—they looked like two survivors of a nuclear war.

Heath looked at Luke. His mouth moved beneath his mask.

“We’re gonna be legends, Stone!”

Luke hit the green START button on his stopwatch. This had better be quick.

He glanced below him. He couldn’t see a damn thing down there, or anywhere. It was all on faith. He went over the side and fell through bleak darkness. Two seconds later, maybe three, he touched down hard on the ground. The landing sent a shockwave up his legs.

He released the rope and looked around, trying to get his bearings.

Heath landed a second later.

Men in masks appeared out of the gloom. Martinez, Hendricks. Hendricks gestured behind him.

“There’s the wall!”

Something large loomed back there. Okay, that was the wall to the compound. A couple of dim lights shone on top of it.

Hendricks was saying something, but Luke couldn’t hear it.

“What?”

“They know!”

They know? Who? Knew what?

Above their heads, the sound of the chopper’s engines changed as it began to rise away. Suddenly, a bright light flashed from on top of the wall.

Something zipped by, screaming as it did.

Mortar.

“Incoming!” Luke screamed. “Incoming!”

All around him, vague shadows threw themselves to the ground.

Two more flashes of light launched.

Then another.

Then another.

How did they know?

In the black darkness of the sky, something exploded. It blew up in muted orange and red. In the sandstorm, the explosion sounded like the crackling of distant thunder. The chopper. It was hit.

From his vantage point on the ground, Luke watched it circle in the sky, an orange streak against the black. It looped toward the right, spinning now. Its engines screamed, and Luke thought he could hear the sound of its blades.

Whump. Whump. Whump. Whump.

It seemed to move in slow motion, sideways and down. It lit up the night like a tracer as it passed over the stone wall of the compound.

BOOOM!

It exploded on the other side of the wall, inside the compound. A fireball went up, two or three stories high. For an instant, Luke imagined it was all over. Chopper down, pilots dead. Support chopper inoperable. They were trapped here, and the Taliban seemed to have known they were coming.

But that helicopter just blew apart inside the compound.

Like a bomb.

And that might give them the initiative.

Several men in masks lay nearby.

Martinez, Hendricks, Colley, Simmons. His team.

Heath had to be around here somewhere.

“Up!” Luke shouted. “Up! Let’s go!”

He jumped to his feet, dragging the nearest person with him. In an instant, they were all up and running, a dozen men, moving fast. Night vision was useless. Lights were useless, and would draw fire. They simply ran in total, spinning darkness.

In ten seconds, they reached the wall. Luke guessed left, and moved that way, hugging the stone. Within a few seconds, he came to the opening. There was the chopper, an apocalypse. A few silhouettes ran in the light from the flames, pulling wounded away from it.

Luke didn’t hesitate. He ran through the opening, his MP5 out now. He gave them a burst from the gun, a blat of automatic fire. Now the silhouettes were running away, back toward another looming shadow, lights beckoning in the chaos.

The house.

His men were running with him.

Up ahead, the silhouettes of the retreating men sprinted up the small flight of stairs to the stone house. Luke sprinted up the stairs behind them.

Two men faced the doorway, pulling automatic weapons down from their shoulders. They wore the long beards and headwraps of the Taliban.

POP! POP! POP! POP! POP!

Luke fired without thinking about it. The two men fell.

Suddenly, there was an explosion behind him. He glanced back—it was impossible to see what was going on. He moved into the house. An instant later, four more men appeared next to him—his A-Team. They took up firing positions in the stone foyer, facing in toward the rest of the house.

They removed their ventilator masks simultaneously, almost as if they were one person. Martinez went to the downed Taliban and shot each one in the head. He didn’t touch either one of them.

“Dead!” he said.

It was quieter here.

“B-Team leader,” Luke said into his helmet mic. “Status?”

Heath came running into the house out of the darkness.

“B-Team leader...”

“We’re holding the front gate,” a voice said inside Luke’s helmet. It was Murphy. His Bronx accent was unmistakable. “Stone! This don’t look good. That was an ambush! They were waiting for us!”

“Just hold the gate, Murph. We’ll be out in a couple of minutes.”

“You better hurry, man. Somebody knew we were coming. Won’t be long before there’s more of them, and I can’t see ten feet in front of my nose.”

Luke’s team had already moved further into the house. Heat went in right behind them.

“Hang in there. We’re inside.”

“Make it quick,” Murphy’s voice said. “I don’t know if we’re still going to be here.”

“Murphy! Hold that gate! We’ll be right out.”

“Aye, aye,” Murphy said.

Luke turned toward the darkened corridor.

Another man appeared—a big man in a white robe. He managed to reach his trigger, but he fired wildly. Luke kneeled, drew a bead on the man.

POP! A dark red circle appeared on his chest.

He seemed surprised, but then slid bonelessly to the floor.

Now Luke moved through the dark hallways, listening for sounds up ahead. He didn’t have to listen long.

BANG!

A flashbang went off, then another.

BANG!

There was shouting and gunfire up ahead. Luke moved slowly toward it, snaking along the wall. Now there were sounds behind him, out on the grounds—automatic fire and explosions.

Luke checked his stopwatch. They’d been on the ground for less than four minutes, and the whole mission was already FUBAR.

“Stone!”

Murphy’s voice again. “Trouble. Barbarians at the gates. I repeat: front gates under attack. Unfriendly converging. Men down. Hastings down. Bailey down. We are falling back to the house.”

“Uh, negative, B-Team. Hold those gates!”

“There’s nothing to hold,” Murphy said. “They’re ripping it up! They got an anti-tank gun out there.”

“Hold it anyway. It’s our only way out of here.”

“Dammit, Stone!”

“Murphy! Hold those gates!”

Luke ran further into the house.

There was screaming just ahead of him. He ran through a doorway, crossed the threshold...

And came upon a scene of total chaos.

There were at least fifteen people in a large back room. The floors were covered in thick, overlapping carpets. The walls were hung with carpets—ornate, richly colored carpets depicting vast landscapes—deserts, mountains, jungles, waterfalls.

Simmons was dead. He lay on his back, his body splayed, his eyes open and staring. His helmet was off and a chunk of his head above the eyes was gone. Two women were also dead. A small child, a boy, was dead. Three men in robes and turbans were dead. It was a massacre in here. There were guns, and blood, all over the floor.

At the very back, near a closed door, a mass of people stood. A crowd of men in robes and turbans held children in front of them, and pointed rifles outward. Behind the men, another man lurked—he was hidden enough that Luke could barely see him.

He must be the target.

All around the chamber, Luke’s team crouched or kneeled, still as statues, their guns trained on the group, looking for a shot. Lieutenant Colonel Heath stood in the center of the room, his MP5 machine gun pointed into the crowd.

“Okay,” Luke said. “It’s okay. Nobody do any—”

“Drop those weapons!” Heath shouted in English. His eyes were wild. He was focused on one thing—getting that whale.

“Heath!” Luke said. “Relax. There’s children. We can—”

“I see the children, Stone.”

“So let’s just—”

Heath fired, a burst of full auto.

Instantly Luke hit the ground as gunfire broke out in all directions. He covered his head, curled into a ball, and turned his back to the action.

The shooting lasted several seconds. Even after it stopped, a few shots continued, one every few seconds, like the last of the popcorn popping. When it was finally over, Luke picked his head up. The knot of people by the closed door lay in a writhing pile.

Heath was down. Luke didn’t care about that. Heath was the cause of this nightmare.

Another of Luke’s men was down, over in the corner. God, what a mess. Three men down. An unknown number of civilians dead.

Luke climbed to his feet. Two other men stood at the same time. One was Martinez. The other was Colley. Martinez and Colley converged on the pile of people near the back, moving slowly, guns still drawn.

Luke glanced around the room. There were corpses everywhere. Simmons was dead. Heath... a large hole had been punched through his head where his face had been. The man had no face. Luke felt nothing about that. This was Heath’s mission. It had gone as wrong as possible. Now Heath was dead.

And one more man was down.

It seemed like a complicated math problem, but really, it was simple subtraction that anyone could do. Luke’s mind was not working correctly. He recognized that. Six men had come in here. Heath and Simmons were dead. Martinez, Colley, and Stone were still in the game. That meant the last man down could only be...

Luke ran to the man. Yes, it was. It was Hendricks. Wayne.

WAYNE.

He was still moving.

Luke kneeled by him and pulled off his helmet.

Wayne’s arms and legs were moving slowly, almost like he was treading water.

“Wayne! Wayne! Where are you hit?”

Wayne’s eyes rolled. They found Luke. He shook his head. He began to cry. He was breathing heavily, almost gasping for air.

“Oh, buddy...” Wayne said.

“Wayne! Talk to me.”

Feverishly, Luke began to unfasten Wayne’s ballistic vest.

“Medic!” he screamed. “Medic!”

An instant later, Colley was there, kneeling behind him. “Simpson was the medic. I’m the backup.”

Wayne was hit in the chest. Somehow shrapnel had gotten under his vest. Luke’s hands searched him. He was also shot high in the leg. That was worse than the chest, by a lot. His pants were saturated with blood. His femoral artery must be hit. Luke’s hand came away dripping red. There was blood everywhere. There was a lake of it under Wayne’s body. It was a miracle he was still alive.

“Tell Katie,” Wayne said.

“Shut up!” Luke said. “You’re going to tell her yourself.”

Wayne’s voice was barely above a whisper.

“Tell her...”

Wayne seemed to be looking at something far away. He gazed, and then did a double take, as if confused by what he was seeing. An instant later, his eyes became still.

He stared at Luke. His mouth was slack. Nobody was home.

“Oh God, Wayne. No.”

Luke looked at Colley. It was as if he were seeing Colley for the first time. Colley looked young—like barely old enough to shave. That couldn’t be, of course. The man was in Delta Force. He was

a trained killer. He was a consummate pro. But his neck looked about as thick as Luke's forearm. He seemed to be swimming in his clothes.

"Check him," Luke said, though he already knew what Colley would say. He fell back into a cross-legged position, and sat that way for a long moment. They had a day off during Ranger School one time. A bunch of guys held a pick-up game of football. It was a hot day, and the game was shirts versus skins. Luke spent the game throwing laser strikes to this big, thick, foul-mouthed redneck with a front tooth missing.

"Wayne."

"He's gone," Colley said.

Just like that, Wayne was dead. Luke's blood brother. The godfather of Luke's unborn son. A long, helpless breath went out of Luke.

In war, Luke knew, that's how it went. One second, your friend—or your sister, or your wife, or your child—was alive. The next second, they were gone. There was no way to turn back that clock, not even one second.

Wayne was dead. They were a long way from home. And this night was just getting started.

"Stone!" Martinez said.

Luke pulled himself to his feet once again. Martinez stood by the pile of corpses that had once protected the target. All of them appeared to be dead, all but one, the man who had stood at the back. He was tall, still youthful, with a long black beard speckled with a little gray. He lay among the fallen—shot full of holes, but alive.

Martinez pointed a pistol down at him.

"What's the guy's name? The one we're looking for?"

"Abu Mustafa Faraj al-Jihadi?" Luke said. It wasn't really a question. It wasn't anything, just a string of syllables.

The man nodded. He didn't say anything. He looked like he was in some pain.

Luke took a small digital camera from inside his vest. The camera was encased in hard rubber. You could bounce it off the floor and it wouldn't break. He fidgeted with it for a second, and then took a few snaps of the man. He checked the images before he turned the camera off. They were fine—not exactly professional quality, but Luke didn't work for *National Geographic*. All he needed was evidence. He looked down at the terrorist leader.

"Gotcha," Luke said. "Thanks for playing."

BANG!

Martinez fired once, and the man's head came apart.

"Mission accomplished," Martinez said. He shook his head and walked away.

Luke's radio crackled.

"Stone! Where are you?"

"Murphy. What's the status?"

Murphy's voice cut in and out. "It's a bloodbath out here. I lost three men. But we commandeered one of their big guns, and we cut an opening. If we want to get out of here, we need to go RIGHT NOW."

"We'll be out in a minute."

"I wouldn't take that long," Murphy said. "Not if you want to live."

* * *

Six men ran through the village.

After all that fighting, the place was like a ghost town. At any second, Luke was expecting gunshots or rockets to come screaming out of the tiny homes. But nothing happened. There didn't even seem to be any people left here.

Back the way they had come, smoke rose. The walls of the compound were destroyed. The helicopter still burned, the flames crackling in the eerie quiet.

Luke could hear the heavy breathing of the other men, running uphill with gear and weapons. In ten minutes, they made it to the old forward operating base on the rocky hillside outside the village.

To Luke's surprise, the place was okay. There were no supplies cached there, of course—but the sandbags were still in place, and the location gave a commanding view of the surrounding area. Luke could see lights on in the homes, and the chopper on fire.

"Martinez, see if you can raise Bagram on the radio. We need an extraction. Hide and seek is over. Tell them to send overwhelming force. We need to get back inside that compound and bring our men out."

Martinez nodded. "I told you, man. Luck runs out for everybody."

"Don't tell me, Martinez. Just get us out of here, okay?"

"All right, Stone."

It was a dark night. The sandstorm had passed. They still had weapons. Along the sandbagged rampart, his men were loading up ammo and checking gear.

It wasn't out of the question that...

"Murphy, send a flare up," he said. "I want to get a look at what we're dealing with."

"And give away our position?" Murphy said.

"I think they probably know where we are," Luke said.

Murphy shrugged and popped one into the night.

The flare moved slowly across the sky, casting eerie shadows on the rocky terrain below. The ground almost appeared to be boiling. Luke stared and stared, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. There was so much activity down there, it was like an ant farm, or a swarm of rats.

It was men. Hundreds of men were methodically moving themselves, their gear, and their weapons into position.

"I guess you're right," Murphy said. "They know we're here."

Luke looked at Martinez.

"Martinez, what's the status on that extraction?"

Martinez shook his head. "They say it's a no go. Nothing but wicked sandstorms between base and here. Zero visibility. They can't even put the choppers in the air. They say hold out till morning. The wind's supposed to die down after sunrise."

Luke stared at him. "They have to do better than that."

Martinez shrugged. "They can't. If the choppers won't fly, the choppers won't fly. I wish those storms had come in before we left."

Luke stared out at the seething mass of Taliban on the hillsides below them. He turned back to Martinez.

Martinez opened his mouth as if to speak.

Luke pointed at him. "Don't say it. Just get ready to fight."

"I'm always ready to fight," Martinez said.

The shooting started moments later.

* * *

Martinez was screaming.

"They're coming through on all sides!"

His eyes were wide. His guns were gone. He had taken an AK-47 from a Taliban, and was bayoneting everyone who came over the wall. Luke watched him in horror. Martinez was an island, a small boat in a sea of Taliban fighters.

And he was going under. Then he was gone, under a pile.

They were just trying to live until daybreak, but the sun refused to rise. The ammunition had run out. It was cold, and Luke's shirt was off. He had ripped it off in the heat of combat.

Turbaned, bearded Taliban fighters poured over the walls of the outpost. Men screamed all around him.

A man came over the wall with a metal hatchet.

Luke shot him in the face. The man lay dead against the sandbags. Now Luke had the hatchet. He waded into the fighters surrounding Martinez, swinging wildly. Blood spattered. He chopped at them, sliced them.

Martinez reappeared, back on his feet, stabbing with the bayonet.

Luke buried the hatchet in a man's skull. It was deep. He couldn't pull it out. Even with the adrenaline raging through his system, he didn't have the strength left. He looked at Martinez.

"You okay?"

Martinez shrugged. He gestured at the bodies all around them. "I been better than this before. I'll tell you that."

There was an AK-47 at Luke's feet. He picked it up and checked the magazine. Empty. Luke tossed it away and pulled his handgun. He fired down the trench—it was overrun with enemies. A line of them were running this way. More came sliding, falling, jumping over the wall.

Where were his guys? Was anyone else still alive?

He killed the closest man with a shot to the face. The head exploded like a cherry tomato. He grabbed the man by his tunic and held him up as a shield. The headless man was light—it was if the corpse was an empty suit of clothes.

He killed four men with four shots. He kept firing.

Then he was out of bullets. Again.

A Taliban charged with an AK-47, bayonet attached. Luke pushed the corpse at him, then threw his gun like a tomahawk. It bounced off the man's head, distracting him for a second. Luke used that time. He stepped into the attack, sliding along the edge of the bayonet. He plunged two fingers deep into the man's eyes, and pulled.

The man screamed. His hands went to his face. Now Luke had the AK. He bayoneted his enemy in the chest, two, three, four times. He pushed it in deep.

The man breathed his last right into Luke's face.

Luke's hands roamed the man's body. The fresh corpse had a grenade in its breast pocket. Luke took it, pulled it, and tossed it over the rampart into the oncoming hordes.

He hit the deck.

BOOOM.

The explosion was *right there*, spraying dirt and rock and blood and bone. The sandbagged wall half collapsed on top of him.

Luke clawed his way to his feet, deaf now, his ears ringing. He checked the AK. Empty. But he still had the bayonet.

"Come on, you bastards!" he screamed. "Come on!"

More men came over the wall, and he stabbed them in a frenzy. He ripped and tore at them with his bare hands. He shot them with their own guns.

A man came over what was left of the wall. He wasn't a man—he was a boy. He had no beard. He had no need of a razor. His skin was smooth and dark. His brown eyes were round in terror. He clutched his hands to his chest.

Luke faced off with this child—the kid was maybe fourteen. There were more coming behind him. They slid and crashed over the barrier. The passageway was choked with corpses.

Why are his hands like that?

Luke knew why. He was a suicide bomber.

"Grenade!" Luke shouted, even if no one was alive to hear him.

He dove backward, digging under one body, then another. There were so many, he crawled and crawled, burrowing toward the center of the Earth, putting a blanket of dead men between him and the boy.

BOOOM!

He heard the explosion, muffled by the bodies, and he felt the heat wave. He heard the shrieks of the next wave of dying. But then another explosion came, and another.

And another.

Luke was fading from the concussions. Maybe he was hit. Maybe he was dying. If this was to die, it wasn't so bad. There was no pain.

He thought of the kid—skinny teenager, wide around the middle like a barrel-chested man. The kid was wearing a suicide vest.

He thought of Rebecca, round with child.

Darkness took him.

* * *

At some point, the sun had risen, but there was no warmth in it. The fighting had stopped somehow—he couldn't remember when, or how, it had ended. The ground was rugged and hard. There were dead bodies everywhere. Skinny, bearded men lay all over the ground, with eyes wide and staring.

Luke. His name was Luke.

He was sitting on a pile of bodies. He had awakened beneath them, and he had crawled out from under them like a snake.

They were piled here like cordwood. He didn't like sitting on them, but it was convenient. It was high enough that it gave him a view down the hillside through the remains of the sandbag wall, but it kept him low enough that no one but a very good sniper could probably get a shot at him.

The Taliban didn't have a lot of very good snipers. Some, but not many, and most of the Taliban around here appeared to be dead now.

Nearby, he spotted one crawling back down the hill, trailing a line of blood like the trail of slime that follows a snail. He should really go out there and kill that guy, but he didn't want to risk being in the open.

Luke glanced down at himself. He didn't look good. His chest was painted red. He was soaked in the blood of dead men. His body trembled from hunger, and from exhaustion. He stared out at the surrounding mountains, just coming into view as the day brightened. It was really a pretty day. This was beautiful country.

How many more were out there? How long before they came?

He shook his head. He didn't know. It didn't really matter. Any at all would probably be too many.

Martinez was sprawled on his back nearby, low in the trench. He was crying. He couldn't move his legs. He'd had enough. He wanted to die. Luke realized he had been tuning out Martinez for a while now.

"Stone," he said. "Hey, Stone. Hey! Kill me, man. Just kill me. Hey, Stone! Listen to me, man!"

Luke was numb.

"I'm not going to kill you, Martinez. You're gonna be all right. We're going to get out of here, and the docs are gonna patch you up. So give it a rest... okay?"

Nearby, Murphy was sitting on an outcropping of rock, staring into space. He wasn't even trying to take cover.

"Murph! Get down here. You want a sniper to put a bullet in your head?"

Murphy turned and looked at Luke. His eyes were just... gone. He shook his head. An exhalation of air escaped from him. It sounded almost like laughter. He stayed right where he was.

As Luke watched, Murphy took out a pistol. It was incredible that he still had a gun on him. Luke had been fighting with his bare hands, rocks, and sharp objects for...

He didn't know how long.

Murphy put the barrel of the gun to the side of his head, eyes on Luke the entire time. He pulled the trigger.

Click.

He pulled the trigger several more times.

Click, click, click, click... click.

"Out," he said.

He threw the gun away. It clattered down the hillside.

Luke watched the gun bounce away. It seemed to go on for longer than he would ever expect. Eventually, it slid to a stop in a scree of loose rocks. He looked at Murphy again. Murphy just sat there, looking at nothing.

If more Taliban came, they were done. Neither one of these guys had much fight left in them, and the only weapon Stone still had was the bent bayonet in his hand. For a moment, he thought idly about picking through some of these dead guys for weapons. He didn't know if he had the strength left to stand. He might have to crawl instead.

A line of black insects appeared in the sky far away. He knew what they were in an instant. Helicopters. United States military helicopters, probably Black Hawks. The cavalry was coming. Luke didn't feel good about that, or bad.

He felt nothing at all.

CHAPTER THREE

March 19

Night

An airplane over Europe

“Are you men comfortable?”

“Yes, sir,” Luke said.

Murphy didn't respond. He sat in a recliner across the narrow aisle from Luke, staring out the window at blank darkness. They were in a small jet that was set up almost like someone's living room. Luke and Murphy sat at the back, facing forward. In the front were three men, including a Delta Force colonel and a three-star general from the Pentagon. There was also a man in civilian clothes.

Behind the men were two green berets, standing at attention.

“Specialist Murphy?” the general said. “Are you comfortable?”

Murphy slid the window shade down. “Yeah. I'm fine.”

“Murphy, do you know how to address a superior officer?” the colonel said.

Murphy turned away from the window. He looked directly at the men for the first time.

“I'm not in your army anymore.”

“Why are you on this plane, in that case?”

Murphy shrugged. “Someone offered me a ride. There aren't a lot of commercial flights out of Afghanistan these days. So I figured I'd better take this one.”

The man in civilian clothes glanced at the cabin door.

“If you're not in the military, I suppose we could always ask you to leave. Of course, it's a long way to the ground.”

Murphy followed the man's eyes.

“Do it. I promise you'll come with me.”

Luke shook his head. If this were a playground, he would almost smile. But this wasn't a playground, and these men were deadly serious.

“Okay, Murph,” he said. “Take it down a notch. I was on that hill with you. Nobody on this plane put us there.”

Murphy shrugged. “All right, Stone.” He looked at the general. “Yes, I'm comfortable, sir. Very comfortable. Thank you.”

The general glanced down at some paperwork in front of him.

“Thank you, gentlemen, for your service. Specialist Murphy, if you are interested in being discharged early from your obligations, I suggest you take that up with your commanding officer when you return to Fort Bragg.”

“Okay,” Murphy said.

The general looked up. “As you know, this was a difficult mission which did not go exactly as planned. I'd like to take the opportunity to familiarize myself with the facts of the situation. I have the records from the mission debrief when you both returned to Bagram. I gather from the testimony, and the photographic evidence, that the overall mission was a success. Would you agree with that, Sergeant Stone?”

“Uh... if by the overall mission, you mean to find and assassinate Abu Mustafa Faraj, then yes sir. I suppose it was a success.”

“That is what I meant, Sergeant. Faraj was a dangerous terrorist, and the world is a better place now that he's gone. Specialist Murphy?”

Murphy stared at the general. It was clear to Luke that Murphy was no longer all there. He was better than he was the morning after the battle, but not by much.

“Yes?” he said.

The general gritted his teeth. He glanced at the men to his left and his right.

“What is your assessment of the mission, please?”

Murphy nodded. “Oh. The one we just did?”

“Yes, Specialist Murphy.”

Murphy didn’t answer for several seconds. He seemed to be thinking about it.

“Well, we lost nine Delta guys and two chopper pilots. Martinez is alive, but he’s scrambled eggs. Also, we killed a bunch of children, so I’m told, and at least a few women. There were piles of dead guys on the ground. I mean hundreds of dead guys. And I guess there was a famous terrorist there too, but I never saw him. So... about par for the course, I guess you’d say. It’s kind of how these things go. This wasn’t my first rodeo, if you know what I mean.”

He looked across the aisle at Luke.

“Stone looks okay. And speaking just for myself, I didn’t get a scratch on me. So sure, I’d say it went fine.”

The officers stared at Murphy.

“Sir,” Luke said. “I think what Specialist Murphy is trying to say, and you’ll see from my testimony that I agree, is the mission was poorly conceived and probably ill advised. Lieutenant Colonel Heath was a brave man, sir, but maybe not a very good strategist or tactician. After the first chopper crashed, I requested that he abort the mission, and he refused. He was also personally responsible for the deaths of a number of civilians, and likely for the death of Corporal Wayne Hendricks.”

Absurdly, saying the name of his friend nearly brought Luke to tears. He choked them back. This wasn’t the time or the place.

The general glanced down at his paperwork again. “And yet you do agree that the mission was a success? The object of the mission was achieved?”

Luke thought about that for a long moment. In the narrowest military sense, they had achieved the mission goal. That was true. They had killed a wanted terrorist, and perhaps somewhere down the line, that was going to save lives. It might even save many more lives than were lost.

That was how these men wanted to define success.

“Sergeant Stone?”

“Yes, sir. I do agree.”

The general nodded. So did the colonel. The man in civilian clothes made no response at all.

The general gathered his papers together and handed them to the colonel.

“Good,” he said. “We’re going to be landing in Germany soon, gentlemen, and then I’ll take my leave of you. Before I do, I want to impress upon you that I believe you’ve done a great thing, and you should be very proud. You’re obviously courageous men, and very skilled at your jobs. Your country owes you a debt of gratitude, one that will never be repaid adequately. It will also never be acknowledged publicly.”

He paused.

“Please recognize that the mission to kill Abu Mustafa Faraj al-Jihadi, while successful, did not take place. It does not exist in any recordkeeping, nor will it ever exist. The men who lost their lives as part of this mission died in a training accident during a sandstorm.”

He looked at them, his eyes hard now.

“Is that understood?”

“Yes sir,” Luke said, without hesitation. The fact that they were disappearing this mission didn’t surprise him in the least. He would disappear it too, if he could.

“Specialist Murphy?”

Murphy raised a hand and shrugged. “It’s your deal, man. I don’t think I’ve ever been on a mission that did exist.”

CHAPTER FOUR

March 23

4:35 p.m.

United States Army Special Operations Command

Fort Bragg

Fayetteville, North Carolina

“Can I bring you a cup of tea?”

Luke nodded. “Thank you.”

Wayne’s wife, Katie, was a pretty blonde, small, quite a bit younger than Wayne. Luke thought she was maybe twenty-four. She was pregnant with their daughter—eight months—and she was huge.

She was living in base housing, half a mile from Luke and Becca. The house was a tiny, three-room bungalow in a neighborhood of exactly identical houses. Wayne was dead. She was there because she had nowhere else to go.

She brought Luke his tea in a small ornate cup, the adult version of the cups little girls use when they have imaginary tea parties. She sat down across from him. The living room was spare. The couch was a futon that could fold out into a double bed for guests.

Luke had met Katie twice before, both times for five minutes or less. He hadn’t seen her since before she was pregnant.

“You were Wayne’s good friend,” she said.

“Yes. I was.”

She stared into her teacup, as if maybe Wayne was floating at the bottom.

“And you were on the mission where he died.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.”

“Did you see it? Did you see him die?”

Already, Luke didn’t like where these questions were headed. How to answer a question like that? Luke had missed the shots that killed Wayne, but he had seen him die, all right. He would give almost anything to unsee it.

“Yes.”

“How did he die?” she said.

“He died like a man. Like a soldier.”

She nodded, but said nothing. Maybe that wasn’t the answer she was looking for. But Luke didn’t want to go any further.

“Was he in pain?” she said.

Luke shook his head. “No.”

She looked into his eyes. Her eyes were red and rimmed with tears. There was a terrible sadness there. “How can you know that?”

“I spoke to him. He told me to tell you that he loved you.”

It was a lie, of course. Wayne hadn’t managed to utter a complete sentence. But it was a white lie. Luke believed that Wayne would have said it, if he could have.

“Is that why you came here, Sergeant Stone?” she said. “To tell me that?”

Luke took a breath.

“Before he died, Wayne asked me to be your daughter’s godfather,” Luke said. “I agreed, and I’m here to honor that commitment. Your daughter will be born soon, and I want to help you through this situation in any way I can.”

There was a long, silent pause between them. It stretched longer and longer.

Finally, Katie shook her head, just a tiny amount. She spoke softly.

“I could never have a man like you be my daughter’s godfather. Wayne is dead because of men like you. My girl will never have a father because of men like you. Do you understand? I’m here because I still have the healthcare, and so my baby will be born here. But after that? I’m going to run as far away from the Army, and from people like you, as I can. Wayne was stupid to be involved in this, and I was stupid to go along with it. You don’t have to worry, Sergeant Stone. You have no responsibility to me. You’re not my baby’s godfather.”

Luke couldn’t think of a single thing to say. He looked in his cup and saw that he had already finished his tea. He put the teacup down on the table. She picked it up and moved her bulk to the door of the tiny house. She opened the door and held it open.

“Good day, Sergeant Stone.”

He stared at her.

She began to cry. Her voice was as soft as ever.

“Please. Get out of my house. Get out of my life.”

* * *

Dinner was dreary and sad.

They sat across the table from each other, not speaking. She had made stuffed chicken and asparagus, and it was good. She had opened a beer for him and poured it into a glass. She had done nice things.

They were eating quietly, almost as though things were normal.

But he couldn’t bring himself to look at her.

There was a black matte Glock nine-millimeter on the table near his right hand. It was loaded.

“Luke, are you okay?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I’m fine.” He took a sip of his beer.

“Why is your gun on the table?”

Finally, he looked up at her. She was beautiful, of course, and he loved her. She was pregnant with his child, and she wore a flower-print maternity blouse. He could almost cry at her beauty, and at the power of his love for her. He felt it intensely, like a wave crashing against the rocks.

“Uh, it’s just there in case I need it, babe.”

“Why would you need it? We’re just eating dinner. We’re on the base. We’re safe here. No one can...”

“Does it bother you?” he said.

She shrugged. She slid a small forkful of chicken into her mouth. Becca was a slow and careful eater. She ate little bites, and it often took her a long time to finish her dinner. She didn’t strap the ol’ feedbag on like some people did. Luke loved that about her. It was one of their differences. He tended to inhale his food.

He watched her chew her food in slow motion. Her teeth were large. She had bunny teeth. It was cute. It was endearing.

“Yeah, a little,” she said. “You’ve never done that before. Are you afraid that...”

Luke shook his head. “I’m not afraid of anything. We have a child on the way, all right? It’s important that we keep our child safe from harm. It’s our responsibility. It’s a dangerous world, Becca, in case you didn’t know that.”

Luke nodded at the truth of what he was saying. More and more, he was beginning to notice hazards all around them. There were sharp dinner knives in the kitchen drawer. There were carving knives and a big meat cleaver in a wooden block on the counter. There were scissors in the cabinet behind the bathroom mirror.

The car had brakes, and someone could easily cut the brake lines. If Luke knew how to do it, then a lot of people knew. And there were a lot of people out there who might want to settle a score with Luke Stone.

It almost seemed like...

Becca was crying. She pushed her chair away from the table and stood up. Her face had turned crimson in the past ten seconds.

“Babe? What’s wrong?”

“You,” she said, the tears streaming down her face. “There’s something wrong with you. You’ve never come home like this before. You’ve barely said hello to me. You haven’t touched me at all. I feel like I’m invisible. You stay up all night. You don’t seem like you’ve slept at all since you got here. Now you’ve got a gun on the dinner table. I’m a little bit afraid, Luke. I’m afraid there’s something very, very wrong.”

He stood, and she took a step back. Her eyes went wide.

That look. It was the look of a woman who was afraid of a man. And he was that man. It horrified him. It was if he had snapped suddenly awake. He never imagined she would ever look at him that way. He never wanted her to look that way again, not at him, not at anyone, not for any reason.

He glanced at the table. He had placed a loaded gun there during dinner. Now why would he do that? Suddenly, he was ashamed of that gun. It was square and squat and ugly. He wanted to cover it with a napkin, but it was too late. She had already seen it.

He looked at her again.

She stood across from, abject, like a child, her shoulders hunched, her face crinkled up, the tears streaming down her cheeks.

“I love you,” she said. “But I’m so worried right now.”

Luke nodded. The next thing he said surprised him.

“I think I might need to go away for a little while.”

CHAPTER FIVE

April 14

9:45 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time

**Fayetteville Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) Health Care Center
Fayetteville, North Carolina**

“Why are you here, Stone?”

The voice shook Luke from whatever reverie he had become lost in. He often wandered alone through his thoughts and his memories these days, and afterward he couldn't remember what he had been thinking about.

He glanced up.

He was sitting in a folding chair among a group of eight men. Most of the men sat in folding chairs. Two were in wheelchairs. The group took up a corner of a large but dreary open room. Windows against the far wall showed that it was a sunny, early spring day. Somehow the light from outside didn't seem to reach into the room.

The group was positioned in a semicircle, facing a middle-aged bearded man with a large stomach. The man wore corduroy pants and a red flannel shirt. The stomach protruded outward almost like a beach ball was hiding under the shirt, except the face of it was flat, like air was leaking out. Luke suspected that if he punched that stomach, it would be as hard as an iron skillet. The man was tall, and he leaned way back in his chair, his thin legs out in a straight line in front of him.

“Excuse me?” Luke said.

The man smiled, but there was no humor in it.

“Why... are... you... here?” he said again. He said it slowly this time, as if talking to a small child, or an imbecile.

Luke looked around at the men. This was group therapy for war veterans.

It was a fair question. Luke didn't belong here. These guys were wrecked. Physically disabled. Traumatized.

A few of them didn't seem like they were ever coming back. The guy named Chambers was probably the worst. He had lost an arm and both his legs. His face was disfigured. The left half was covered by bandages, a large metal plate protruding from under there, stabilizing what was left of the facial bones on that side. He had lost his left eye, and they hadn't replaced it yet. At some point, after they finished rebuilding his orbital socket, they were going to give him a nice new fake eye.

Chambers had been riding in a Humvee that ran over an IED in Iraq. The device was a surprise innovation—a shaped charge that penetrated straight up through the undercarriage of the vehicle, and then straight through Chambers, taking him apart from the bottom up. The military was retrofitting the old Humvees with heavy underside armor, and redesigning the new ones, to guard against these sorts of attacks in the future. But that wasn't going to help Chambers.

Luke didn't like to look at Chambers.

“Why are you here?” the leader said yet again.

Luke shrugged. “I don't know, Riggs. Why are you here?”

“I'm trying to help men get their lives back,” Riggs said. He said it without missing a beat. Either it was a canned answer he kept for when people confronted him, or he actually believed it. “How about you?”

Luke said nothing, but everyone was staring at him now. He rarely said anything in this group. He would just as soon not attend. He didn't think it was helping him. Truth be told, he thought the whole thing was a waste of time.

“Are you afraid?” Riggs said. “Is that why you're here?”

“Riggs, if you think that, then you don’t know me very well.”

“Ah,” Riggs said, and raised his meaty hands just a bit. “Now we’re getting somewhere. You’re a hardcase. We know that already. So do it. Step up. Tell us all about Sergeant First Class Luke Stone of the United States Army Special Forces. Delta, am I right? Neck deep in the shit, right? One of the guys who went on that botched mission to kill the Al Qaeda guy, the guy who supposedly did the USS *Sarasota* bombing?”

“Riggs, I wouldn’t know anything about any mission like that. A mission like that would be classified information, which would mean that if either of us knew anything about it, we wouldn’t be at liberty...”

Riggs smiled and made a spinning wheel motion with his hand. “To discuss such a high-level and crucial targeted assassination that never existed in the first place. Yeah, yeah, yeah. We all know the talk. We’ve heard it before. Believe me, Stone, you’re not that important. Every man in this group has seen combat. Every man in this group is intimately aware of the—”

“What kind of combat have you seen, Riggs?” Luke said. “You were in the Navy. On a destroyer. In the middle of the ocean. You’ve been riding a desk in this hospital for the past fifteen years.”

“This isn’t about me, Stone. It’s about you. You’re in a VA hospital, in the psych ward. Right? I’m not in the psych ward. You are. I work in the psych ward, and you live there. But you’re not committed. You’re voluntary. You can walk out of here any time you want. Right in the middle of this session, if you like. Fort Bragg is five or six miles from here. All your old buddies are over there, waiting for you. Don’t you want to get back together with them? They’re waiting for you, man. Rock and roll. There’s always another classified FUBAR mission to go on.”

Luke said nothing. He just stared at Riggs. The man was out of his mind. He was the crazy one. He wasn’t even slowing down.

“Stone, I see you Delta guys come through here from time to time. You never have a scratch on you. You guys are like, supernatural. The bullets always miss you somehow. But you’re freaked out. You’re burnt out. You’ve seen too much. You’ve killed too many people. You’ve got their blood all over you. It’s invisible, but it’s there.”

Riggs nodded to himself.

“We had a Delta guy come through here back in oh-three, about your age, insisted he was fine. He had just come back from a top secret mission in Afghanistan. It was a slaughterhouse. Of course it was. But he didn’t need all this talk. Sound like anybody we know? When he left here, he went home, killed his wife, his three-year-old daughter, and then put a bullet in his own brain.”

A pause drew out between Luke and Riggs. None of the other men said a word. The guy was a button pusher. For some reason, he saw that as his job. It was important that Luke stay cool and not let Riggs get under his skin. But Luke didn’t like this kind of thing. He felt a surge building inside him. Riggs was moving into dangerous territory.

“Is that what you’re scared of?” Riggs said. “You’re worried you’re gonna go home and blow your wife’s brains all over the—”

Luke was up from his chair and across the space between him and Riggs in less than a second. Before he knew what had happened, he had grabbed Riggs, kicked his chair out from under him, and thrown him to the floor like a rag doll. Riggs’s head banged off the stone tile.

Luke crouched over him and reared back his fist.

Riggs’s eyes were wide, and for a split second fear flashed across his face. Then his calm demeanor returned.

“That’s what I like to see,” he said. “A little enthusiasm.”

Luke took a deep breath and let his fist relax. He looked around at the other men. None of them had made a move. They just stared dispassionately as if a patient attacking his therapist was a normal part of their day.

No. That wasn't it. They stared like they didn't care what happened, like they were beyond caring.

"I know what you're trying to do," Luke said.

"I'm trying to break you out of your shell, Stone. And it looks like it's finally starting to work."

* * *

"I don't want you here," Martinez said.

Luke sat in a wooden chair next to Martinez's bed. The chair was surprisingly uncomfortable, as if it had been designed to discourage loitering.

Luke was doing the thing he had avoided for weeks—he was visiting Martinez. The man was in a different building of the hospital, yes. But it was all of a twelve-minute walk from Luke's own room. Luke hadn't been able to face that walk until now.

Martinez was on a long road, a road that he seemed to have no interest in traveling. His legs had been shredded, and could not be saved. One was gone at his pelvis, one below the knee. He still had the use of his arms, but he was paralyzed from just below his ribcage down.

Before Luke came in here, a nurse whispered to him that Martinez spent most of his time crying. He also spent a lot of time sleeping—he was on a heavy dose of sedatives.

"I just came to say goodbye," Luke said.

Martinez had been staring out the window at the bright day. Now he turned to look at Luke. His face was fine. He had always been a handsome guy, and he still was. God, or the Devil, or whoever was in charge of these things, had spared the man his face.

"Hello and goodbye, right? Good for you, Stone. You're all in one piece, you gonna walk right out of here, probably get a promotion, some kind of citation. Never see another minute of combat because you were in the psych ward. Ride a desk, make more money, send other guys in. Good for you, man."

Luke sat quietly. He folded one leg over the other. He didn't say a word.

"Murphy stopped by here a couple of weeks ago, did you know that? I asked if he was going to see you, but he said no. He didn't want to see you. Stone? Stone's a suck-up to the brass. Why should he see Stone? Murphy said he's gonna ride the freight trains across the country, like a hobo. That's his plan. You know what I think? I think he's gonna shoot himself in the head."

"I'm sorry about what happened," Luke said.

But Martinez wasn't listening.

"How's your wife, man? Pregnancy coming along good? Little Luke junior on the way? That's real nice, Stone. I'm happy for you."

"Robby, did I do something to you?" Luke said.

Tears began to stream down Martinez's face. He pounded the bed with his fists. "Look at me, man! I have no legs! I'm gonna be pissing and shitting in a bag the rest of my life, okay? I can't walk. I'm never gonna walk. I can't..."

He shook his head. "I can't..."

Now Martinez began to weep.

"I didn't do it," Luke said. His voice sounded small and weak, like a child's voice.

"Yes! You did it! You did this. It was you. It was your mission. We were your guys. Now we're dead. All but you."

Luke shook his head. "No. It was Heath's mission. I was just—"

"You bastard! You were just following orders. But you could have said no."

Luke said nothing. Martinez breathed deeply.

"I told you to kill me." He gritted his teeth. "I told you... to... kill... me. Now look at this... this mess. You were the one." He shook his head. "You could have done it. Nobody would know."

Luke stared at him. “I couldn’t kill you. You’re my friend.”

“Don’t say that!” Martinez said. “I’m not your friend.”

He turned his head to face the wall. “Get out of my room.”

“Robby...”

“How many men you killed, Stone? How many, huh? A hundred? Two hundred?”

Luke spoke barely above a whisper. He answered honestly. “I don’t know. I stopped counting.”

“You couldn’t kill one man as a favor? A favor to your so-called friend?”

Luke didn’t speak. Such a thing had never occurred to him before. Kill his own man? But he realized now that it was possible.

For a split second, he was back on that hillside on that cold morning. He saw Martinez sprawled on his back, crying. Luke walked over to him. There was no ammo left. All Luke had was the twisted bayonet in his hand. He crouched down next to Martinez, the bayonet protruding from his fist like a spike. He reached up with it, above Martinez’s heart, and...

“I don’t want you here,” Martinez said now. “I want you out of my room. Get out, okay, Stone? Get out right now.”

Suddenly, Martinez started screaming. He took the nurse call button from his bedside and began ramming it with his thumb.

“I want you out! Get out! Out!”

Luke stood. He raised his hands. “Okay, Robby. Okay.”

“OUT!”

Luke headed for the door.

“I hope you die, Stone. I hope your baby dies.”

Then Luke was out in the hall. Two nurses were coming toward him, walking but moving fast.

“Is he okay?” the first one said.

“Did you hear me, Stone? I hope your...”

But Luke had already covered his ears and was running down the hall. He ran through the building, sprinting now, gasping for air. He saw the EXIT sign, turned toward it, and burst through the double doors. Then he was running across the grounds along a concrete pathway. Here and there, people turned to look, but Luke kept running. He ran until his lungs began to burn.

A man was coming the other way. The man was older, but broad and strong. He walked upright with military bearing, but wore blue jeans and a leather jacket. Luke was almost on top of him before he realized he knew him.

“Luke,” the man said. “Where you running to, son?”

Luke stopped. He bent over and put his hands on his knees. His breath came in harsh rasps. He fought for big lungfuls.

“Don,” he said. “Oh man, Don. I’m out of shape.”

He stood up. He reached out to shake Don Morris’s hand, but Don pulled him into a bear hug instead. It felt... Luke didn’t have words for it. Don was like a father to him. Feelings surged. It felt safe. It felt like a relief. It felt like for so long, he had been holding so many things inside of him, things Don knew intuitively, without having to be told. Being hugged by Don Morris felt like being home.

After a long moment, they parted.

“What are you doing here?” Luke said.

He imagined Don was down from Washington to meet with the brass at Fort Bragg, but Don dispelled that notion in just a few words.

“I came to get you,” he said.

* * *

“It’s a good deal,” Don said. “The best you’re going to get.”

They were driving through the tree-lined cobblestone streets of downtown Fayetteville in a nondescript rental sedan. Don was at the wheel, Luke in the passenger seat. People sat in open air coffee shops and restaurants along the sidewalks. It was a military city—a lot of the people who were out and about were upright and fit.

But in addition to being healthy, they also looked happy. At this moment, Luke couldn't imagine what that felt like.

"Tell me again," he said.

"You go out at the rank of Master Sergeant. Honorable discharge, effective at the end of this calendar year, though you can go on indefinite leave as early as this afternoon. The new pay goes into effect immediately, and carries on until discharge. Your service record is intact, and your wartime veteran's pension and all other benefits are in place."

It sounded like a good deal. But Luke hadn't considered leaving the Army until this minute. The entire time he was in the hospital, he had been hoping to rejoin his unit. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, Don had been negotiating an exit for him.

"And if I want to stay in?" he said.

Don shrugged. "You've been in the hospital for nearly a month. The records I've seen suggest you've made little or no progress in therapy, and are considered an uncooperative patient."

He sighed. "They're not going to take you back, Luke. They think you're damaged goods. If you refuse the package I just described, they plan to send you out with an involuntary psychiatric discharge at your current rank and pay, with a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder. I'm sure I don't have to tell you the sort of prospects faced by men with a discharge under those circumstances."

Luke supposed that none of this was a very big surprise, but it was still painful to hear. He knew the deal. The Army didn't even formally acknowledge the existence of Delta Force. The mission was classified—it never happened. So it wasn't as if he hoped to receive a medal during a public ceremony. In Delta, you didn't do it for the glory.

Even so, while he expected to be ignored, he didn't expect to be thrown on the scrap heap. He had given a lot of himself to the Army, and they were ready to dump him after one bad mission. True, the mission was more than bad. It was a disaster, a debacle, but that wasn't his fault.

"They're kicking me out either way," he said. "I can go quietly or I can go kicking and screaming."

"That's right," Don said.

Luke sighed heavily. He watched the old town roll past. They passed out of the historic district and into a more modern roadway with strip malls. They came to the end of a long block and Don turned left into a Burger King parking lot.

Civilian life was coming, whether Luke liked it or not. It was a world he had left fourteen years before. He had never expected to see it again. What went on in that world?

He watched an overweight young couple waddle toward the door of the restaurant.

"What am I going to do?" Luke said. "After the end of this year? What kind of civilian job can I possibly get?"

"That's easy," Don said. "You're going to come work for me."

Luke looked at him.

Don pulled into a spot near the back. There were no other cars here. "The Special Response Team is ready to go. While you've been lying in bed and examining your navel, I've been wrestling with bureaucrats and drawing up paperwork. I've got funding cemented in place, at least through the end of the year. I've got a small headquarters in the Virginia suburbs, not far from the CIA. They're stenciling the letters on the door as we speak. I've got the ear of the FBI director. And I spoke on the phone—briefly, I might add—with the President of the United States."

Don turned off the car and looked at Luke.

"I'm ready to hire my first agent. You're it."

He gestured with his head at a large sign near the front of the parking lot. Luke glanced where Don indicated. Just beneath the Burger King logo was a series of black letters on a white background. Taken together, the letters spelled out a bleak message.

Now Hiring. Inquire Within.

“If you don’t want to join me, I’ll bet there are plenty of other opportunities out there for you.”

Luke shook his head. Then he laughed.

“This has been a strange day,” he said.

Don nodded. “Well, it’s about to get even stranger. Here’s another surprise. This one’s a gift. I didn’t want to give it to you at the hospital because hospitals are awful places. Especially VA hospitals.”

Standing in front of the car was a beautiful young woman with long brown hair. She looked in at Luke, tears in her eyes. She wore a light jacket, open to reveal a mommy shirt. The woman was very pregnant.

With Luke’s son.

It took Luke a split second to recognize her—something he would never reveal to anyone, not even under pain of torture. His mind hadn’t been working right these past weeks, and she was out of place in this wasteland of a parking lot. He didn’t expect to see her here. Her presence was unreal, otherworldly.

Rebecca.

“Oh my God,” Luke said.

“Yeah,” Don said. “You might want to go say hello before she finds someone better. Around here? It won’t take long.”

“Why... why did you bring her here?”

Don shrugged. He looked around at the Burger King parking lot.

“It’s more romantic than meeting her back at the base.”

Then Luke was out of the car. He seemed to float to her. They embraced, and he held her for a long time. Endlessly. He never wanted to let go of her.

For the first time, Luke felt tears streaming down his own face. He breathed deeply. It felt so good to hold her. He didn’t speak. He couldn’t think of a single word to say.

She looked up at him and rubbed the tears away from his face.

“Isn’t it great?” she said. “Don said you’re going to work for him.”

Luke nodded. He still didn’t speak. It seemed like it was settled, then. Don and Becca had made the decision for him.

“I love you so much, Luke,” she said. “I’m so glad this military life is over.”

CHAPTER SIX

May 3

7:15 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time

Headquarters of the Special Response Team

McLean, Virginia—Suburbs of Washington, DC

“I think I might have something for you,” Don Morris said.

They were sitting in Don’s new office. The place was starting to take shape. There were photos of his wife and kids on the desk, framed ribbons and proclamations on the walls. The desk itself was a wide expanse of gleaming oak. On top of it sat a telephone console, a computer monitor, a cell phone, a satellite phone, and not much else. Don wasn’t a big believer in paperwork.

“Something to get you out in the field a bit. You’ve seemed a little antsy since you came here. This might cure that.”

Luke stared at him. It was almost as if Don had just read his mind. Don had done him a favor by giving him this job. Luke knew that. It was a lifeline thrown to a drowning man. But Luke was already inching toward the door. It had been weeks of sitting and talking so far. Luke was bored. That was okay. The danger was that if it went on too long, he would start to go crazy. Desk-bound intelligence work was not for him. That was beginning to become abundantly clear.

“I’m all ears,” Luke said.

Don gestured back out the open door to his office. “Let’s go down the hall.”

Luke followed Don along the narrow hallway to the brightly lit conference room at the other end. This small office complex had been a satellite office for the Bureau of Housing and Urban Development until six months ago. Don was working to drag the building into the twenty-first century a little bit.

With that in mind, a tall young guy with a ponytail and wearing strange wraparound aviator glasses was hanging a flat-panel display on one wall. Another display was already on the far wall, wires running to a control panel on the long conference table. The guy was wearing a red, white, and blue T-shirt, jeans and red Converse All-Star high-top sneakers.

Luke barely looked at him. He assumed that he was a technician from a government contractor agency, or possibly some techie buried deep inside the FBI.

“Luke, have you met Mark Swann?” Don said, casually blowing those thoughts out of the water. “He’s our new systems designer and operator, in charge of our intelligence networks, Internet, satellite connections... Mark’s going to wear a lot of hats, at least for a little while. Mark Swann, this is Agent Luke Stone. Luke is our first field agent, although we are about to add a couple more.”

The guy turned around. He was skinny. He had stovepipe legs. The front of his American flag shirt read “We’re Number 31!”

The guy’s eyes met Luke’s. Luke sized him up quickly. He was young, maybe early twenties—he looked even younger than that. He was confident bordering on arrogant. He was smart. He had probably been a computer geek in high school. He and Luke were going to be in different departments. This guy’s thing was equipment—taking it apart, putting it back together, making it hum. He had probably never participated in a moment of violence in his life, and might not have witnessed any such moments.

They shook hands.

“We’re number thirty-one, are we?” Luke said. “What are we number thirty-one at?”

The guy shrugged and smiled.

“I don’t know, man. Maybe you can guess.”

Luke nearly laughed.

“I can’t guess,” he said. “Maybe you can just help me out a little.”

“Healthcare,” the guy said. “We’re number thirty-one in healthcare, according to the World Health Organization. We’re number one in healthcare expenditures, though, if you’re looking for something to be proud about.”

Luke was still holding the guy’s hand.

“I’d be proud to break a few of your bones, and see what a good job American doctors do putting them back together. But you’d probably prefer to get them fixed in Mexico.”

Swann took his hand back. “Cuba, maybe. Or Canada.”

“Very nice, Mark,” Don said. “I’m sure Agent Stone is glad to discover that he’s been risking his neck all these years for a country with such a mediocre healthcare performance.”

Don gestured with his head at the audiovisual set-up. “How’s it coming?”

Mark nodded. “The first display is ready to go. High-definition, high-speed connection. You can pull that keyboard up on the table there, and that small screen, and access any of your own files just by using your login. You can choose whatever you want to share and it’ll come up on the big screen. I can easily make that ability available to anyone in the building—I just wanted you to take it for a test drive first, see how you like it.”

Don nodded. “Very cool. What about visitors? Also, what about sharing information with other venues?”

The kid Mark Swann raised his hands as if to say *Don’t shoot!* “It’s coming. But we’re going to want airtight encryption before we start broadcasting intelligence outside the building. You can email anything you want. But in terms of putting up video imagery or data that appear elsewhere, or bringing broadcasts in here? That’ll happen on a case-by-case basis with each partner. CIA, NSA, the White House if it comes to that, even FBI headquarters. They’ve all got their own procedures and we’re going to be following their leads.”

Don nodded. “Okay, Mark. I like it already. Can you give Agent Stone and me about twenty, maybe thirty minutes? And send Trudy Wellington in here?”

Swann nodded. “Sure.”

When he left, Don looked at Luke.

“Funny kid,” Luke said.

“Whiz kid,” Don said. “My goal here is to hire the best. And when it comes to that, it isn’t always the guy who fits the suit the best. In terms of technology, usually it isn’t. We’re cowboys in here, Luke. We’re the kids who color outside the lines. That’s what they want from us. The FBI director said that himself.”

“I’m with you,” Luke said.

“You should be. You’re one of the best special operators I’ve seen in my long career, and in terms of coloring outside the lines... well...”

Suddenly a young woman appeared in the doorway. If anything, she was even younger than the guy who just left. Don was staffing this place up with children. This child, however, was beautiful. She had long, curly brown hair. She wore a dress shirt and slacks that hugged her curves. She wore big red eyeglasses that gave her a slight owlish appearance.

“Don?”

“Trudy, come in. I want you to meet Luke Stone. He’s the man I told you about. Luke, this is Trudy Wellington. She is our new intel officer. She’s another whiz kid, graduated MIT as a teenager, spent a couple of years in CIA listening stations. Now she’s with us, ready to take a quantum leap to the next level of spycraft.”

Luke shook hands with the young woman. She was a little sheepish, wouldn’t quite meet his eyes. Hell, she was still a kid.

Luke glanced back and forth between Don and Trudy. Something about the body language...

Nah, it was impossible. Don had been married for thirty years. He had a daughter and a son who were older than this Trudy person.

“Trudy’s going to brief us on the mission we have on deck.”

Trudy sat right down at the conference table. Luke and Don did the same. She immediately took the keyboard, pulled the small monitor forward, and typed in her information. Her office computer’s desktop appeared on the large flat-panel display on the wall.

“You already know how to use this?” Don said.

“Yeah, well... We had AV stuff like this at MIT, of course. Not so much at CIA that I saw, but I imagine they have it somewhere. Swann gave me access earlier. I think he was showing off.”

“Anyway, it’s pretty cool,” Don said.

Luke nodded. He almost laughed again. He pictured steel-eyed Don as he had known him these past several years—parachuting into combat zones, commanding men in the field, remorselessly killing bad guys. He seemed almost absurdly proud of his little agency, its office gizmos, and the young civilians who manipulated them with such ease. Well, good for him.

On the screen, a United States Marine Corps ID appeared. It showed a soldier with a flattop haircut, a broad jaw, and a threatening gaze. He seemed sarcastic, irritated, and ready to murder someone all at once. He looked like the kind of guy who would do his combat service overseas, then come home and spend his time getting in bar fights during R&R. A rough customer.

Luke had seen a lot of guys like that. As a matter of fact, he had knocked a few of them unconscious.

“I’m going to assume that neither of you have prior knowledge of the subject, or the task at hand,” Trudy said. “It might make this conversation a little longer than necessary, it might not. But it tends to guarantee we’re all on the same page. Sound okay?”

“Good,” Don said.

“Sounds okay to me,” Luke said.

She nodded. “Then let’s begin. The man on the screen is former Marine Corps Sergeant Edwin Lee Parr. Thirty-seven years old, raised in Kentucky, south of Lexington. Combat veteran, who saw action in both the invasion of Panama in 1989, and the Gulf War. He was also deployed in a peacekeeping role at the end of the Kosovo War. Purple Heart and a Bronze Star for meritorious service during the invasion of Panama. Honorable discharge December 1999, after twelve years of service.

“Parr came home and kicked around the country for a year and a half after that, doing security work. He had a concealed carry license, and was mostly a personal bodyguard, mostly for businessmen, often for diamond dealers. He worked for a firm called White Knight Security, and bounced between New York, Miami, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. A few documented trips to Tokyo, Hong Kong, and London, though it isn’t clear how the firearm regulations were handled in those cases.”

Luke stared into the man’s angry eyes. It didn’t seem like bad work for a combat veteran. Not much action, but plenty of movement. It might even appeal to a man like...

“Then September eleven happened,” Trudy said.

“Did he reenlist?” Luke said.

She shook her head. “No. Within a short period of time, there was enormous demand for experienced military contractors. White Knight Security spun off a whole new division called White Knight Consultants. Edwin Parr was one of their first available combat zone experts. He did a tour in Afghanistan, and has now been in Iraq for twenty-five straight months.”

Luke was beginning to wish she would get to the point. The thought of Edwin Lee Parr in a combat theater, beholden to little or no chain of command, and making ten times the money of normal soldiers irritated Luke. To put it mildly.

“Twenty-five months?” Luke said. “What’s he doing over there? I mean, besides padding his bank account?”

“Edwin Parr appears to have gone rogue,” Trudy said.

She paused and looked away from the keyboard and mouse for a moment. “The next images are graphic.”

Luke stared at her.

“I think we can handle it,” Don said.

Trudy nodded. “Parr was fired by White Knight four months ago, despite having a five-year relationship with them. White Knight disavows knowledge of his activities or whereabouts. They disclaim responsibility for his actions.”

A new image appeared on the screen. It showed perhaps a dozen bodies strewn about some sort of market square. The bodies were almost not recognizable as human—they had been torn apart by a bomb or some type of high-caliber repeating weapon.

“Parr is operating in northwest Iraq, in what is known as the Sunni Triangle, beyond the reach of coalition troops. He has anywhere up to a dozen former or possibly present-tense contractors operating with him, as well as what we believe are one or two Marine Corps deserters. He is believed to be responsible for ordering a civilian massacre that took place in this Fallujah open air market, and it is believed that this is an image of the aftermath of that massacre. As many as forty people may have died in the attack.”

Luke was interested. “Why would he do that?”

A new image appeared on the screen. It showed two burned and headless torsos hanging from a bridge overpass.

“The bodies you see here have been identified as the remains of former American military contractors Thomas Calence, age thirty-one, and Vladimir Garcia, age thirty-nine. Their jeep was attacked by Sunni insurgents. They were captured, beheaded, and set on fire. When this happened, neither man was on any payroll as a military contractor. The massacre in the previous image appears to have been payback for the deaths of Calence and Garcia, as part of an escalating series of tit for tat attacks. Calence and Garcia had been operating with Parr.”

“What were they doing?” Luke said.

A new image appeared, a map of the so-called Sunni Triangle.

“The Sunni Triangle was Saddam Hussein’s stronghold in Iraq. The south of the country is primarily Shiite, and Saddam took great pains to suppress the Shiites, including frequent massacres. The north is primarily Kurdish, and if anything, the Kurds got even worse treatment than the Shiites. But north-central and northwest Iraq is Sunni. Saddam was born there, and the people there are his loyalists. It has been very difficult for the American military to tame this region, and much of it is still a no-go zone. We believe that Parr operates out there because this is where the bulk of Saddam’s wealth is hidden.

“It seems that Parr has been systematically uncovering secret caches of money, weapons, diamonds, gold, and other precious metals, as well as luxury cars. He is finding this stuff through the use of torture and murder of Saddam’s former lieutenants and intimidation of the local population. The locals hate Parr, and they are actively trying to kill him.

“But Parr has put together a small army of tough hombres—military consultants, several of them former special operators, and as I already indicated, possibly two Marine Corps deserters. All his men are battle-hardened, and Parr is making them rich, as long as they can stay alive. On that score, they are taking increasingly extreme measures to make sure they do so. Currently, they are kidnapping women and girls from the local tribes. We believe they are holding them as human shields. It’s also possible they are selling some of them to Al Qaeda, and to Shiite tribesmen from the south.”

Trudy paused.

“He is looting Saddam’s buried treasure as fast as he can, and he is not letting anyone get in his way.”

“What’s our role in this?” Luke said.

Don shrugged. “We’re the FBI, son. We’re going to go in there, rescue anyone being held against their will, and arrest Edwin Lee Parr for kidnapping and for murder.”

“Arrest him...” Luke said. “For murder. In a war zone. Where hundreds of thousands of people have already died.”

He let his mind chew on that one for a minute.

Don nodded. “That’s correct. Then we’re going to bring him back here, try him, and lock him away. This man Parr is a mess, and he needs to be cleaned up. He’s a murderer, a liar, and a thief. He’s out there beyond anyone’s reach, operating under no one’s command, and has become a law unto himself. He is committing atrocities that the Iraqi people are blaming on Americans. If he keeps on, he is going to cause an international incident, one that will give our entire effort in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and around the world, a black eye.”

Luke took a deep breath. “How do you picture this going?”

Don and Trudy stared at him.

Trudy spoke. “If you take the case, the CIA will provide you with an identity as a corrupt military contractor on the make,” she said. “You and a partner will proceed alone to the Sunni Triangle, find Parr’s headquarters from half a dozen suspected locations, infiltrate his team, arrest him, and then call for a helicopter extraction.”

Luke grunted. He nearly laughed. He looked at young, lovely Trudy, graduate of an elite East Coast university. For some reason, he focused on her hands. They were tiny, immaculate, even beautiful. He doubted they had ever held a gun. They looked like they had never lifted anything heavier than a pencil, or been sullied by an ounce of dirt, in their lives. Her hands should be on a commercial for Palmolive. Her hands should have their own TV show.

“That sounds good,” he said. “Did you come up with that? I can tell you that my last helicopter extraction went pretty well. My best friend died, my commanding officer died, pretty much everybody died, actually. The only people who didn’t die were me, a guy who lost his mind, and another guy who lost both his legs *and* his mind. And... you know, his ability to...”

Luke trailed off. He didn’t want to finish that sentence.

“That guy won’t speak to me anymore because he asked me to kill him, and I declined.”

Trudy stared at Luke with those big, pretty eyes. The glasses made her eyes seem bigger than they really were. She looked, at this moment, like a scientist staring through a microscope at an insect.

“That’s awkward,” she said.

“It’s old news,” Don said. “You either climb back on the horse, or you don’t.”

Luke nodded. He raised his hands. “I know. I’m sorry. I know that. Okay? So let’s say I go in. What if Parr doesn’t want to come quietly? What if spending the rest of his life in prison doesn’t exactly appeal to him?”

Don shrugged. “If he resists arrest, then you terminate his command, and terminate his group’s ability to operate, by whatever means available to you at that time.”

“You realize we’re talking about Americans?” Luke said.

They both just looked at him. Neither one answered. A long moment passed. It was a silly question. Of course they realized.

“Do you want it?” Don said.

It took a minute before Luke spoke. Did he want it? Of course he wanted it. What choice did he have? What else was he going to do? Sit in this office building and go crazy? Sit here and turn down missions until Don finally got the message and let him go? This was what he had been hired for. Compared to the things he had done previously, it wasn’t even much of a mission. It was practically a weekend getaway.

An image of Rebecca, very pregnant now, out at her family's cabin, flashed across the screen in his mind. His son was growing inside her. He would be here soon. Despite this desk job, despite the long commute, despite the fact that he was gone all day five days a week, the past month was about the happiest they had ever been together.

What was Becca going to think about this?

“Luke?” Don said.

Luke nodded. “Yeah. I want it.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

6:15 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time

Queen Anne's County, Maryland—Eastern Shore of Chesapeake Bay

“You look beautiful,” Luke said.

He had just arrived. He had ripped off his shirt and tie and changed into jeans and a T-shirt as soon as he walked in the door. Now he had a can of beer in his hand. The beer was ice cold and delicious.

The traffic was insane. It was a ninety-minute drive from DC, through Annapolis, across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, and on to the Eastern Shore. But none of that mattered because he was home now.

He and Becca were staying at her family's cabin in Queen Anne's County. The cabin was an ancient, rustic place sitting on a small bluff right above the bay. It was two floors, wooden everything, with creaks and squeaks everywhere you stepped. There was a screened-in porch facing the water and a kitchen door that slammed shut with enthusiasm.

The living room furniture was generations old. The beds were old metal skeletons on springs; the bed in the master bedroom was almost long enough, but not quite, for Luke to sleep comfortably on it. By far the sturdiest thing in the house was the stone fireplace in the living room. It was almost as if the grand old fireplace had been there already, and someone with a sense of humor had built a clapboard shack all around it.

To hear tell of it, the house had been in the family for a hundred years. Some of Becca's earliest memories happened in that house.

It really was a beautiful place. Luke loved it there.

They were sitting on the back patio, enjoying the late afternoon as the sun slowly went west over the vast sweep of water. It was a breezy day, and white sails were everywhere out there. Luke almost wished that time would stop and he could just sit right in this spot forever. The setting was amazing, and Becca did look beautiful. Luke wasn't lying about that.

She was pretty as ever, and almost as petite. Their son was a basketball she was smuggling under her shirt. She had spent part of the afternoon digging a bit in her garden, and she was a little bit sweaty and flushed. She wore a big floppy sun hat and was drinking a big glass of ice water.

She smiled. “You don't look too bad yourself.”

A long pause drew out between them.

“How did your day go?” she said.

Luke took another sip of his beer. He believed that when trouble was brewing, the thing to do was to get right to it. Beating around the bush was not normally his style. And Becca deserved to hear it right away.

“Well, it was different. Don is staffing the place up. And he dropped a project in my lap today.”

“Well, that's good,” Becca said. “It's good news, right? Something to sink your teeth into? I know you've been feeling a little bored by the job, and frustrated by the commute.”

Luke nodded. “Sure, it's good. It could be. It's police work, I guess you'd say. We're the FBI, right? That's what we do. The downside is, if I'm going to take the assignment—and really, I don't have a lot of choice since it is my job—then I need to go out of town for a few days.”

Luke could hear himself hemming and hawing. He didn't like the sound of it. Go out of town? Was it a joke? Don wasn't sending him to Pittsburgh.

Now Becca sipped her water. Her eyes watched him over the top of the glass. They were wary eyes. “Where do you have to go?”

Here it came. Might as well put it out there.

“Iraq.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Oh, Luke. Come on.” She sighed heavily. “He wants you to go to Iraq? You just came from Afghanistan, and you nearly got killed. Doesn’t he realize we’re about to have a baby? I mean, he knows this, right?”

Luke nodded. “He saw you, babe. Remember? He brought you down to see me.”

“Then how can he even think of this? I hope you told him no.”

Luke took another sip of his beer. It was a touch warmer now. Not quite as delicious as a moment ago.

“Luke? You told him no, right?”

“Sweetheart, it’s my job. There aren’t a lot of jobs like this available to me. Don threw me a rope and saved my neck. The Army was going to say I had PTSD and put me out on my butt. That didn’t happen because of Don. I don’t have a lot of room to tell him no right now. And as things go, this is a pretty easy assignment.”

“An easy assignment in a war zone,” Becca said. “What’s the job? Assassinate Osama bin Laden?”

Luke shook his head. “No.”

“What is it then?”

“There’s an American military contractor over there that’s out of control. He’s looting old Saddam Hussein hideouts and stealing cash, artwork, gold, diamonds... They want me and a partner to arrest him. It’s not a military operation at all. It’s a police job.”

“Who’s the partner?” she said. He could see in her eyes she was thinking about what happened to his last partner.

“I haven’t met him yet.”

“Why don’t they just have the military police do this?”

Luke shook his head. “It’s not an issue for the military. Like I said, it’s a police matter. The contractor is technically a civilian. They want to make the difference clear.”

Luke thought of all the things he was leaving out. The restive nature of the region, and the fierce fighting going on there. The atrocities Parr had committed. The team of badass operators and remorseless killers he had accumulated around himself. The desperation they must feel right now to get out alive, unscathed, with all their loot, and without being captured by the law. The dead men, decapitated and burned, and hanging from a bridge.

Abruptly, Becca started crying. Luke put the beer down and went to her. He knelt by her chair and hugged her.

“Oh God, Luke. Tell me this isn’t going to start up again. I don’t think I can bear it. Our son is coming.”

“I know,” he said. “I know that. It’s not going to be like before. It’s not a deployment. I’ll be gone three days, maybe four. I arrest a guy, I bring him home.”

“What if you die?” she said.

“I’m not going to die. I’m going to be very careful. I probably won’t even have to draw my gun.”

He almost couldn’t believe the things he was telling her.

She was shaking now from the tears.

“I don’t want you to go,” she said.

“I know, honey. I know. But I have to. It’ll be very quick. I will call you every night. You can stay with your folks. And then I’ll be right back. It’ll be like I never even left.”

She shook her head, the tears coming harder now. “Please,” she said. “Please tell me it’s going to be okay.”

Luke squeezed her tight, mindful of the baby growing inside her. “It’s going to be okay. It’s going to be fine. I know it is.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

May 5

3:45 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time

Joint Base Andrews

Prince George's County, Maryland

“You’re the boss,” Don said.

He was a couple of inches taller than Luke, and quite a bit broader. With Don’s gray hair, and his size, and his age, and his experience... well, Luke always felt a little bit like a child next to Don.

“Don’t let them forget who’s in charge. I’d be coming with you, but I’m stuck in meetings. You’re my representative. As far as this trip is concerned, you are me.”

Luke nodded. “Okay, Don.”

They were walking a long, wide corridor through the terminal. Swarms of people, mostly in uniforms of various kinds, milled about, moving to and fro. People were standing and eating at Taco Bell and Subway. Men and women were hugging. Piles of baggage were going by on carts. The place was busy. There were two wars on at once, and all across the armed services, personnel were on the move.

“We’ve got a new guy joining you. He’s your partner, but you’re the senior partner. His name is Ed Newsam. I like him. He’s big, he’s cocky as hell, and he’s young. I plucked him out of Delta, even though he’s only been there a year.”

“A year? Don...”

“In a year, he’s already acquitted himself very admirably. Believe me, you’re going to be happy I acquired this guy. He’s a stud. He’s an animal, like you were at that age.”

At thirty-two, Luke was already beginning to feel old. He had been back in the gym the past few weeks, and it was suddenly an uphill climb to get in shape. That was a rude awakening. He had let himself go during his stay in the hospital.

“Trudy and Swann are traveling with you, but they won’t go into theater with you. They will stay in the Green Zone where it’s safe, and offer you guidance and intelligence from there. Under no circumstances should you put them in harm’s way. They are not military personnel, nor have they been.”

Luke nodded. “Understood.”

Don stopped. He turned to face Luke. His hard eyes softened a touch. It was like he was Luke’s dad—the father he never had. Don was just a big, gray-haired, broad-chested, face-like-a-granite-cliff dad.

“You’re going to do fine, son. You’ve held command positions before. You’ve been in war zones before. You’ve been on difficult missions before, impossible missions. This isn’t like that. This one’s got a glass jaw, okay? Big Daddy Cronin is going to be running this operation on the ground. He’s got your back and he’s going to make sure you have the people you need in the air above you, and one step behind you.”

Luke was glad to hear that. Bill Cronin was a CIA Special Agent. He had been around the block a few times, had a lot of Middle East experience. Luke had served under him twice before—once while on loan from Delta Force to the CIA, and once during a joint special op.

Don went on. “I fully expect you guys to walk in there and for Parr to drop his weapon and throw his hands in the air. He’ll be relieved you’re not Al Qaeda. We need an early win to show the congressmen we mean business, so I padded your comeback schedule with an easy knockout. But don’t tell the others that. They think this is the most serious thing ever.”

Luke smiled and shook his head. “Okay, Dad.”

“I’d ruffle your hair, but you’re too old,” Don said.

Up ahead was a small waiting area for their gate. Three rows of five seats each were clustered in front of a desk, and behind the desk, the door to the tarmac. The desk was abandoned, and no one sat in the chairs. This was an empty area of the terminal.

Through the large windows, Luke could see a small blue State Department jet plane parked and waiting outside. A rollaway staircase led up to the open cabin door of the plane.

A group of three people milled around at the gate. Two of them were Trudy Wellington and Mark Swann. Trudy was tiny, and looked every inch of it. Swann was tall and thin, but was positively dwarfed by the third member of their party, a black guy in jeans and a leather jacket. The black guy stood by himself, a little bit away from Trudy and Swann. He had a green rucksack on the floor at his feet.

“That the guy?” Luke said. “Newsam?”

Don nodded. “That’s the guy.”

Luke soaked him in as they approached. He looked to be six foot, five inches tall. His shoulders were broad, as was his chest. Beneath his leather jacket he wore a white T-shirt that clung to his massive frame. It looked like someone had painted it on there. His arms were covered by his jacket, but his fists were huge. He wore yellow work boots on his big feet. He looked like a cartoon rendering of a superhero.

Except for his face—it was as arrogant and as young as that of any kid in high school. There wasn’t a line on it.

“This guy has seen combat before?” Luke said.

Don nodded again. “Oh yeah.”

“Okay. You’re the boss.”

“Yes I am.”

They reached the group. The three of them turned. Trudy’s and Swann’s eyes were focused on Don, their boss. The newcomer, Newsam, stared at Luke.

“Thanks for coming out, everyone. Trudy and Mark, you’ve had the opportunity to meet Luke Stone, your commander on this trip. Luke was one of the best special operators I had the pleasure to serve with in the United States Army. Luke, this is Ed Newsam, who I didn’t serve with, but who I’ve heard spectacular things about.”

The two men shook hands. Luke looked into the eyes of the larger man. Newsam didn’t do anything overt—he didn’t, for example, try to crush Luke’s hand in his own. But his eyes said it all: *You don’t command me.*

Luke begged to differ. But this wasn’t the time or the place to worry about it. If they were going to work together, though, especially in a combat zone, the time would almost certainly come.

Don said a few words of encouragement to send the group off. But Luke wasn’t listening anymore. He just watched those hard young eyes, as they watched him.

CHAPTER NINE

11:15 p.m. Central European Summer Time (5:15 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time)
Institut Le Rosey
Rolle, Switzerland

It was the most famous school in the world.

Well, it was the most expensive, anyway.

But really, it was just very boring, and she didn't want to be here. Her mom and dad had sent her here for a year of "finishing" before she went to college. And it had been the dreariest, loneliest year of her life. Maybe things would get better now that it was almost over. She was accepted to Yale for the fall.

Of course she was. Her father was one of Yale's most well-known alumni, so why wouldn't they accept her? She was Elizabeth Barrett, younger daughter of David P. Barrett, the current President of the United States.

In fact, she was finishing up on the telephone with her dad right now.

"Well, sweetheart, are there any positives that you can take away from this year?"

That was her father, always talking about "positives." Was it even a real word? He said words and phrases like that all the time—there were always positives, and takeaways, and we were always moving forward, and climbing the ladder, and building something great. She had begun to suspect that he wasn't nearly as optimistic as he talked. The whole act was a fake, a fraud. He just said these things because he knew that in his life, there was always someone listening.

She hated that part of it. She hated the security detail from the Secret Service that hovered nearby twenty-four hours a day. She liked some of the agents themselves, but she hated the fact of it, that it was necessary, that her life was stilted and thwarted at every turn because of it. They were listening to this phone call, of course, and they were never far away—a man stood out in the hall all night while she slept.

"I don't know, Dad," she said. "I just don't know. I'll be glad to get out of here."

"Well, you got to go skiing in the Swiss Alps, right? You met people from all over the world."

"I liked our Colorado trips better when I was a kid," she said. "And the people I met? Yeah, great. Kids from Russia whose dads are the gangsters that stole all the industries when the Soviet Union collapsed. Kids from Saudi Arabia and Dubai whose dads are all princes or whatever. Is everybody in Saudi Arabia a prince? I think that's the big takeaway, Dad. Everybody in Saudi Arabia belongs to the royal family."

Her dad the President laughed. It made her smile. She hadn't heard that from him in a long, long while. And it made her think about how things used to be, back when her dad worked in the family oil business and co-owned a pro football team. He had been a fun dad, once upon a time.

When they used to have family barbecues, he would wear a chef's apron that said *World's Funnest Dad* on it. That seemed like a long time ago now.

"Well, honey," he said, "I'm pretty sure not everybody in Saudi Arabia is in the royal family."

"I know," she said. "Some people are servants and slaves."

"Elizabeth!" he said, but he wasn't angry. He was having fun with her. She was always the one to say the outrageous things, even when she was young.

"The truth hurts, Dad."

"Elizabeth? That's very funny. But I've got to run. Do this for me, will you? You've got just a week left to go there. Try to make the best of it. Take advantage of the opportunities presented, and do something that excites you, okay?"

“I don’t know what that would be,” she said, except now she was lying to him. “But I’ll do my best.”

“Good. You’re beautiful, hon. Your mom and I love you. Grandpa and Grandma send their love. And call your sister, will you?”

“Okay,” Elizabeth said. “I love you too, Dad.”

She hung up the telephone. In her mind, she imagined all the people who were hanging up at the same time. Her dad certainly, probably in the Oval Office. But also Secret Service people listening on other phones in the Oval Office—two or three of them, hanging up as one. Also, people sitting at computer screens in the CIA building, or the FBI headquarters. Also, her personal bodyguard standing out in the hall, with the wire going to his ear. Was he on the phone call? She bet he was.

Also, the Russian and Chinese spy agencies. You knew they were listening. And the billionaire Russian gangsters who sent their uncouth loud children to this expensive school. Were they listening? Probably.

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