



OUR
SACRED
HONOR

A LUKE STONE THRILLER--BOOK #6

JACK MARS

A Luke Stone Thriller

Джек Марс

Our Sacred Honor

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2017

Дж. Марк

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“One of the best thrillers I have read this year. The plot is intelligent and will keep you hooked from the beginning. The author did a superb job creating a set of characters who are fully developed and very much enjoyable. I can hardly wait for the sequel.” -- Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos (re Any Means Necessary) OUR SACRED HONOR is book #6 in the bestselling Luke Stone thriller series, which begins with ANY MEANS NECESSARY (book #1), a free download with over 500 five star reviews! After being struck by an Iran-backed terrorist attack, Israel gives Iran a 72 hour ultimatum: clear out your military bases before we destroy them by air. Iran responds: enter our airspace, and we will launch nuclear attacks on Israel and on all U.S. bases in the Mid-East. With 72 hours to stop a nuclear Armageddon, there is only one man to turn to: Luke Stone. The President sends Luke on his boldest mission yet: to airdrop into Iran and find the secret location of the underground nukes, so that the U.S. can take them out before it's too late. In a mad race against time, Luke takes us on a roller-coaster through the chaotic and confusing terrain of Iran, as he scrambles to find their most-guarded secrets and prevent a war from destroying all mankind. Yet as one shocking twist follows another, it may, even for Luke, be too late. A political thriller with non-stop action, dramatic international settings and heart-pounding suspense, OUR SACRED HONOR is book #6 in the bestselling and critically-acclaimed Luke Stone series, an explosive new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night. “Thriller writing at its best. Thriller enthusiasts who relish the precise execution of an international thriller, but who seek the psychological depth and believability of a protagonist who simultaneously fields professional and personal life challenges, will find this a gripping story that's hard to put down.”

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Jack Mars

Our Sacred Honor

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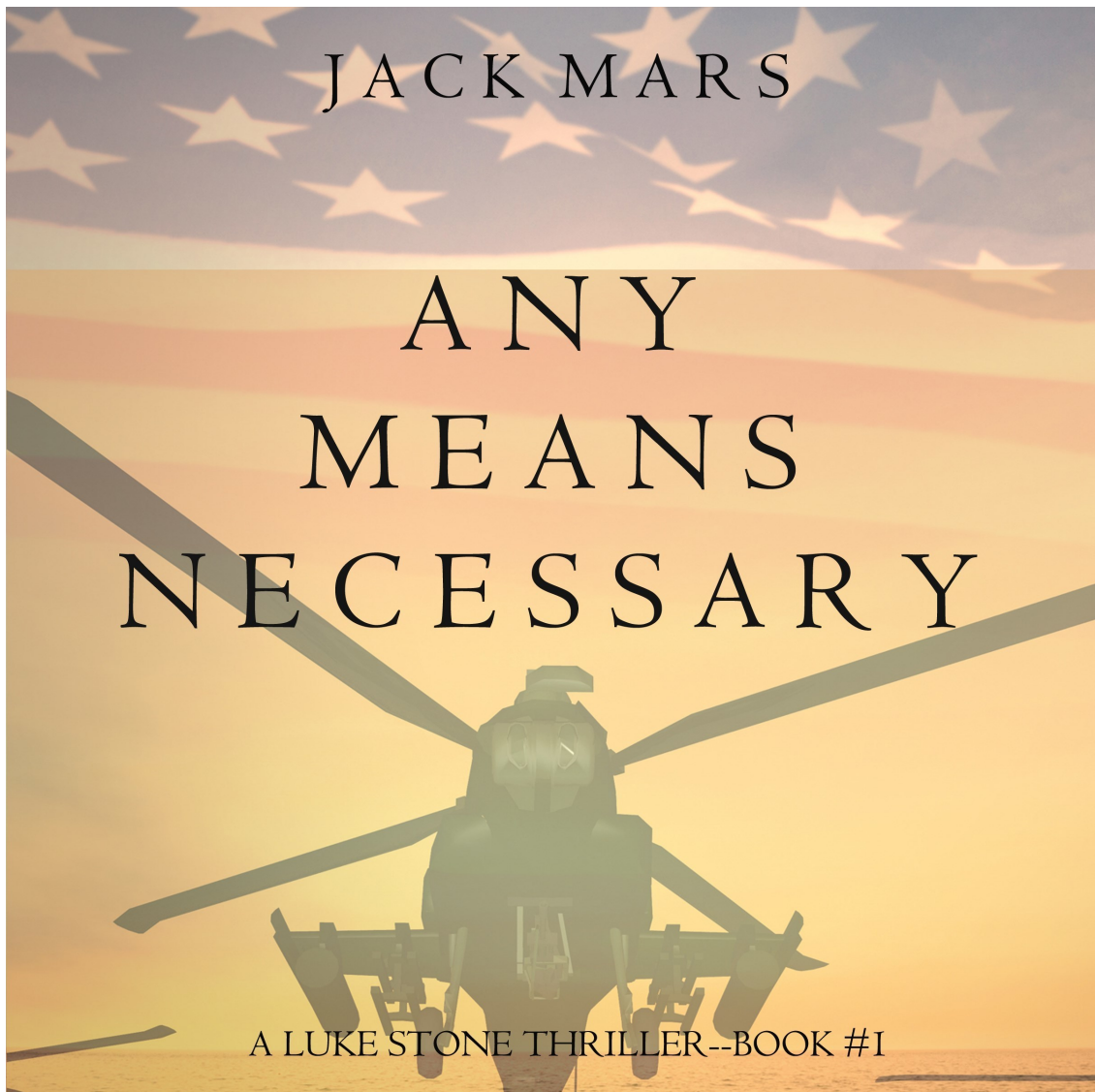
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“...we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

Thomas Jefferson

The Declaration of Independence

CHAPTER ONE

December 9th

11:45 p.m. Lebanon Time (4:45 p.m. Eastern Standard Time)

Southern Lebanon

“Praise God,” the young man said. “Praise Him. Praise Him.”

He took a long drag from his cigarette, his hand shaking as he reached to his mouth. He hadn't eaten in twelve hours. For the past four hours, the world around him had been entirely black. He was a truck driver, skilled at driving the biggest rigs, and he had driven this one across the border from Syria, then through the hilly Lebanese countryside, moving slow on winding roads, lights off the entire way.

It was a dangerous drive. The sky was filled with drones, with helicopters, with spy planes, and with bombers – Russian, American, and Israeli. Any one of these could become interested in this truck. Any one of these could decide to destroy the truck, and do so effortlessly. He drove the entire way expecting that at any moment, a missile would hit him without warning, rendering him a flaming skeleton sitting inside a burned out steel relic.

Now he had just pulled the truck up a long, narrow path and parked it under an awning. The awning, held up with wooden legs, was made to look from the sky like typical forest cover – in fact, the top of it was covered with dense brush. Its location was right where they had said it would be.

He turned the truck off, the engine farting and belching, black smoke pouring from a stack on the driver's side as the thing shut itself down. He opened the door to the cab and climbed down. As soon as he did so, a squad of heavily armed men materialized like ghosts, emerging from the surrounding woods.

“*As salaam alaikum,*” the young truck driver said as they approached.

“*Wa alaikum salaam,*” the militia leader said. He was tall and burly, with a thick black beard and dark eyes. His face was hard – there was no compassion in it. He gestured at the truck. “Is this it?”

The young man took another shaky drag from his cigarette. No, he almost said. Some other truck is it. This one is nothing.

“Yes,” he said instead.

“You're late,” the militia leader said.

The young man shrugged. “You should have driven in that case.”

The leader stared at the truck. It looked like a typical tractor-trailer – perhaps something carrying lumber, or furniture, or foodstuffs. But it wasn't. The militiamen went right to work on it, two climbing the back ladder to the top, two kneeling near the bottom. Each man had a battery-powered screwdriver.

Moving quickly, they removed the screws one by one that held the tractor-trailer fiction together. Within moments, they pulled a large piece of aluminum sheet metal off the side. A moment later, they pulled a narrower sheet off the back. Then they were working on the other side, where the driver could no longer see them.

He turned and looked out at the nighttime hillsides and forest. Across the darkness, he could see the lights of a village twinkling several miles away. Beautiful country. He was very glad to be here. His job was done. He was not a militiaman. He was a truck driver. They had paid him to go across the border and pick up this truck.

He was also not from this region – he lived far to the north. He had no idea what arrangements these men had made for his return home, but he didn't care. Rid of the infernal machine he had just driven, he would gladly walk from here.

Headlights were coming up the narrow rutted road, a whole series of them. Seconds later, a line of three black Mercedes SUVs appeared. The doors opened in unison and gunmen poured from each car. Each man carried a heavy rifle or machine gun. The rear door of the middle car opened last.

A heavyset man with a salt-and-pepper beard and glasses pulled himself from the SUV. He leaned on a knobby wooden stick and walked with a pronounced limp – the residue of a car bomb attempt on the man’s life two years ago.

The young driver recognized the man instantly – he was certainly the most famous man in Lebanon, and well known throughout the world. His name was Abba Qassem, and he was the absolute leader of Hezbollah. His authority – in matters of military operations, social programs, relations with foreign governments, crime and punishment, life and death – was unquestioned.

His presence made the driver nervous. It came on suddenly, like a stomach sickness. There were the nerves that came with meeting any celebrity, yes. But there was more to it than that. Qassem being here meant that this truck – whatever it might be – was important. Much more important than the driver had realized.

Qassem hobbled to the truck driver, surrounded by his bodyguards, and gave him an awkward hug.

“My brother,” he said. “You are the driver?”

“Yes.”

“Allah will reward you.”

“Thank you, Sayyid,” the driver said, calling him by a title of honor, suggesting that Qassem was a direct descendent of Mohammed himself. The driver was hardly a devout Muslim, but people like Qassem seemed to enjoy that sort of thing.

They turned together. The men had already finished removing the sheet metal covering from the truck. Now the real truck was revealed. The front of it was much as it had appeared to be – the cab of a trailer truck, painted a deep green color. The long rear of the truck was a flat, two-cylinder missile launch platform. Resting inside each of the launch cylinders was a large silver missile, shiny and metallic.

The two parts of the truck were separate and independent of each other, but were attached by a hydraulic system in the middle, and steel chains on either side. That explained why the truck had been difficult to control – the rear section was not secured to the front as tightly as the driver might have chosen.

“A transporter-erector-launcher, they call it,” Qassem said, explaining to the driver what he had just driven here. “And just one of many the Perfect One has seen fit to bring us.”

“Yes?” the driver said.

Qassem nodded. “Oh yes.”

“And the missiles?”

Qassem smiled. It was beatific and calm, the smile of a saint. “Very advanced weaponry. Long distance. As accurate as anything in this world. More powerful than we have ever known before. God willing, we will use these weapons to bring our enemies to their knees.”

“Israel?” the driver said. He nearly choked on the word. The urge came upon him to start walking north right this moment.

Qassem put a hand on the driver’s shoulder. “God is great, my brother. God is great. Very soon, everyone will know exactly how great.”

He stepped away, limping toward the missile launcher. The driver watched him go. He took one last drag on his cigarette, which he had smoked down to the nub. He was feeling a little better, calmer. This job was over. These maniacs could start another war if they wanted – it likely wouldn’t reach the north.

Qassem turned around then and looked at him. “Brother,” he said.

“Yes?”

“These missiles are a secret, you know. No one can hear of them.”

The driver nodded. “Of course.”

“You have friends, family?”

The driver smiled. “I do. A wife, three children. Little ones. I still have my mother. I am well known in my village and the nearby areas. I have played the violin since I was very young, and everyone demands a song from me.”

He paused. “It’s a full life.”

The sayyid nodded, a little sadly.

“Allah will reward you.”

The driver didn’t like the sound of that. It was the second time Qassem had mentioned such a reward. “Yes. Thank you.”

Near Qassem, two big men took rifles down from their shoulders. A second later, they held them ready, aimed at the driver.

The driver barely moved. This didn’t seem right. It was happening so fast. His heart pounded in his ears. He could not feel his legs. Or his arms. Even his lips were numb. For a second, he tried to think of anything he might have done to offend them. Nothing. He had done nothing. All he had done was bring the truck here.

The truck... *was a secret.*

“Wait,” he said. “Wait! I won’t tell anyone.”

Qassem shook his head now. “The All-Knowing has seen your good work. He will open the gates of Paradise to you this very evening. This is my promise to you. This is my prayer.”

Much too late, the driver turned to run.

An instant later, he heard the loud CRACK as the first gun fired.

And he realized, as the ground came rushing up to meet him, that his entire life had been in vain.

CHAPTER TWO

December 11

9:01 a.m. Eastern Standard Time

The Oval Office

The White House, Washington, DC

Susan Hopkins almost couldn't believe what she was watching.

She stood on the carpet in the sitting area of the Oval Office – the comfortable high-backed chairs had been removed for this morning's festivities. Thirty people packed the room. Kurt Kimball and Kat Lopez stood near her, as well as Haley Lawrence, her Secretary of Defense.

The White House Residence staff were all here at her insistence, the chef, the servers, the domestic staff, mingling among other invited guests – the directors of the National Science Foundation, NASA, and the National Park Service, to name a few. A handful of news media personalities were here, as well as two or three carefully selected camera people. There were many Secret Service agents, lining the walls and peppered among the crowd.

On a large TV monitor mounted near the far wall, Stephen Lief, a man whom Susan could expect to never see in the flesh until her term as President was over, was about to take the Vice Presidential Oath of Office. Stephen was late middle-aged, owlish in round glasses, hair gray and thinning and receding across the top of his skull like an army in disordered retreat. He had a vaguely pear-shaped body, hidden inside a three-thousand-dollar blue pinstriped Armani suit.

Susan had known Stephen a long time. He would have been her main competition in the most recent election, if Jeff Monroe hadn't interceded. Before that, in her Senate days, he was the loyal opposition across the aisle from her, a moderate conservative, unremarkable – pig-headed but not deranged. And he was a nice man.

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

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

“Why not Stephen Lief?”

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

“No, I mean it,” he said.

He was lying on his side. His nude body was thin but rock hard, chiseled, and covered with scars. Thick bandaging still covered his recent bullet wound – it was molded to his torso along the left side. The various wounds didn't bother her – they made him sexier, more dangerous. His dark blue eyes watched her from deep inside his weathered Marlboro Man face, half a mischievous smile on his lips.

“You're beautiful, Stone. Like an ancient Greek statue, uh, wearing a bandage. But maybe you better let me do the thinking. You can just recline there, looking pretty.”

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

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

Stone shook his head, but kept smiling. “The country is fractured, Susan. Recent events have made the feelings worse than ever. You’re still doing okay, but Congress has the lowest approval ratings in American history. If you can believe the polls, then politicians, the Taliban, and the Church of Satan all rate well with a similar percentage of Americans. Lawyers, the IRS, and the Italian Mafia have much higher approval numbers.”

“And you say that because...”

“Because what the American people want now is for right and left, liberal and conservative, to come together a little bit and start to get some things done on behalf of this country. The roads and bridges need to be rebuilt, the train system belongs in a museum, the public schools are falling apart, and we haven’t built a new major airport in almost thirty years. We’re ranked thirty-second in healthcare, Susan. That’s low. Can there really be thirty-one other countries ahead of us? Because I tell you, I’ve been around the world, and I run out of good countries at twenty-one or twenty-two. That puts us behind a bunch of bad ones.”

She sighed. “If we had some buy-in from conservatives, we might be able to get my infrastructure package through...”

He tapped her forehead. “Now you’re using your noodle. Lief did eighteen years in the Senate. He knows the game as well as anybody.”

“I thought politics wasn’t your thing,” she said.

“It’s not.”

She shook her head. “That’s what scares me.”

He started moving toward her. “Don’t be scared. I’ll tell you what is my thing.”

“Do tell.”

“Getting physical,” he said. “With someone like you.”

Now she shook the memories away, a ghost of a smile on her face. She had drifted there for a bit. On the TV monitor, Stephen Lief was getting ready to take his oath. It was happening in her old study at the Naval Observatory. She remembered the room and the house well. It was the beautiful, turreted and gabled Queen Anne–style 1850s mansion on the grounds of the Naval Observatory in Washington, DC. For decades, it had been the official residence of the Vice President of the United States.

She used to stand at the big bay window that was visible on the monitor, staring out at the beautiful rolling lawns of the Naval Observatory campus. The afternoon sun would come through that window, playing incredible games with light and shadow. For five years, she had lived in that house as Vice President. She’d loved it there, and would move back in a heartbeat if she could.

In the old days, in the afternoons and evenings, she would go out jogging on the Observatory grounds with her Secret Service men. Those years were a time of optimism, of stirring speeches, of meeting and greeting thousands of hopeful Americans. It seemed like a lifetime ago now.

Susan sighed. Her mind wandered. She remembered the day of the Mount Weather attack, the atrocity that had catapulted her out of her happy life as Vice President and into the raging tumult of the past few years.

She shook her head. No thank you. She would not think about that day.

Through the looking glass, on a small dais, two men and a woman stood. Photographers milled around like gnats, snapping pictures of them.

One of the men on the dais was short and bald. He wore a long robe. He was Clarence Warren, Chief Justice of the United States. The woman’s name was Judy Lief. She wore a bright blue suit. She was smiling ear to ear and holding a Bible open in her hands. Her husband, Stephen, placed his left hand on the Bible. His right hand was raised. Lief was often thought of dour, but even he was smiling a little.

“I, Stephen Douglas Lief,” he said, “do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.”

“That I will bear true faith...” Judge Warren prompted.

“That I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same,” Lief said. “That I take this obligation freely, and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office which I am about to enter.”

“So help me God,” Judge Warren said.

“So help me God,” Lief said.

An image appeared in Susan’s mind – a ghost from the recent past. Marybeth Horning, the last person to take that oath. She had been a mentor to Susan in the Senate, and something of a mentor as Vice President. With her thin, small frame and her big glasses, she looked like a mouse, but she roared like a lion.

Then she was shot down and killed because of... what? Her liberal politics, you might say, but that wasn’t true. The people who killed her hadn’t cared about policy differences – all they cared about was power.

Susan hoped the country could move past that now. She watched Stephen on the TV monitor, embracing his family and other well-wishers.

Did she trust this man? She didn’t know.

Would he try to have her killed?

No. She didn’t think so. He had more integrity than that. She had never known him to be underhanded during her time in the Senate. She supposed that was a start – she had a Vice President who wouldn’t try to kill her.

She pictured reporters from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* asking questions: “What do you like about Stephen Lief as your new Vice President?”

“Well, he’s not going to kill me. I feel pretty good about that.”

Then Kat Lopez was at her side.

“Uh, Susan? Let’s get you over to the microphones so you can congratulate Vice President Lief and give him a few words of encouragement.”

Susan snapped out of her reverie. “Of course. That’s a good idea. He can probably use them.”

CHAPTER THREE

11:16 p.m. Israel Time (4:16 p.m. Eastern Standard Time)

The Blue Line, Israel-Lebanon Border

“Listen not to the liars, to the unbelievers,” the boy of seventeen whispered.

He took a deep breath.

“Strive against them with the utmost effort. Fight against them so that Allah will punish them by your hands and disgrace them and give you victory over them.”

The boy was as battle-hardened as they came. At fifteen, he had left his home and family and joined the Army of God. He had crossed into Syria and spent the past two years fighting street-to-street, face-to-face, and sometimes hand-to-hand, against the apostates of Daesh, what the westerners called ISIS.

The Daesh were unafraid to die – indeed, they welcomed death. Many of them were older Chechens and Iraqis, very hard to kill. The early days of opposing them had been a nightmare, but the boy had survived. In two years, he had fought many battles and killed many men. And he had learned much about war.

Now he stood in the black dark on a hillside in northern Israel. He balanced an anti-tank rocket launcher on his right shoulder. In his younger days, a heavy rocket like this would drill into his shoulder and after a short time, his bones would begin to ache. But he was stronger now. The weight of it no longer made much impression on him.

There was a small stand of trees around him, and very nearby, a group of commandos were on the ground, watching the roadway below them.

“Let those who fight in the way of Allah sell the life of this world for the other,” he said, very low, under his breath. “He who fights in the way of Allah, be he slain or be he victorious, he shall receive a vast reward.”

“Abu!” someone whispered fiercely.

“Yes.” His own voice was calm.

“Shut up!”

Abu took a deep breath and let the exhale slowly come out.

He was an expert with the anti-tank rocket. He had fired so many of these, and he had become so accurate with them, that he was now a very valuable man. That was something he had learned about war. The longer you lived, the more skills you amassed, and the better you became at fighting. The better you became, the more valuable you were, and ever more likely to remain alive. He had known many who didn’t survive long in combat – a week, ten days. He had met one who died on the first day. If only they could last a month, things would start to become clearer to —

“Abu!” the voice hissed.

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Ready? They’re coming.”

“Okay.”

He went about his business, relaxed, almost as if he were just practicing. He hefted the rocket launcher and unfolded the stock. His placed his left hand along the length of the barrel, lightly, lightly, until the target came into view. You didn’t want your grip too firm, too soon. The index finger of his right hand caressed the trigger mechanism. He put the gun sight near his face, but not to his eye. He liked to have his eyes free until the last moment, so he could acquire the entire picture before focusing on the details. His knees bent slightly, his back ever-so-slightly arched.

He could see light from the convoy now, behind the hillside to his right, approaching along the road. The lights reached upward, casting strange shadows. A few seconds later, he could hear the rumble of the engines.

He took another deep breath.

“Steady...” a stern voice said. “Steady.”

“Lord Allah,” Abu said, his words coming quickly now, and louder than before. “Guide my hands and my eyes. Let me bring death to your enemies, in your name and in the name of your most beloved prophet Mohammed, and all the great prophets in all times.”

The first jeep came around the bend. The round headlights were clear now, cutting through the nighttime mist.

The boy Abu instantly became rigid under the weight of the heavy gun. He put his right eye to the sight. The vehicles in the line appeared, large, like he could reach out and touch them. His finger tightened on the trigger. The breath caught in his throat. He was no longer a boy with a rocket launcher – he and the launcher melded together, becoming one entity, a killing machine.

All around his feet, men moved like snakes, crawling toward the roadway.

“Steady,” the voice said again. “The second car, you understand?”

“Yes.”

In his gun sight, the second jeep was RIGHT THERE. He could see the silhouettes of the people inside it.

“It’s easy,” he whispered. “It’s so easy... Steady...”

Two seconds passed, Abu slowly sweeping the rocket launcher from right to left, following the target, never wavering.

“FIRE!”

* * *

For Avraham Gold, this was the part he hated.

Hate was the wrong word. He feared it. Any second now, coming right up.

He always talked here. He talked too much. He felt that he would blurt anything, just to get past this place. He took a long drag from his cigarette – against the rules to smoke on patrol, but it was the only thing that relaxed him.

“Leave Israel?” he said. “Never! Israel is my home, now and forever. I will travel abroad, certainly, but leave? How could I? We are called by God to live here. This is the Holy Land. This is the land that was promised.”

Avraham was twenty years old, a corporal in the Israeli Defense Forces. His grandparents were Germans who had survived the Holocaust. He believed every word that he said. But it still sounded hollow to his ears, like a corny pro-settler TV commercial.

He was at the wheel of the jeep, driving the third in a line of three. He glanced at the girl sitting next to him. Daria. *God, she’s beautiful!*

Even with her close-cropped hair, even with her body covered primly in her uniform. It was her smile. It would light up the sky. And her long eyelashes – like a cat.

She had no business being up here, in this... no-man’s-land. Especially with her views. She was a liberal. There shouldn’t be any liberals in the IDF, Avraham had decided. They were useless. And Daria was worse than a liberal. She was...

“I don’t believe in your God,” she said simply. “You know that.”

Now Avraham smiled. “I know, and when you get out of the army, you’re going to – ”

She finished the thought for him. “Move to Brooklyn, that’s right. My cousin owns a moving company.”

He almost laughed, despite his nerves. “You’re a skinny girl to carry couches and pianos up and down flights of stairs.”

“I’m stronger than you might – ”

Just then, the radio screeched. “Abel Patrol. Come in, Abel Patrol.”

He picked up the receiver. “Abel.”

“Whereabouts?” came the tinny voice.

“Just entering Sector Nine as we speak.”

“Right on time. Okay. Eyes sharp.”

“Yes, sir,” Avraham said. He clicked off the receiver and glanced at Daria.

She shook her head. “If it’s so worrisome, why don’t they do something about it?”

He shrugged. “It’s the military. They’ll fix it just as soon as something terrible happens.”

The problem was right up ahead. The convoy was moving east to west along the narrow ribbon of roadway. To their right was a stand of dense, deep forest – it began fifty meters from the road. The IDF had cleared the land right to the border. Where those woods began was Lebanon.

To their left were three steep, green hills. Not mountains, really, but neither were they rolling hills. They were abrupt, and sheer. The roadway wrapped around and behind the hills, and for just a moment, radio communications were tenuous, and the convoys were vulnerable.

IDF command had been talking about those hills for over a year. It had to be the hills. They couldn’t clear out the forest because it was Lebanese territory – it would cause an international incident. So for a while, they were going to dynamite the hills. Then they were going to build a guard tower atop one of them. Both plans were deemed unsuitable. Dynamiting the hills meant the road would have to be temporarily rerouted away from the border. And a guard tower would be under constant threat of attack.

No, the best thing to do was run patrols between the hills and the forest night and day and just hope for the best.

“Watch those woods,” Avraham said. “Eyes sharp.”

He realized he had just repeated the exact same words as the commander. What a fool! He glanced at Daria again. Her heavy rifle lay alongside her thin frame. She giggled and shook her head, her face turning red.

In the darkness ahead, a flash of light erupted from their left.

It slammed into the middle jeep, twenty meters in front of them. The car exploded, spun to its left, and rolled. The car burned, the occupants already incinerated.

Avraham stomped on the brakes, but too late. He skidded into the burning vehicle.

Beside him, Daria screamed.

They had attacked from the wrong side – the hill side. There was no cover over there. *It was inside Israel.*

There was no time to speak, no time to give Daria a command.

Gunfire came from both sides now. Machine gun fire raked his door. DUNK-DUNK-DUNK-DUNK-DUNK. His window shattered, spraying glass in on him. At least one of the bullets had pierced the armor. He was hit. He looked down at his side – there was a darkness, growing and spreading. He was bleeding. He could barely feel it – it seemed like a bee sting.

He grunted. Men were running in the darkness.

Instantly, before he knew it, his gun was in his hand. He aimed out the missing window.

BLAM!

The noise was deafening to his ears.

He had hit one. He had hit one. The man had gone down.

He sighted on another one.

Steady...

Something happened. His whole body bucked wildly in his seat. He had dropped his gun. A shot, something heavy, had gone right through him. It had come from behind him and punched through the dashboard. A gunshot, or a small rocket of some kind. Gingerly, numb with terror, he reached to his chest and touched the area below his throat.

It was... gone.

There was a massive hole in his chest. How was he even still alive?

The answer came instantly: he soon wouldn't be.

He didn't even feel it. A sense of warmth spread out through his body. He looked at Daria again. It was too bad. He was going to convince her... of something. Now that would never happen.

She stared at him. Her eyes were round, like saucers. Her mouth was open in a giant O of horror. He felt the urge to comfort her, even now.

"It's okay," he wanted to tell her. "It doesn't hurt."

But he could not speak.

Men appeared at the window behind her. With their rifle butts, they smashed away the remaining shards of glass. Hands reached in, trying to pull her out the window, but she fought them. She tore at them with her bare hands.

The door opened. Three men now, dragging her, pulling at her.

Then she was gone, and he was alone.

Avraham stared at the vehicle burning in the darkness in front of him. It occurred to him that he had no idea what had happened to the lead vehicle. He supposed it didn't matter now.

He thought briefly of his parents and his sister. He loved them all, simply and without regret.

He thought of his grandparents, perhaps standing ready to receive him.

He could no longer make out the burning vehicle. It was just bright red, yellow, and orange, flickering against a black background. He watched as the colors became smaller and dimmer, the darkness spreading and growing even darker. The inferno of the exploded car now seemed like the guttering of a spent candle.

He watched until the last of the color went out.

CHAPTER FOUR

4:35 p.m. Eastern Standard Time
Headquarters of the Special Response Team
McLean, Virginia

“Well, I guess the band is officially back together,” Susan Hopkins said.
Luke smiled at the thought.

It was the Special Response Team’s first day in their brand new digs. The new headquarters were their old headquarters from years before, but newly renovated. The squat, three-story, glass and concrete building was in the wealthy suburb of McLean, only a few miles from the CIA. It had a helipad with a brand new black Bell 430 hunched on the tarmac like a dragonfly, gleaming white SRT logo on its side.

There were four black agency SUVs parked in the lot. The building had offices on the first and second floor, and a state-of-the-art conference room that was nearly a match for the Situation Room at the White House. It had every technological bell and whistle that Mark Swann’s fevered imagination could conjure. The workout center (complete with cardio equipment, weight machines, and a heavily padded sparring room) and the cafeteria were on the third floor. The soundproof gun range was in the basement.

The new agency had twenty employees, the perfect size to respond to unfolding events fast, light, and with total flexibility. Spun off from the FBI and now organized as a sub-agency of the Secret Service, the arrangement limited Luke’s interactions with the federal bureaucracy. He reported directly to the President of the United States.

The small campus was surrounded by security fencing, topped with razor wire. But right now the gates were thrown wide open. They were having an Open House today. And Luke was happy to be here.

He strode the halls with Susan, eager to show the President of the United States all the things she already knew about. He felt like a five-year-old. He glanced at her from time to time, soaked in her beauty, but did not stare. He stifled the urge to hold hands, which she apparently felt as well, because her hand brushed his hand, his arm, his shoulder, almost constantly.

She needed to save all that touching for later.

Luke turned his attention to the building. The place had come together exactly as he had hoped, and so had the SRT. His people had agreed to join him. This was no small matter – with all the strife they had endured, and Luke’s extended absence, it was a gift that everyone was willing to trust him again.

He and Susan entered the cafeteria and waded through the crowd, trailed by two Secret Service agents. About a dozen people snaked in a line around the food serving bar. Over by the window, Luke spotted the person he was looking for, standing between Ed Newsam and Mark Swann, dwarfed by the rippling muscle of Ed and the beanpole height of Swann. It was his son, Gunner.

“Come on, Susan, there’s someone over here I want you to meet.”

Suddenly, she looked stricken. “Wait, Luke! This isn’t the right...”

He shook his head, and this time he did grab her – by the wrist. “It’ll be fine. Just tell him you’re my boss. Lie to him.”

They emerged from the crowd and appeared next to Gunner, Ed, and Swann. Swann wore his hair in a ponytail, wraparound glasses on his face. His long body was draped in a black RAMONES T-shirt, faded blue jeans, with yellow-and-black checkerboard Chuck Taylor sneakers on his big feet.

Ed looked huge in a black turtleneck, beige dress pants, and black leather shoes. There was a gold Rolex watch around his wrist. His hair and beard were jet black, closely cropped, and meticulous, like hedges cared for by a master gardener.

Swann was information systems – one of the best hackers Luke had ever worked with. Ed was weapons and tactics – he had come through Delta Force after Luke. He was absolutely devastating in the use of force. Ed had a glass of wine – it looked tiny in his giant hand. Swann held a black can of beer with a pirate logo on it in one hand, a plate with several large sandwich slices in the other.

“Guys, you both know Susan Hopkins, don’t you?” Luke said.

Ed and Swann shook her hand in turn.

“Madam President,” Ed said. He looked her up and down and smiled. “Good to see you again.”

Luke almost laughed at Ed giving the President the wolf’s eye. He ruffled Gunner’s hair. It was slightly awkward, because Gunner was just a little too tall to have his hair ruffled.

“Madam President, this is my son, Gunner.”

She shook his hand and put on her friendly *I’m the President, and I’m meeting some random kid* face. “Gunner, very nice to meet you. How are you enjoying the party?”

“It’s okay,” he said. He blushed bright red and did not meet her eyes. He was still a shy kid, in some ways.

“Are your girls here?” Luke said to Ed, changing the subject.

Ed shrugged and smiled. “Oh, they’re running around somewhere.”

A woman appeared at the edge of their group. She was tall, blonde, and striking. She wore a red suit and high heels. Even more striking than her looks was the fact that she went straight to Luke, ignoring the President of the United States.

She held a smartphone out to Luke like a microphone.

“Agent Stone, I’m Tera Wright, with WFNK, DC’s number one radio news.”

Luke almost laughed at her self-introduction. “Hi, Tera,” he said. He expected her to ask him about the reopening of the Special Response Team offices, and the mandate the SRT would have to fight terrorism at home and abroad. Nice. It was something he wouldn’t mind talking about.

“How can I help you?”

“Well,” Tera began, “I see the President is here at your agency’s grand opening.”

Luke nodded. “She sure is. I think the President knows how impor – ”

The woman cut him off. “Can you answer one question for me, please?”

“Of course.”

“Are the rumors true?”

“Uh, I’m not aware of any – ”

“Rumors have been circulating for a couple of weeks,” Tera Wright informed him.

“Rumors about what?” Luke said. He glanced around at the group, like a drowning man hoping for a rope.

Tera Wright raised a hand as if to say STOP. “Let’s do this a different way,” she said. “What would you say is the nature of your relationship with President Hopkins?”

Luke looked at Susan. Susan was an old hand at this. She didn’t blush. She didn’t look guilty. She merely raised an eyebrow and stared quizzically at the back of the reporter’s head, like she had no idea what this person might be referring to.

Luke took a breath. “Well, I would say that President Hopkins is my boss.”

“Nothing more?” the reporter said.

“Same as you,” Luke said. “She’s also my Commander-in-Chief.”

He glanced at Susan again, thinking she would jump in now and steer the conversation in a new direction. But now Susan’s chief-of-staff was there, pretty Kat Lopez, in a form-fitting blue pinstriped suit. Kat was still slim, though her face was not nearly as youthful as it had been when she took this job. Three years of constant stress and herding cats would do a number on anyone.

She was speaking low, practically whispering, directly into Susan’s ear.

Susan’s face darkened as she listened, then she nodded. Whatever it was, it was bad.

She looked up.

“Gentlemen,” she said. “I hope you’ll excuse me.”

CHAPTER FIVE

6:15 p.m. Eastern Standard Time

The Situation Room

The White House, Washington, DC

“Amy,” Kurt said, “please give us Lebanon and Israel. Focus on the Blue Line.”

On the oversized screen behind him, a map appeared. A second later, it popped up on the smaller screens embedded in the walls. The map showed two territories, bisected by a thick, undulating blue line. To the left of the land area was a pale blue area, denoting the Mediterranean Sea.

Susan knew the area well enough that she could easily skip this geography lesson. Further, she was frustrated – she had already been back at the White House for an hour. It had taken this long to pull this meeting together.

“I’m going to race through the preliminaries, if no one minds,” Kurt said. “I imagine everyone in this room is up on current events enough to know that there was a skirmish on the border between Lebanon and Israel nearly two hours ago.

“The Blue Line, which you see here, is the negotiated border, behind which Israel agreed to pull back her troops after the 1982 war and occupation. An unknown number of Hezbollah commandos made an incursion and attacked an Israeli patrol on the road that follows the Blue Line for much of its length. There were eight soldiers from the Israeli Defense Forces on the patrol, all of whom we know were killed, except one.”

A formal photograph of a dark-haired young woman appeared on the screens. It looked like a photo taken for a high school yearbook, or before some kind of awards ceremony. The girl was smiling brightly. More than smiling – she was positively beaming.

“Daria Shalit,” Kurt said. “Nineteen years old, and just beginning the second year of her compulsory two-year service in the IDF.”

“Pretty,” someone in the room said.

Kurt didn’t respond. A long exhale escaped from him.

“Believe me, there is a lot of table-pounding and soul-searching in Israeli decision-making circles. Women have participated in the Israeli border patrols for the past several months. It seems clear now that this was a preplanned kidnapping with Shalit, or any young woman on the patrol, as the intended target. An assault force pursued the kidnappers across the border, but met with furious resistance within two kilometers. Another four Israelis were killed, along with an estimated twenty Hezbollah militants.”

“Helen of Troy,” a man in military dress greens said.

Kurt nodded. “Exactly. The effect on Israeli society has been visceral. It has been a punch to the gut, and this was probably the intent. Our intelligence suggests that Hezbollah is deliberately trying to spark a war, similar to the one that took place in 2006. Unfortunately, we suspect they are leading Israel into a trap.”

“Hezbollah is tough,” the military man said. “They are hard to root out.”

“Amy,” Kurt said. “Give me Hezbollah, please.”

On the screen, an image appeared of a group of men marching with banners, fists in the air. Kurt gestured at the men with a laser pointer.

“Hezbollah – the Party of God, or Army of God, depending on which translation you prefer – is probably the world’s largest and most militarily capable terror organization. They were created, and are trained, funded, and deployed, as a proxy of the Iranian government, with operations spanning Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

“As terrorists go, Hezbollah is vastly formidable. They enjoy worldwide legitimacy among Shiite Muslims, sophistication of operations, and an organizational ability that ISIS can only dream

of having among Sunnis. In the areas of Lebanon where Hezbollah are based, they often act as the de facto local government, with the full cooperation of the population. They run schools, food, recreation and job programs, and they send a handful of elected representatives to the Lebanese parliament. Their military wing is far more effective and powerful than the Lebanese military. Because of the religious differences between Shiite and Sunni Muslims, Hezbollah and ISIS are enemies, sworn to destroy each other.”

“What’s so bad about that?” Susan said, only half-joking. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend, isn’t she?”

Kurt almost smiled. “Careful. Hezbollah’s policy toward our close ally Israel is one of open-ended holy war. According to Hezbollah, Israel is an existential threat, oppresses Lebanese society, oppresses the Palestinians, and must be destroyed at all costs.”

“Do they have a chance of doing that?” Susan said.

Kurt shrugged.

“They could do some damage, the extent of which we don’t know. Current assessments suggest that Hezbollah has between twenty-five thousand and thirty thousand fighters. Perhaps ten thousand to fifteen thousand of those fighters have combat experience, either during the 2006 war, or more recently fighting directly against ISIS in the Syrian Civil War. We believe as many as twenty thousand troops have received training from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards – five thousand or more have gone to Iran and received extensive training.

“Hezbollah has a network of deep tunnels and fortifications in the hilly region just north of the Blue Line, which during the 2006 war with Israel proved impossible to completely take out from the air. Israeli intelligence assessments suggest that these forts have only become deeper, more hardened, and more sophisticated since 2006. Our own intelligence suggests that Hezbollah has more than sixty-five thousand rockets and missiles, plus millions of rounds of small arms ammunition. Their arsenal is probably five times as large as it was in 2006. Throughout Hezbollah’s history, Iran has been reluctant to provide them with anything more than slow-moving, short-range missiles and rockets, and we suspect that this is still the case.”

“What is Israel doing?” the man in dress greens said.

Kurt nodded. Behind him on the screen, the Blue Line reappeared. All along the south side of it, small icons of soldiers appeared.

“Now we get to the meat of it. The Israelis have amassed a large incursion force at the border, with more units joining all the time. The Secretary of State has been on the phone with Yonatan Stern, the Israeli Prime Minister. Yonatan is a hardliner, popular with the right wing of Israeli society. To maintain his popularity with his base, he’s going to have to deliver here. He needs a decisive victory, a return of the missing soldier – something. We understand he plans to send the Israeli incursion force across the border within the next few hours, essentially invading Lebanon.”

“In a sense, you could say that Israel was already invaded by Lebanon,” the military man said.

Kurt nodded. “You could say that. Combined with the invasion, Stern plans to conduct a bombing campaign. We have requested that the bombing campaign be limited to twelve hours in duration, be designed to avoid civilian casualties, and only target known Hezbollah military assets.”

“What did Yonatan say to that?” Susan said. Yonatan Stern was not her favorite person in the world. You might even say that they did not get along.

“He said he would take it under advisement.”

Susan shook her head. “Yonatan’s another one of you men. He never met a war, or a weapon system, he didn’t like.”

She paused. This seemed like another low-grade Israel-Hezbollah skirmish, just like all the Israel-Hamas skirmishes, and the Israel-PLO skirmishes before those. Ugly, bloody, brutish, and in the end, inconclusive. Just another practice round for the next practice round.

“So what is our end game here, Kurt? What are the dangers, and what do you suggest that we do?”

Kurt sighed. His perfectly bald head reflected the lights recessed in the ceiling. “As always, the danger is that the fighting spills out of control and becomes linked to, or causes, other regional fighting. Hezbollah and the Palestinians are allies. Often, Hamas uses these wars with Hezbollah as cover to launch their own guerrilla attacks inside Israel. Syria is in chaos, with numerous small, but heavily armed groups looking to exploit instability.

“Meanwhile, large majorities in Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia identify as anti-Israel. And there is always Iran, the biggest, meanest kid on that block, hovering in the background with arms folded, with the big Russian bear hovering behind them. Everyone involved is armed to the teeth.”

“And our next steps?”

Kurt shook his head and shrugged his big shoulders. “Our next steps are to walk a fine line. The whole region is a minefield, and we need to be careful where we put our feet. Israel is one of our closest allies and an important strategic partner. They are really the only functioning democracy in the whole region. At the same time, Lebanon has been an ally and a partner of ours for a long time. Jordan and Turkey are allies of ours. We buy the bulk of our foreign energy supplies from Saudi Arabia. We also have a commitment to brokering peace between the Palestinians and Israel, and engineering the creation of a sovereign state in Palestine.”

He nodded, as if to himself. “I’d say our job is to not inflame tensions any further, and hope this little flare-up turns out to be a nine-day wonder – or better yet, a nine-hour wonder.”

Susan almost laughed. “In other words, we sit on our hands.”

Now Kurt smiled. “I’d say we should sit on our hands. But right now our hands are tied behind our backs.”

CHAPTER SIX

December 12

1:40 p.m. Israel Time (6:40 am Eastern Standard Time)

Tel Aviv, Israel

The news was bad.

The young woman sat on the park bench, watching her little boy and girl, twins, play on the swing set. In the near distance was the tan apartment block, sixteen stories high, where the woman lived. There was no one around today, the park mostly empty.

It was unusual for an early afternoon in spring, but not surprising given the circumstances. Most of the country seemed to be inside somewhere, glued to their TV and computer screens.

Last night, Daria Shalit, a nineteen-year-old soldier in the Israeli Defense Forces, had gone missing after a skirmish with Hezbollah terrorists who had made a surprise attack along the northern border. The seven other soldiers in her patrol – all men – had died in the fighting. But not Daria. Daria was just gone.

IDF troops had pursued the terrorists back into Lebanon. Four more Israelis had died in the fighting there. Eleven young men – the cream of Israeli youth – all dead in an hour. But that was not what consumed the country.

The fate of Daria had become an overnight obsession. If the woman closed her eyes, she could see Daria's pretty face and dark eyes alight, smiling as she clowned around with a machine gun, smiling as she posed with friends in bikinis on a Mediterranean beach, smiling as she received her school diploma. So beautiful and always beaming, as though her future was assured, a promise she was sure to receive.

The woman did close her eyes now and let the tears stream down her cheeks. She put a hand to her face, hoping her children would not see her weep. Her heart was broken for a girl she had never met but somehow knew as well as if Daria were her own sister.

The newspapers were crying out for blood, demanding the complete destruction of the Lebanese people. There were violent arguments in the Knesset through the night, as the government issued threats, demanded the girl's release, but took no immediate action. A rage was building, ready to explode.

Hours ago, the bombing had begun.

Israeli jets were pounding southern Lebanon, the Hezbollah stronghold, and all the way north to Beirut. Each time the announcements came on TV, the woman's neighbors in her apartment building erupted in shouts and cheers.

"Kill every one of them!" an old man shouted in something that sounded like triumph, but of course could not be. His gruff voice was clear through the paper thin walls. "Kill every single one!"

The woman took her children outside after that.

Now she sat in the park, silently weeping, letting herself cry, getting it out, all the while her ears tuned carefully to the calls and shouts of her two children. Her children, innocents, would grow to adulthood surrounded by enemies who would gladly see their throats cut and their flesh bled white.

"What are we to do?" the woman whispered. "What are we to do?"

The answer came in the form of a new sound, low and far away at first, mingling with the sounds of her children. Soon it moved closer and louder, then louder still. It was a sound she knew too well.

Air raid sirens.

Her eyes popped open.

Her children had stopped playing. They stared across the playground at her. The sirens were loud now.

LOUD.

“Mama!”

She jumped from the bench and ran toward the children. There was a bomb shelter beneath their building – a quarter of a kilometer away.

“Run!” she screamed. “Run to the building!”

The children didn’t move. She raced to them and gathered them in her arms. Then she ran with them held to her, one in each arm. For a few moments, she didn’t know her own strength. She dashed across the pavement with these two precious packages, both crying now, the sirens around them shrieking louder and louder.

The woman’s breath was harsh in her ears.

The building loomed, growing closer. Everywhere, people who were invisible just moments ago ran toward the building.

Suddenly, yet another sound came – a sound so loud, so high-pitched that the woman thought her eardrums would burst. She looked up and a missile streaked across the sky, coming from the north. It slammed into the upper floors of her building.

The earth beneath her feet shook from the impact. The world seemed to spin around her, even as the top of the building blew apart in a massive explosion, concrete masonry flying through the air. How many people in those rooms? How many dead?

She lost her balance and fell, spilling her two children onto the ground. She crawled on top of them, covering them with her body just before the shockwave came. Then a hail of debris from the explosion rained down, tiny biting pebbles and shards, choking dust, the remains of the old and infirm who could not leave their apartments in time.

The sirens did not stop. The deafening shriek of another missile came, flying just overhead, followed by the blast and rumble as it found its target not far away.

On and on and on raged the sirens.

Another missile shriek began to grow. It whistled in her ears. The skin on her body popped out in gooseflesh. She pulled her children closer, closer. The sound was too loud. It no longer made sense. It was beyond hearing, monstrous beyond all human comprehension – her systems shut down in the face of it.

The woman screamed in tandem with the missile, but she seemed to make no sound at all. She could not look up. She could not move. She felt its shadow above her, blotting out the light of day.

Then a new light took her, a blinding light.

And after that, the darkness.

CHAPTER SEVEN

6:50 a.m. Eastern Standard Time

The White House Residence

Washington, DC

The morning light was streaming through the blinds, but Luke did not want to get up. He lay flat on his back in the big bed, his head propped up on pillows.

Susan lay next to him under the sheets, the President of the United States, her head resting on his chest, her short blonde hair hanging loose against his bare skin. He noticed a few flecks of gray that her stylist had missed. Or perhaps that was on purpose – on a man, a little bit of gray would indicate experience, seriousness, *gravitas*.

She was breathing deeply.

“Are you awake?” he whispered.

He felt her smile against his body. “Of course I am, silly. I’ve been awake for over an hour.”

“What are you thinking about?” he said.

“What are *you* thinking about? That’s the important question.”

“Well, I’m worried.”

She pressed herself onto her elbows, turned, and looked at him. As always, he was astonished by her beauty. Her eyes were pale blue, and in her face he could see the woman who had appeared on magazine covers more than twenty years before. She was aging backward, moving in reverse toward that time. He would almost swear to it – in the short time they had been together, she appeared to grow a little bit younger nearly every day.

Her mouth made a half smile and her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Luke Stone is worried? The man who takes down terrorist networks with a wave of his hand? The man who topples despotic rulers and stops mass killers alike, all before breakfast? What could Luke Stone possibly be worried about?”

He shook his head and smiled, despite himself. “Enough of that.”

Truth be told, he was more than worried. Things were getting complicated. He was committed to putting his relationship back together with Gunner. It was going well – better than he could have hoped – but Gunner’s grandparents still had custody of him. Luke was beginning to think that was for the best. A protracted custody battle with Becca’s wealthy and hateful parents – it would be long, drawn-out, and ugly. And what would he win? Luke was still in the spy game. If he moved in with Luke, Gunner would end up spending a lot of time on his own. No guidance, no supervision – it sounded like a lousy arrangement.

Then there was the Susan situation. She was the President of the United States. She had her own family, and technically speaking, she was still married. Her husband, Pierre, knew about Luke, and apparently he was happy for them. But they were keeping this a secret from everyone else.

Who was he kidding? They weren’t keeping anything a secret.

Her close security team knew about him – it was their job to know. And that meant it was already a widespread and growing rumor within the Secret Service. He passed through security to get in here late at night, two, sometimes three nights a week. Or he signed in as a guest in the afternoon, but never signed out again. The people who monitored the video surveillance saw him entering and leaving the Residence, and took note of when he did so. The chef knew he was cooking for two, and the servers who brought the food out were two heavyset older ladies who smiled at him, and bantered with him, and called him “Mr. Luke.”

Susan’s chief-of-staff knew, which meant that Kurt Kimball also probably knew, and God only knew where it went from there.

Every single person who already knew about him had family, friends, and acquaintances. They had favorite early morning breakfast joints, or lunch counters, or bars where they regaled the regulars with tales of life inside the White House.

The reporter's question yesterday suggested that the rumor had already broken out of the box. They were one leak, one disgruntled staffer's call to the *Washington Post* or CNN, from a full-blown, twenty-four/seven media circus.

Luke didn't want that. He didn't want Gunner subjected to that glare. He didn't want the boy in the custody of the Secret Service everywhere he went. He didn't want the media following him or staking out his school.

Luke also didn't want the attention for himself. It was better for his work if he could remain in obscurity. He needed the freedom to operate, both for himself and for his team.

And he didn't want the attention for Susan. He didn't want it for their relationship. Things were hot and heavy right now, but he couldn't imagine this thing lasting under constant scrutiny from the media.

It was impossible to raise these issues with her. She was an irrepressible optimist, she was already under the glare of the media anyway, and she was riding high on endorphins. Her answer was always some variation of, "Oh, we'll work it out."

"What are you worried about, Mr. Luke?" Susan said now.

"I'm worried..." he began. He shook his head again. "I'm worried that I'm falling in love."

Her thousand-watt smile lit up the room. "I know," she said. "Isn't it great?"

She kissed him deeply, then leapt out of bed like a teenager. He watched her as she padded across the room, nude, to her closet. She still had the body of a teenager.

Almost.

"I want you to meet my daughters," she said. "They're coming to town next week to spend Christmas."

"Terrific," he said. The thought of it made his stomach do a lazy barrel roll. "Who should we tell them I am?"

"They knew who you are. You're that superhero. James Bond without the clean shave or the fancy suit. I mean, you rescued Michaela's life just a few years ago."

"We were never properly introduced."

"Still. You're like an uncle to them."

Just then, the phone on the bedside table began to ring. It made a funny sound, not so much a ring as a buzz, or a hum. It sounded like a monk with a bad cold chanting in meditation. Also, it lit up in blue on each ring. Luke hated that phone.

"You want me to get it?" he said.

She smiled and shook her head. Now he watched her come back across the room, moving faster this time. For a brief moment, he imagined another world, one where they didn't have their jobs. Hell, maybe even a world where they were both unemployed. In that world, she could climb right back into bed with him.

She picked up the phone. "Good morning."

Her face changed as she listened to the voice on the other end of the line. All of the fun went out of it. The light in her eyes faded, and her smile dropped away. She took a deep breath and let out a long exhale.

"Okay," she said. "I'll be down in fifteen minutes."

She hung up.

"Trouble?" Luke said.

She looked at him, her eyes showing something – a vulnerability perhaps – that the masses never saw on TV.

"When isn't there trouble?" she said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

7:30 a.m. Eastern Standard Time

The Situation Room

The White House, Washington, DC

The elevator opened and Luke stepped into the egg-shaped Situation Room.

Big Kurt Kimball stood at the far end of the room, his bald head gleaming, and he spotted Luke right away. Kurt usually ran these meetings with an iron hand. He had such a deep, effortless, and encyclopedic command of world affairs that people tended to follow his lead.

“Agent Stone,” he said. “Glad you could join us this early.”

Was there a hint of hidden meaning, even sarcasm, in that statement? Luke decided not to touch it.

He shrugged. “The President called me. I got here as soon as I could.”

He glanced around the room.

Ultra-modern, the place was much more than a conference room – it was set up for maximum use of the space, with large screens embedded in the walls every couple of feet, and a giant projection screen on the far wall at the end of the table. Tablet computers and slim microphones rose from slots out of the conference table – they could be dropped back into the table if the attendee wanted to use their own device.

Every plush leather chair at the table was occupied – a few military uniforms, several business suits. Most of the people were middle-aged and overweight – career government types who spent a lot of time sitting down in comfortable chairs and eating lunch. These chairs all looked like the captain’s chair on the command module of a spaceship crossing the galaxy. Big arms, deep leather, high backs, ergonomically correct with lumbar spine support.

The seats along the walls – smaller, red linen chairs with lower backs – were filled with young aides and even younger assistants, most of them slurping from Styrofoam coffee cups, tapping messages into tablets, or murmuring into telephones.

Susan sat in a leather chair at the closest end of the oblong table. She wore a blue pinstriped pantsuit. Her right leg was crossed over her left, and she leaned in close to hear what a young aide was telling her. Luke tried not to stare at her.

After a moment, she glanced up and nodded to him.

“Agent Stone,” she said. “Thanks for coming.”

Luke nodded. “Madam President. Of course.”

Kurt clapped his big hands, as if Luke entering was the cue he had been waiting for. The clap made a sound like a heavy book dropping to a stone floor. “Order, everybody! Come to order, please.”

The place went silent. Almost. A couple of military men at the conference table continued to talk with each other, heads leaned in close.

Kurt clapped his hands again.

CLAP. CLAP.

They both looked at him. He raised his hands as if to say, “Are you done?”

The room finally went dead quiet.

Kurt gestured to a young woman sitting in a chair to his left. Luke had seen her before, many times. She was Kurt’s indispensable aide, practically an extra appendage. She wore her auburn hair in a short bob cut like Susan’s – short bob cuts like Susan’s were all the rage with young women these days. Magazine editors and fluff news shows hadn’t exactly overlooked this fact. Critics called it the Hopkins Bob if they liked it, the Hopkins Helmet if they didn’t. They all seemed to be in agreement about what to call the women who styled their hair that way, however.

Susan’s Army.

Luke enjoyed that one. He didn't wear a bob, but he supposed he was also in Susan's Army.

"Amy, let's see it," Kurt said. "Israel and Lebanon, please."

On the screen, blue and yellow icons that represented explosions began to appear across southern Lebanon, reaching as far north as the southern edge of Beirut, the explosions becoming sparser the further north they went.

"Hours ago, the Israeli air force began a bombing campaign, attacking the Hezbollah tunnel systems and fortifications along the Blue Line, as well as the Hezbollah-dominated neighborhoods of south Beirut. This is not a surprise, and in fact was telegraphed to us by Yonatan Stern's government last night."

On the screen, large red icons in the same shape as the earlier ones began to appear across Israel. There were maybe fifteen of them in total. A moment later, smaller red icons, tiny starbursts, began to appear in northern Israel. There were dozens of these.

"Soon after Israel began its air strikes, Hezbollah started to launch missile attacks into Israel. This is not unusual, especially when there is exchange of fire between the two forces. The 2006 war followed more or less this same trajectory. But a problem has arisen. In the intervening years, Hezbollah has obtained better firepower."

A photograph of a large missile on a mobile launch pad appeared.

"This is the Fateh-200 missile. It is an Iranian-built weapon system, long-range missiles with multiple warheads that pack a powerful punch. Launched from inside Lebanon, it can reach nearly anywhere in Israel, except perhaps the sparsely populated Negev Desert in the south. It has sophisticated control and guidance features that for the first time give Hezbollah precision-strike capability."

Kurt paused. "From what we can gather, it now appears that Hezbollah has obtained the Fateh-200. We believe they have launched anywhere from twenty to thirty of these missiles so far, each with as many as a dozen warheads. They targeted civilian and military infrastructure in population centers across Israel, including Tel Aviv, the western edge of Jerusalem, and the center of Haifa, among others. Israel's medium-range missile defense system, known as David's Sling, knocked perhaps half to two-thirds of these from the sky. But that wasn't good enough.

"Several civilian neighborhoods were hit and numerous buildings destroyed. A warhead landed within half a mile of the Knesset, the Israeli congress, while it was in session."

"What are the current casualties?" Haley Lawrence, the Secretary of Defense, said.

"Thus far, all we have are the official figures that have been released. More than four hundred civilians killed, thousands wounded, amid widespread destruction and panic. No figures on military casualties have been released, but the Israelis have mobilized for total war, calling for duty all reservists and able-bodied veterans of previous wars. They have intensified the bombing campaign in Lebanon dramatically, probably in an attempt to destroy any more Fateh-200s before they're launched."

"Has it worked?" Luke said, already knowing the answer.

Kurt shook his head. "We don't know. We doubt it. As we speak, Hezbollah is still launching small, unguided missiles and rockets into northern Israel, demonstrating that their response capability still exists. We believe they are holding back the Fateh-200s for the time being, but will resume those launches on a timetable of their choosing.

"Israel has publicly blamed the Iranians for providing Hezbollah with the new missiles. In all likelihood, this is an accurate assessment. Hezbollah is a cat's paw for Iran. Thirty minutes ago, Israel threatened to attack Iran if another Fateh-200 or similar missile is launched into Israeli territory."

Kurt paused. "Ten minutes later, Iran informed the Israelis that they will counter any Israeli attack by launching nuclear weapons. In the same statement, they indicated that any Israeli attack will be grounds for Iran to launch nuclear weapons at the American air base in Doha, Qatar, as well as the large American embassy complex in Baghdad."

The room went dead quite for several seconds. Luke, standing in a corner, watched the looks on the faces. Several people blushed, as if they were embarrassed. Others stared with wide eyes and mouths hanging slightly open.

“Iran doesn’t have nuclear weapons,” someone said. “They can’t.”

Kurt shook his head. “Every international agreement and accord states that Iran is not a nuclear-armed state, and is forbidden from becoming one. But that doesn’t mean they haven’t acquired nuclear weapons. Amy, give us Iran, please.”

A new map appeared on the screen – Iran. The map gave Luke a sinking feeling. He had been to Iran. It wasn’t his favorite place in the world.

“The Islamic State of Iran is a Shiite Muslim theocracy. We know that they have harbored an ambition to acquire nuclear weapons since at least the 1979 Islamic Revolution.”

“But if they ever tested a nuclear weapon,” Susan said, “we would know about it.” It was the first time she had spoken since the meeting started.

“It would be nice if that were true,” Kurt said. “Deep underground testing facilities are proliferating everywhere in the world – they are very difficult to find and map. Advanced radiation detection systems can account for, down to very small amounts, radiation released into the atmosphere. We can combine that with our ability to measure the force and direction of prevailing winds, and determine with a fair amount of accuracy where the radiation is coming from. But when I say a fair amount of accuracy, what I mean is to within several hundred miles. Given Iran’s proximity to Pakistan – which is a known and accepted nuclear-armed state – it’s hard to pinpoint a radiation source and say for sure it’s in Iran.”

“But those tests have seismic signatures,” Susan said. “They’re practically like earthquakes.”

Kurt nodded. “And that’s what makes Iran doubly challenging. It is one of the most seismically active places on the planet. Earthquakes are common there, and frequently devastating. The most recent disaster was in 2003, when a 6.6 magnitude earthquake killed at least twenty-three thousand people in the city of Bam. But disasters aside, seismic activity in Iran is nearly constant. We monitor it on a daily basis. Listening for an underground rumble in Iran is like listening for waves to crash at the beach. It happens all the time.”

“What are you saying, Kurt?” Susan said. “Just say it.”

“Iran could build and test nuclear weapons,” Kurt said. “And we might not find out about it.”

Instantly, an idea occurred to Luke. It was just one of those things. There is a question, and your mind spits out the answer. You don’t have to like the answer, but there it is in front of you.

“Why don’t we send in a covert infiltration team?” he said. “They could go in and find out if this is a bluff or not. If it isn’t a bluff, they discover the location of the nukes, and call in air strikes.”

Admittedly, he didn’t have the entire plan worked through, but once he said it out loud, he could see the wisdom in it.

“We don’t have the necessary people in place for that kind of deployment,” said a man in dress greens. “It would take weeks or even months – ”

“General, I beg to differ,” Luke said. “We do have the people in place. My own organization, the Special Response Team, is ready.”

CHAPTER NINE

8:15 a.m. Eastern Standard Time

The West Wing

The White House, Washington, DC

“This is a disaster,” Susan said. “It’s crazy. I’m not going to allow it.”

They were walking back through the West Wing to the Oval Office, three of them – Susan, Kurt, and Kat Lopez. Susan’s and Kat’s shoes clacked on the marble floor. Three big Secret Service men trailed them; two walked in front.

The double doors to the Oval Office were just up ahead, a large Secret Service man on either side. Susan and the swarm of people around her were all walking so fast, it felt like she was being sucked toward the office on a conveyor belt. She felt out of control. She did not want to have this meeting. A couple of months ago, sending her best agents on a life-threatening mission wouldn’t have rattled her cage all that much.

“Susan, we have another problem,” Kurt said.

“Hit me.”

“The Israelis are no longer sharing casualty assessments with us, or keeping us updated on their plans. Yonatan Stern is furious. He wants to attack Iran immediately, and we have asked him to hold off from doing that. He is already pounding southern Lebanon to dust, but Hezbollah is still launching missiles. He calls these attacks, and the Iranian threat with no clear way to respond, a humiliation, and he blames us for it. He is ready to kick our ambassador out of the country. He wants to speak with you directly.”

Susan shook her head. “This day keeps getting better and better.”

They passed through the double doors and into the Oval Office.

“Do you want me to schedule a call with him?” Kat said.

Susan shrugged. “Sure. I’ll talk to him. Kurt, can you have someone draft me my talking points? What am I supposed to tell him? Why can’t everybody just be friends? Why don’t you just bake those guys with the missiles a cake?”

“Of course,” Kurt said, and peeled off into a corner of the office, already on his telephone.

Kat disappeared back out through the doorway.

Susan gazed around the Oval Office. In front of her, three tall windows, with drapes pulled back, looked out on the Rose Garden. Outside, it was a sunny day in early winter. There were several people in the room. Luke Stone sat in a high-backed chair in the sitting area. Beneath his feet was the Seal of the President of the United States. Sitting beside him was big Haley Lawrence, the Secretary of Defense, who looked like he had been gaining weight – the additional bulk somehow took on the appearance of baby fat, making a man well over six feet tall seem a lot like a little boy.

There were two other men in the room, both standing. They wore dress green military uniforms – men who Susan guessed were in their mid-fifties, very fit, with crew-cut hair. They could be twins – Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

“Madam President,” Tweedledum said. He reached out a hand to her. “I’m General Steven Perkins with the Defense Intelligence Agency.”

She nodded to him as his hand swallowed hers in a firm military grip.

“General.”

Tweedledee also reached out for his shake. “Madam President, I’m Mike Sobchak with Naval Intelligence.”

“Admiral.”

She shook her head. “Okay, men, where are we on this?” Susan said. “What kind of scheme have you and Agent Stone cooked up?”

Kurt was back, having murmured into his phone for all of eleven seconds. “Please shut the door,” he said to the Secret Service men.

“It’s a highly classified mission,” Haley Lawrence said.

Susan shrugged and made a spinning gesture with her hand. “I figured as much. So give it to me.”

“We send a small team to Israel on a State Department plane,” Kurt said. “We’ve already sent three State Department planes since yesterday, so to anyone watching it might seem like more of the same – crisis diplomats flying in to try to defuse the situation.”

“I’m sure no one suspects that we’re going to send spies in,” Susan said.

“When the team arrives, it will be briefed by Israeli intelligence on possible locations of Iranian nuclear sites. The team will coordinate with the Israelis to design an infiltration, and then drop into Iran under cover of darkness. The team then makes their way, by whatever means available, to the most likely sites, and either confirms or discredits the existence of nuclear weapons at those sites. If weapons are found, they call in air strikes on those coordinates, which destroy the weapons in their silos.”

“Air strikes by whom?” Susan said. “Americans or Israelis?”

“Americans,” Tweedledum said. “By definition, those strikes will have to be powerful bunker busters dropped from high altitude. Most likely, MOABs dropped from B-52 bombers, and that’s if we can even take out the bunkers with conventional weapons, which is not guaranteed. We don’t believe the Israelis have those capabilities.”

“We don’t believe?” Susan said. “Don’t we know?”

“We’re dealing with Israel here,” Tweedledee said. “They might have them, they might not. They’re not always forthcoming with information like that. In any event, if the Israelis bomb Iranian missile silos, there’s always the chance it will start World War Three. The Russians are close allies with Iran. Meanwhile, the Sunni countries hate the Iranian Shiites. But only until the Israelis bomb them. Then they’re all fellow Muslims and Israeli aggression must be avenged. If we do the bombing...”

He shrugged. “I think we can find a way to placate the Russians about this. And the Sunni countries will live with it.”

“Why don’t the Israelis send their own spies in to look for the bomb?” Susan said.

“We talked to their intelligence people. They think the mission is a sure failure. They would prefer to bomb Iran indiscriminately and destroy all of Iranian military bases and infrastructure, in the hopes of hitting any nukes they might have. We are encouraging them – encouraging them very strenuously – to refrain from that course of action. Obviously, the risk of bombing Iran and leaving even one nuclear missile operational is too high to contemplate what...”

Susan looked at Luke. “Hello, Agent Stone.”

He gazed directly into her eyes. This was the thing she hated, the thing she had been dreading. She wanted to stop time right here and not have him say another word.

“Madam President.”

“Do you intend to take this mission?”

He nodded. “Yes. Of course. It was my idea.”

“It sounds to me like a suicide mission, Agent Stone.”

“I’ve heard of worse,” Luke said. “In any case, it’s exactly the kind of thing the new Special Response Team was organized to do. I’ve already talked to my team. We can be ready to leave in a couple of hours.”

She tried a different tack. “Agent Stone, you’re the director of the Special Response Team. My records indicate that you’re forty-two years old. Wouldn’t this mission be better handled by a more junior operative from your agency? Someone a little younger, say? Someone a little more energetic?”

“I plan to go in with Ed Newsam,” Luke said. “He’s thirty-five. And anyway, I’m still pretty energetic for an old geezer.”

“Agent Stone and Agent Newsam both have extensive operations experience in the Middle East,” Tweedledum said. “Both are elite combat veterans, have been deep undercover, and are familiar with Israeli, Arab, and Persian culture. Both have some ability to speak Farsi.”

Susan ignored him. She glanced around the room. Everyone seemed to be staring at her. They wanted to talk about the design of the mission, she knew. They wanted her to green light it immediately, so they could gather the resources needed, come up with contingencies in case it failed, develop strategies for plausible deniability in case it went public. In their minds, who was going was not even in play anymore – the issue had already been decided.

“Can you gentlemen give me a few minutes alone with Agent Stone?”

* * *

“Luke, are you out of your mind?”

The other men, and all of the Secret Service, had gone.

“I wouldn’t send my worst enemy on this mission. You’re supposed to parachute into Iran, and then wander around the country with people trying to murder you, until you find nuclear weapons?”

He smiled. “Well, I hope it’ll be a little better thought out than that.”

“You’re going to get yourself killed.”

He stood then, and went to her. He tried to hug her. She was stiff for a moment, then melted into his embrace.

“Do you know how ridiculous it looks for the President of the United States to be overly worried about the life of one special operative, who’s been doing exactly this type of thing his entire adult life?”

She shook her head. “I don’t care. This is different. I can’t sign off on a mission where you might get killed. It’s nuts.”

He looked down at her. “Are you telling me that in order to be with you, I have to give up my job?”

“No. You’re the head of your own agency. You don’t have to take this on. You don’t have to volunteer for this. Send someone else.”

“You want me to send someone else even though you think this is a suicide mission?”

She nodded. “That’s right. Send someone who I don’t love.”

“Susan, I can’t do that.”

She turned away then, and abruptly, miserable tears started to flow. “I know. I know that. But for the love of God, please don’t die over there.”

CHAPTER TEN

4:45 p.m. Israel Time (9:45 a.m. Eastern Standard Time)

Samson's Lair – Deep Underground

Jerusalem, Israel

“Tell them to shut up.”

Yonatan Stern, the Prime Minister of Israel, sat in his customary chair at the head of the conference table in the Israeli crisis command center, his chin in his hand. The room was a cavernous egg-shaped dome. All around him, his military and political advisors were in a state of chaos, shouting, recriminating, jabbing fingers at one another.

How had it come to this? seemed to be the prevailing question. And the answer upon which most of these brilliant strategic minds had landed was, *It's someone else's fault.*

“David!” he said, staring at his chief-of-staff, a burly former commando who had been his right-hand man since their military days. David looked back at him, big dark eyes baleful, teeth biting the inside of his cheek, as he did when he was nervous or distracted. Once upon a time, the man would kill enemies with his bare hands, and yet somehow appear apologetic while he did so. He still looked apologetic now.

“Please,” Yonatan said. “Bring the place to order.”

David shrugged. He stepped to the conference table and slammed a giant fist down on its surface.

BOOM!

He didn't say a word, but brought his fist down again.

BOOM!

And again. And again. And again. Each time the fist landed, the room became a little quieter. Eventually, all the men in the room stood and stared at David Cohn, Yonatan Stern's organizer and enforcer, a man none of them respected intellectually, but also a man none would ever dare cross.

He raised his fist one last time, but now the room was silent. It paused in midair, like a hammer. Then it floated slowly back to his side.

“Thank you, David,” Yonatan said. He looked at the other men in the room. “Gentlemen, I would like to begin this meeting. So please, take your seats and enthrall me with your acumen.”

He looked around the room. Efraim Shavitz was here, always boyish, much younger than his years. People called him the Model. He was the Director of Mossad. He wore an expensive, custom-tailored suit and Italian black leather shoes with a high polish. He looked like he was heading out to a nightclub in Tel Aviv, and not currently overseeing the destruction of his own people. In a room full of aging military men and frumpy thinkers, Shavitz the dandy looked like some sort of exotic bird.

Yonatan shook his head. Shavitz was one of his predecessor's men. Yonatan kept him on because he came well recommended and seemed like he knew what he was doing. Until today.

“Efraim, your assessment, please.”

Shavitz nodded. “Of course.”

He pulled a remote control from his jacket pocket and turned to the large screen at the end of the conference table. Instantly, a video of a missile launch from a drab green mobile platform came on.

“The Fateh-200 has come to Lebanon. We have suspected this might be the case – ”

“When did you suspect that?” Yonatan said.

Shavitz looked at him. “I'm sorry?”

“When did you suspect that Hezbollah had obtained the Fateh-200 weapon system? When? I have never read such a report, nor has anyone mentioned to me that such a report might be coming. The first I heard of it was when long-range, high-explosive missiles began toppling residential buildings in Tel Aviv.”

There was a long, drawn-out silence. The other men in the room stared, some at Yonatan Stern, some at Efraim Shavitz, some at the table in front of them.

“In any event, they have them,” Shavitz said.

Yonatan nodded. “Yes, they do. Now about Iran... what do they have?”

Shavitz pointed at Yonatan. “Don’t conflate Hezbollah acquiring powerful conventional weapons with the Iranian nuclear threat, Yonatan. Don’t do that. We’ve told you that the Iranians were working on nuclear missiles. We know the suspected locations. We know the people involved. We have a sense of the number of warheads. You’ve been warned of these dangers for years. We’ve lost a lot of good men to obtain this information. That you took no action is not my fault, or the fault of Mossad.”

“There are political considerations,” Yonatan said.

Shavitz shook his head. “That’s not my department. Now, we believe the Iranians may have as many as fourteen warheads, salted in three locations, and likely fairly deep underground. They may not have any. It may be a lie. But no more than fourteen.”

“And if they do have them, all fourteen of them?”

Shavitz shrugged. A piece of hair above his forehead slipped out of place, very uncustomary for him. He’d better comb it back before he reached the nightclub. “And they manage to launch them?”

Yonatan nodded. “Yes.”

“We’ll be annihilated. It’s that simple.”

“What are our options?”

“Very few,” Shavitz said. “Everyone in this room already knows what they are. Everyone here well knows our own nuclear, conventional missile, and air force capabilities. We can launch a massive preemptive attack, all out, against all known Iranian and Syrian missile sites, and against all Iranian air force bases. If we act with total commitment, and with all of our forces in perfect concert, we can utterly destroy Iranian and Syrian military capabilities, and set Iranian civil society back to the dark ages. Those in this room with political considerations don’t need me to tell them what the worldwide backlash would be.”

“What about a lesser strike?”

Shavitz shook his head. “For what? Any strike that leaves Iran with missile capabilities, with fighters or bombers in the air, or that leaves even a single nuclear missile operational, will spell disaster for us. While some of us have been sleeping, Prime Minister, or rewarding our friends with government contracts, the Iranians have been working like termites, building an almost impossibly robust conventional missile arsenal, all of it with us in mind.

“The Fajr-3, with precision guidance and multiple reentry vehicles – nearly impossible to knock down. The Shahab-3 program, with enough missiles, enough firepower, and the reach to carpet bomb every square inch of Israel. The Ghadr-110, the Ashoura, the Sejjil, and the Bina systems, all of which can reach us, thousands of individual projectiles and warheads. And, while it hardly seems pressing at this moment, they are still working on the Simorgh satellite-launched missile, which is in testing and which we can expect to see operational with a year. Once that system is in place...”

Shavitz sighed. The rest of the room was silent.

“What about our shelter system?”

Shavitz nodded. “Sure. Assuming the Iranians are bluffing and they don’t have any nuclear weapons, we can say with confidence that should they launch a major attack against us, some percentage of our people would make it to the shelters in time, some of the shelters would hold, and afterwards, a handful of survivors would crawl out alive. But don’t think for a minute that they would rebuild. They would be traumatized and helpless, wandering across a blasted moonscape. What would Hezbollah do then? Or the Turks? Or the Syrians? Or the Saudis? Rush in to bring aid and comfort to the last remnants of Israeli society? I really don’t think so.”

Yonatan took a deep breath. “Are there any other options at all?”

Shavitz shrugged. “Just one. The idea the Americans have floated. Send in a small commando team to discover if the nuclear weapons are even real, and to determine their locations. Then the American forces come in and precision strike those locations, possibly with our participation, possibly not. If the Americans make a limited, precise attack, and destroy only the nuclear weapons, the Iranians may hesitate to respond.”

This was an idea Yonatan hated. He hated it because of all the fruitless loss of life – the loss of highly trained and valuable agents – that had already come from previous infiltrations into Iran. He hated it because he would be forced to wait while the agents disappeared, with no idea if they might resurface and whether they would know anything when they did. Yonatan did not like the prospect of waiting – not when the clock was ticking and the Iranians could launch their own massive attack at any time.

Yonatan especially hated this idea because it appeared to have come from inside the White House of Susan Hopkins. Hopkins had no idea of the reality of Israel’s situation, and she did not seem to care. She was like a parrot with a reluctant owner, who had only taught the poor bird one phrase.

The Palestinians. The Palestinians. The Palestinians.

“What are the odds that such a mission would succeed?” Yonatan said.

Shavitz shook his head. “Very, very slim. But attempting it would probably please the Americans, and demonstrate to them the restraint we are showing. If we made the whole thing time-limited, perhaps forty-eight hours, we might not have anything to lose.”

“Can we afford that much time?”

“If we closely monitor the Iranians for any sign of a first strike, and immediately launch our own strike at forty-eight hours, we should be okay.”

“And if the agents are killed or captured?”

“An American team, with perhaps one Israeli guide who has significant Iranian experience. The Israeli will be a deep cover operative with no identity. If anything goes wrong, we simply deny involvement.”

Shavitz paused for a long moment. “I already have the perfect operative in mind.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

12:10 p.m. Eastern Standard Time

Joint Base Andrews

Prince George's County, Maryland

The small blue jet with the US Department of State logo on the side moved slowly onto the taxiway and made a sharp right turn. Already cleared for takeoff, it quickly accelerated down the runway, left the ground, and climbed steeply into the clouds. Within another moment, it angled sharply left toward the Atlantic Ocean.

Inside the plane, Luke and his team easily fell back into old habits – they used the front four passenger seats as their meeting area. They stowed their luggage and their gear in the seats at the back.

They were leaving later than he had intended. The holdup was because Luke had gone to see Gunner at school. He had promised his son that he would never leave without telling him face-to-face, and sharing as much as he could about where he was going. Gunner had asked for that, and Luke had agreed.

They had met in a small room provided to them by the principal's assistant – it was a place where they stored musical instruments, mostly old wind instruments, many of them gathering rust, by the looks of things.

Gunner had handled it pretty well, all things considered.

“Where are you going?” he said.

Luke shook his head. “It's classified, Monster. If I tell you...”

“Then I tell someone, and that person tells someone.”

“I don't think you would tell anyone. But just knowing would put you at risk.”

He looked at the boy, who was more than a little long-faced.

“Are you worried?” Luke said.

Gunner shook his head. “No. I think you can probably take care of yourself.”

Now, on the plane, Luke smiled to himself. Funny kid. He had been through a lot, and somehow hadn't lost his sense of humor.

Luke glanced around at his team. In the seat next to him sat big Ed Newsam, in khaki cargo pants and a long-sleeved T-shirt. Steely-eyed, huge, as eternal as a mountain. Ed was older now, certainly. There were lines on his face, especially around the eyes, that hadn't been there before. And his hair wasn't as jet black as it used to be – there were a few gray and white strands running around loose in there.

Ed had left the FBI Hostage Rescue Team for this gig. The FBI was moving Ed up the ranks – more seniority, more responsibility, more sitting at a desk, and a lot less time in the field. To hear Ed tell it, he was switching because he wanted to see some action again. But that didn't stop him from holding out for more money. It didn't matter. Luke had been ready to make the SRT budget cry out in agony if that's what it took to get Ed back on board.

Across from Luke and to the left, facing him, was Mark Swann. He stretched his long legs out into the aisle as usual, an old pair of ripped jeans and a pair of red Chuck Taylor sneakers there for anyone to trip over. Swann had changed, of course. Barely surviving his time as a prisoner of ISIS had made him more serious – he no longer joked about the danger of missions. Luke was glad that he had come back at all – there was a period of time when it seemed like Swann might become a recluse, and never emerge from his penthouse condo overlooking the beach again.

Then there was Trudy Wellington. She sat directly across from Luke. She had curly brown hair again, and hadn't aged at all. That made sense. Despite everything she had seen and done – her time as an analyst with the original SRT, her relationship with Don Morris, her escape from prison and her time in hiding – she was still only thirty-two years old. She was slim and as attractive as ever in

a green sweater and blue jeans. At some point, she had done away with the big, round, red-rimmed owlsh glasses she used to hide behind. Now her pretty blue eyes were front and center.

Those eyes were staring hard at Luke. They didn't look friendly.

What did she know about his relationship with Susan? Was she angry about it? Why would she be?

"Do you know what you're doing, man?" Ed Newsam said. He said it good-naturedly enough, but there was an edge, an undercurrent to it.

"You mean, with this mission?"

Ed shrugged. "Sure. Start with that."

Luke glanced out his window as he spoke. It was a bright day, but the sun was already behind them. In a little while, as they moved further east, the sky would begin to darken. It gave him the sense of events surging out ahead – a familiar feeling, but one of his least favorite aspects of the job. It was a race against time. It was *always* a race against time, and they were way behind. The war they were trying to prevent had already started.

"I guess that's what we're about to find out. Trudy?"

She shrugged, seemed noncommittal. She picked the tablet up from her lap. "Okay," she said. "I'm going to assume no prior knowledge."

"Sounds good to me," Luke said. "Boys?"

"Good," Swann said.

"Let's hear it," Ed said. He eased back into his seat.

"This is Israel and Iran," Trudy said. "It's not exactly a short story."

Luke shrugged. "It's a long flight," he said.

* * *

"Israel is a young country, existing only since 1948," Trudy said. "But the idea of the Land of Israel as a place has been sacred to the Jewish people since Biblical times, possibly as long ago as two thousand years before Christ. The first written reference to Israel as a place occurs around 1200 BC. The area was invaded, conquered, and reconquered throughout ancient times by the Babylonians, the Egyptians, and the Persians, to name a few. Through it all, the Jews persisted.

"In 63 BC, the Roman Empire conquered the region, transforming it into a Roman province. For almost two hundred years, it became the site of a violent struggle between the Jews and the Romans, which ended in widespread destruction, genocide, and ethnic cleansing. The final Jewish revolt against the Romans failed in 132 AD, and the majority of Jews were either killed or dispersed – many went north into modern-day Russia, northwest into eastern and central Europe, or directly west toward Morocco and Spain. Some went east into Syria, Iraq, and Iran. A handful might have headed south into Africa. And some stayed in Israel.

"Over time, the Roman Empire faded, and the region was conquered by Arabs in the middle 600s, who themselves had recently adopted the new religion of Islam. Despite frequent attacks by Christian Crusaders, the area remained mostly under the control of Muslim sultans for the next nine hundred years. In 1516, it was conquered again, this time by the Ottoman Empire. On Ottoman maps as early as 1600, the area we think of as Israel was referred to as Palestine. When the Ottoman Empire was destroyed in World War One, Palestine came under the control of its next ruler, the British."

"Setting us up for modern problems," Ed said.

Trudy nodded. "Naturally. Throughout history, some Jews had remained there, and over the centuries, there were numerous idealistic attempts to have Jews from other parts of the world return. By the early 1900s, those efforts were picking up steam. The rise of the Nazis led to vastly increased numbers of Jews leaving Europe. At the end of World War Two, the population of Palestine was

about one-third Jewish. After the war, a massive influx of Jews, survivors of the Holocaust, left their destroyed communities across Europe and made their way to Palestine.

“In 1948, the State of Israel was formed. This set off a series of violent conflicts between Muslims and Jews that continue to the present day. In the initial fighting, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq invaded, joined by contingents of irregulars from Yemen, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan. The Israelis fought them off. At least seven hundred thousands Arabs fled or were expelled by advancing Israeli forces to the areas now known as the Palestinian Territories – the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.”

“See, here’s the part I don’t get,” Ed Newsam said. “1948 is old news. Right now you have all these Palestinians locked up in Gaza and the West Bank. Why not just give them their freedom and let them become their own country? Failing that, why not just give them all citizenship and incorporate them into Israel? It seems like either thing might put the brakes on all this fighting.”

“It’s complicated,” Swann said.

“Complicated, to put it mildly,” Trudy said. “Impossible is more like it. For one thing, Israel was established as a Jewish state – a homeland for Jews all over the world. This is a project nearly two thousand years in the making.

“If Israel wants to remain a Jewish state, it can’t simply incorporate the Palestinians into the country as citizens. It would set the clock ticking on a demographic time bomb, one which would go off sooner rather than later. The country has universal suffrage – every citizen gets the right to vote. There are roughly six and a half million Jews in Israel, and nearly two million Israeli Arabs, the vast majority of whom are Muslim. There are about four and a half million Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank combined.

“If the Palestinians all became citizens, suddenly you’d have a society nearly split down the middle between Jews and Muslims, with a relative handful of Christians and others thrown in. Right away, Jews would no longer be the majority. Also, Israeli Arabs and Palestinians have higher birthrates than Israeli Jews, generally speaking. Within a couple of decades, Muslims would have a clear and growing majority. Would they vote to keep Israel the Jewish homeland?”

“Doubt it,” Swann said.

“So give the Palestinians their freedom,” Ed said. “Grant them nationhood. Open their roads, let them control their own airspace and coastal waters, and let them trade with other countries.”

Trudy shook her head. “Also impossible. I rarely make absolute declarations about future events, but I’ve looked at these scenarios from every angle. No matter who says what during international negotiations, no matter how many times the United Nations general assembly votes its condemnation, keep your eye on Palestinian nationhood. It never comes any closer to fruition. And that’s because Israel will never voluntarily allow it. The very idea is absurd. It’s suicide.

“Look, Israel exists in a state of sometimes desperate conflict with the countries that surround it. Survival is always an open question. Security is the most important thing in Israeli society, and providing it is a major focus of the state. Israel is a tiny country as it is. If the West Bank were not there as a buffer zone, and in fact became a foreign country, the situation would instantly go from difficult to very, very dangerous. Untenable. The coastal plain of central Israel is a narrow sliver of land, from the West Bank to the sea, varying for much of its length from nine to eleven miles wide. The average person could ride a bicycle that distance in under an hour.

“Most of the civilian population, as well as the country’s industrial and technology sectors – are located there. To make matters worse, the West Bank lands are hills that overlook the plain – there are places in the West Bank where you can easily see the Mediterranean. When extremists in Arab countries talk about driving the Israelis into the sea, the thing to remember is it’s a very short drive.

“The Palestinians are allied with Iran, and many Palestinians are hostile to Israel’s very existence. If you grant the Palestinians nationhood, what’s to stop Iranian tanks, fighter planes, missile batteries, and troops amassing on your border? Not just on your border, but on the high ground

above you? It's a nightmare scenario. Further, the West Bank highlands are the water source for the freshwater aquifers in coastal Israel. What's to stop a sovereign Palestine from trying to block this water supply?

"Even further, although Israel doesn't acknowledge its nuclear capabilities, it is widely accepted that they have anywhere from fifty to eighty nuclear weapons. Most of these are thought to be housed at the Zachariah Missile Base southeast of Tel Aviv, and others are housed in the southern desert. But some – perhaps as many as twenty or even thirty percent – are deployed in underground missile silos in the West Bank east of Jerusalem. These are 1970s and 1980s Cold War-era weapons, and are likely still operational.

"The expense, the transportation logistics, and the public outcry would make it nearly impossible to move the silos back into Israel, and there is no way the Israelis are going to allow the Palestinians to administer those weapons. As I said before, Israel doesn't even acknowledge the weapons exist."

"So what are you saying?" Luke said.

"I'm saying that Israel faces an existential crisis no matter where they look. If they grant the Palestinians citizenship, the very concept of Israel gets voted out of existence. If they let the West Bank become sovereign Palestine, the country of Israel gets bombed out of existence. So they pursue a third path, one that is fraught with danger, but offers some chance of success. That's the path of never-ending tension and conflict with the Palestinians, Hezbollah, Iran, and whoever else decides to join in. It may seem extreme, imbalanced, and highly emotional from the outside, but it is actually simple, hard-headed, rational decision-making. Develop and maintain technological superiority at all costs, mobilize the entire population militarily, and never let your guard down, not for one second."

"But that only works for as long as you have technological superiority," Swann said. "Once your enemy catches up to you..."

"Right," Trudy said. "Then you've got big problems. And it looks like the Iranians have just caught up."

"Have they caught up?" Luke said. "Do they have nuclear weapons?"

Trudy looked at him. "Yes. I'm almost certain that they do."

* * *

Luke pulled down his window shade.

He had been staring out into the vast darkness until he realized there was nothing to see but his own face, wreathed in shadow.

The Lear jet was going east, and if Luke had to guess, he'd say they were over the North Atlantic, nearly as far as Europe now – they'd been flying for hours, and had hours more to go. This was a long trip.

Luke looked at Trudy, who sat across the aisle from him. She was the only one besides Luke who was still awake.

Behind her, Swann lay curled in a ball across two seats. He was fast asleep. In the row behind Swann, Ed Newsam was doing the same thing. Ed was rock solid, of course. But Luke had some reservations about Swann. It wasn't Swann's fault – he had been traumatized by his time in ISIS captivity. He had changed. He was not the same wisecracking, sarcastic idiot he had once been. He was more reserved now, more careful. He spoke a lot less. On the surface, that might seem like a good thing – wisdom, maybe, or maturity. But Luke suspected it might be lack of confidence.

Swann had been rattled to his core. When the heat came, when the stress level amped up, it remained to be seen how well he would perform.

Luke looked across at Trudy. She had been asleep for a little while, curled into a ball. Now she was awake again, gazing out her dark window. From here, all Luke could see was a blinking light on the wing.

“Dark out there,” Luke said. “A whole lot of nothing.”

“Yes.”

“What are you looking at?”

“Exactly that. Nothing.”

He paused. It was awkward between them. He supposed it always would be. He didn’t want to get into it with her now, their shared time together, because Swann and Ed were here. Swann and Ed were not involved in this, and he didn’t want them to wake up in the middle of it.

“I remember the last time we went on a long flight together,” Luke said.

She nodded. “So do I. Korea. You guys had just broken me out of prison. That was a crazy time. I thought my life was over. I didn’t realize it was just beginning.”

“How was your time on the run?”

She shrugged. She did not seem eager to look at him. “I wouldn’t choose to do it again. But all in all, it wasn’t terrible. I learned a lot. I learned not to get so attached to a specific identity. Trudy Wellington, who is that? One possibility out of hundreds. I dyed my hair blonde, just like you suggested. I also dyed it black. At one point, I even shaved my head.

“You know I fell in with a bunch of left-wing protestors in Spain for a while? I really did. I learned Spanish in high school, and Spain was a safe place to disappear. No one had any idea who I was. They sent me for EMT training, so I could become a street medic. People get hurt at these protests a lot – usually minor things, but the ambulances can’t get to them. Street medics are right there, in the middle of the action. I saw quite a few broken limbs and cracked skulls. I thought of Ed the whole time I was doing it – I always had a lot of respect for his medical skills. Even more so now.”

She turned and faced Luke. “I learned a lot about myself, things I needed to learn.”

“Name a big one,” Luke said.

She smiled. “I learned that I don’t need to give myself away to older men anymore. What was I looking for, protection? Approval? It was a silly, little girl habit. I’ve been sticking with men my own age or younger the past couple of years, and it’s been pretty nice. I’ve decided I prefer men who aren’t trying to teach me anything.”

Ouch. Now Luke smiled. Words, however, seemed to escape him.

“I also learned I was a survivor.”

“That’s big,” Luke said.

“Yeah,” she said. “But not as big as the man thing.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

1:45 p.m. Eastern Standard Time

The Situation Room

The White House, Washington, DC

“What time is it there?” Susan said.

Kurt looked at his watch. “Ah, about a quarter to nine at night. We’re scheduled to talk to him at nine.”

Susan nodded. “Okay. Give me the elevator pitch.”

She looked around the room, packed as usual. Kurt stood at the far end of the oblong table, in his customary position. Haley Lawrence sat at the table among a sea of generals and admirals, a few of them women, Susan was gratified to notice. The edges of the room were full of aides and assistants.

“We’ve got a crisis unfolding,” Kurt said. “And we’ve got to step carefully. That’s the message.”

Susan made a spinning motion with her hand, as if to say, *Get on with it.*

“As most people here will know, Israel has been a strategic ally of ours since its founding in 1948. In a constantly changing world, only a handful of countries – England, Canada, France, India, Saudi Arabia...”

Kurt waited and rolled his eyes as a few people booed the mention of the Saudis.

“...Morocco, a few others – have been with us longer. As a relatively small country in a volatile region, Israel’s position is tenuous at best, and over the decades tensions have repeatedly erupted into open conflict with a host of regional actors. In the early days, these conflicts were the result of attacks by neighboring countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. In more recent years, the conflicts have focused on the plight of the Palestinians who were displaced when Israel was created, and who live in a sort of political limbo in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, lands that Israel seized during the Six Day War in 1967. Every international body, indeed every country on Earth besides Israel and United States, considers Israel the occupying power in these territories.

“Islamic terrorist organizations have been using this situation as a fundraising tool for two generations. Also, Muslim countries can whip up anti-Israel sentiment any time it fits their purposes, as long as the Palestinians remain in limbo.”

“What is our policy on this?” someone along the back asked.

Kurt nodded. “Sure, good question. Just so we’re all clear. Our official policy is that there is an ongoing negotiation, the result of which will be that the West Bank and Gaza eventually become a country, probably called Palestine, and that Palestine and Israel will co-exist peacefully and may even become regional partners. In the meantime, we recognize Israel’s right to secure its borders and prevent attacks by Palestinians on Israeli civilians. We do not recognize Israel’s right to build so-called settlements in Palestinian territory, nor do we recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. We consider it a partitioned city – the western half in Israel, the eastern half in the West Bank.”

“And Yonatan?”

Kurt glanced at a sheet of paper on the table in front of him. “Yonatan Stern. Sixty-three years old. Married, father of five, grandfather of eight. As a young man, he was a commando with the elite Sayeret Matkal unit of the Israeli Defense Forces. In 1976, he was one of the leaders of the successful raid on Entebbe Airport in Uganda, where Israeli commandos rescued more than one hundred Israeli hostages taken from a hijacked plane.

“Since he left the military, he has spent almost his entire adult life in Israeli politics as a war hawk and a hardliner. At the moment, he appears to sit atop an unassailable majority in the Knesset. His vulnerability is that he is currently the subject of at least four separate police investigations into corruption – ranging from receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of gifts from

wealthy supporters, all the way up to doling out preferential no-bid government military contracts and manipulating the Israeli telecom industry on behalf of friends.”

Kurt shook his head and whistled. “Stern is in legal jeopardy. It’s real, and it has been consuming much of his attention in recent months. He’ll be lucky to stay out of jail. And he has problems on the diplomatic front as well. While traveling in Europe three weeks ago, he was caught speaking into an open microphone, joking about the idea of a two-state solution with the Palestinians, seeming to dismiss it out of hand. Apparently, he didn’t know the mic was on, and he said the European Union was crazy – yes, he used the word crazy – for worrying about the Palestinians. You can imagine how well this little faux pas has played in European capitals and among the Israeli left wing.”

He looked at Susan. “To be clear, Yonatan Stern is not an ideal partner. But I think we also need to recognize that he isn’t Prime Minister for life, and there are many, many elements in Israeli society that are seeking a peaceful solution to the ongoing problems. Israel has been, and continues to be, an important ally of the United States, and their civilian population is under attack. There is no telling at this moment what the extent of that attack is likely to be. But if Iran has nuclear weapons, as they claim...”

Susan nodded. “Of course. My problem isn’t with Israel. I understand the relationship is much larger than Yonatan.”

“Good. All we need from him at this moment is restraint, which is not necessarily his strong suit. He’s a hammer, and everywhere he looks, he sees nails. But he has to give us time to find and eliminate those nukes. Shall we talk to him?”

She shrugged. “Let’s do it.”

* * *

“I hope you’re happy.”

Yonatan Stern’s deep disembodied rumble came over the black speakerphone device at the center of the conference table. “I hope this pleases you.”

Susan looked at Kurt and shook her head.

“Why would this please me, Yonatan?”

“I think it should be obvious,” he said.

“It isn’t.”

“Your country, at your personal urging, sought an appeasement with Iran, continuing to allow them to refine uranium. The Europeans went along with you. And this is the result – an Iran that is willing to claim it has nuclear weapons, in defiance of all international agreements. An Iran that is happy to put the most advanced conventional weapons it has into the hands of terrorists – maniacs who are accountable to no one.”

“Yonatan...” Susan began.

“There are hundreds dead here, Susan. Perhaps thousands. We don’t even know yet. Residential buildings have been completely destroyed, and rescuers can only slowly dig through the rubble for fear of further collapses. There was a firestorm in a neighborhood in Haifa. The hospitals everywhere are overwhelmed.”

Susan shook her head. “I’m very sorry.”

It was as if Stern hadn’t heard her. “We are facing, perhaps for the first time since 1973, the question of annihilation. Now, I’m sure you think that the situation is more complicated than what I describe. Isn’t that what the Americans always say? Oh my, Israel and Iran, Israel and Hezbollah, what a complicated situation! But it’s not complicated. It’s simple. You have unleashed Iran upon us. You did it. And now you ask us to hold back our response. For decades you have tolerated a failed state in Lebanon and called it your ally. Lebanon is a launch platform for Iranian terror attacks – nothing more, nothing less. It is not a country. And yet you ask us – ”

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