

THE FORGING OF LUKE STONE--BOOK 2

PRIMARY COMMAND



JACK MARS

The Forging of Luke Stone

Jack Mars

Primary Command

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Mars J.

Primary Command / J. Mars — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», — (The Forging of Luke Stone)

ISBN 978-1-64-029618-3

“One of the best thrillers I have read this year.” --Books and Movie Reviews (re Any Means Necessary) In PRIMARY COMMAND (The Forging of Luke Stone —Book #2), a ground-breaking action thriller by #1 bestseller Jack Mars, elite Delta Force veteran Luke Stone, 29, leads the FBI’s Special Response Team on a nail-biting mission to save American hostages from a nuclear submarine. But when all goes wrong, and when the President shocks the world with his reaction, it may fall on Luke’s shoulders to save not only the hostages—but the world. PRIMARY COMMAND is an un-putdownable military thriller, a wild action ride that will leave you turning pages late into the night. The precursor to the #1 bestselling LUKE STONE THRILLER SERIES, this series takes us back to how it all began, a riveting series by bestseller Jack Mars, dubbed “one of the best thriller authors” out there. “Thriller writing at its best.” --Midwest Book Review (re Any Means Necessary) Also available is Jack Mars’ #1 bestselling LUKE STONE THRILLER series (7 books), which begins with Any Means Necessary (Book #1), a free download with over 800 five star reviews!

ISBN 978-1-64-029618-3

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Содержание

CHAPTER ONE	7
CHAPTER TWO	12
CHAPTER THREE	17
CHAPTER FOUR	23
CHAPTER FIVE	28
CHAPTER SIX	32
CHAPTER SEVEN	39
CHAPTER EIGHT	41
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	47

Jack Mars

PRIMARY COMMAND

Jack Mars

Jack Mars is the USA Today bestselling author of the LUKE STONE thriller series, which includes seven books. He is also the author of the new FORGING OF LUKE STONE prequel series, comprising three books (and counting); and of the AGENT ZERO spy thriller series, comprising six books (and counting).

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

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CHAPTER ONE

June 25, 2005

1:45 p.m. Moscow Daylight Time (5:45 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time)

130 Nautical Miles East-Southeast of Yalta

The Black Sea

“I’m sick of waiting,” the fat sub pilot said to Reed Smith. “Let’s do this already.”

Smith sat on the deck of the *Aegean Explorer*, a beat-up old fishing trawler that had been retrofitted for archaeological discovery. He was smoking a Turkish cigarette, drinking a can of Coke, and soaking up the warmth of the bright day, the dry salty feeling of the air, and the call of the seagulls that congregated in the sky around the boat.

The midday sun had crested above their heads and was now starting to creep to their west. The science crew was still inside the pilot house of the trawler, pretending to make calculations concerning the whereabouts of an ancient Greek trading vessel resting in the mud 350 meters below the surface of this beautiful blue sea.

All around them was wide open water, the waves shimmering in the sun.

“What’s the rush?” Smith said. He was still nursing a hangover from two nights before. The *Aegean Explorer* had been docked for several days in the Turkish port of Samsun. With nothing else to do, Smith had sampled the local nightlife.

Smith liked to live in airtight compartments. He could be out drinking and partying with prostitutes in a strange city, and never once think about the people in other places who would kill him if given a chance. He could sit on this deck, enjoying a smoke and the beauty of the waters surrounding him, and never once think about how, in a little while, he would be tapping into Russian communications cables one hundred stories below the surface of those waters. And living in compartments meant he didn’t enjoy people who were constantly thinking, anticipating, sifting through the contents of one compartment and putting them in another. People like this sub pilot.

“What kind of archaeology team dives in the middle of the afternoon?” the pilot said. “We should have gone down in the morning.”

Smith didn’t say a word. The answer should be obvious enough.

The *Aegean Explorer* worked the waters, not just of the Aegean, but also the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. By all appearances, the *Explorer* was looking for shipwrecks left behind by long-dead civilizations.

The Black Sea in particular was an excellent place to search for wrecks. The water here was anoxic, which meant that below 150 meters there was almost no oxygen. Sea life was sparse down there, and what little there was tended toward the anaerobic bacteria variety.

And what that meant was objects that fell to the sea floor were very well preserved. There were ships down there from the Middle Ages in which modern divers had found crew members still dressed in the clothes they were wearing when they died.

Reed Smith would like to see something like that. Of course, it would have to wait for another time. They weren’t here to dive a shipwreck.

The *Aegean Explorer* and its mission was a lie. Poseidon Research International, the organization that owned and manned the *Aegean Explorer*, was also a lie. Reed Smith was a lie. The truth was, every man on board this ship was either an employee of, an elite covert operator on loan to, or a freelancer temporarily hired by the Central Intelligence Agency.

“*Nereus* crew, load up,” a flat voice said over the loudspeaker.

The *Nereus* was a tiny, bright yellow submarine—known in the trade as a submersible. Its cockpit was a perfectly round acrylic bubble. That bubble, as fragile as it appeared, would resist the pressure at a depth of a thousand meters—pressure one hundred times that at the surface.

Smith pitched his smoke into the water.

The two men moved toward the submersible. They were joined by a third man, a wiry, muscular guy in his twenties, with a deep scar on the left side of his face. He had a jarhead haircut. His eyes were razor sharp. He claimed to be a marine biologist named Eric Davis.

The kid had special ops written all over him. He had hardly spoken a word the entire time they'd been on the boat.

The bright yellow *Nereus* squatted on a metal platform. Looking like a friendly robot from a science fiction movie, it even had two black metal robot arms reaching from the front of it. A heavy crane loomed above from the deck of the trawler, ready to lift the *Nereus* into the water. Two men in orange jumpsuits waited to hook the *Nereus* to the thick cable that it would be suspended from.

Smith and his two crewmates mounted the stairs and climbed, one at a time, through the main hatch. The special ops kid went first, as he would sit in the back. Then the pilot went in.

Smith went in last, easing into his co-pilot chair. Directly in front of him were the controls to the robot arms. All around him was the clear bubble of the cockpit. He reached up and pulled the hatch shut behind him, turning the valve to seal and lock it.

He was shoulder to shoulder with the thick pilot, Bolger. The glass of the cockpit was not more than a foot from his face, and six inches from his right shoulder.

It was hot inside this orb, and getting hotter.

“Cozy,” Smith said, not enjoying the feeling any more than he had when he was in training for this. A claustrophobic wouldn't last three minutes inside this thing.

“Get used to it,” the pilot said. “We're going to be in here awhile.”

No sooner had Smith sealed the hatch than the *Nereus* lurched to life. The men had hooked it to the cable, and the crane lifted it toward the water. Smith looked behind them. One of the men in the orange jumpsuits was riding on the *Nereus*'s narrow outside deck. He held onto the cable with one thick-gloved hand.

In a moment, they were out over nothing, two stories in the air. The crane lowered them to the water, the green fishing trawler looming above them now. A Zodiac appeared with one man aboard, moving fast. The man on the outside deck busied himself releasing the cable straps and then stepped into the Zodiac.

A voice came over the radio. “*Nereus*, this is *Aegean Explorer* command. Initiate tests.”

“Roger,” the pilot said. “Initiating now.” The man had an array of controls in front of him. He pressed a button on top of the joystick he held in his hand. Then he began to flip switches, his meaty left hand moving from one to another in fast succession. His right hand stayed on the joystick. Cool, oxygenated air began to blow into the tiny module. Smith took a deep breath of it. It felt so nice on his sweaty face. He'd been starting to overheat there for a minute.

The pilot and radio voice exchanged information, talking back and forth as the sub rocked gently forward, then backward. The water bubbled and rose all around them. In a few seconds, the surface of the Black Sea was just above their heads. Smith and the man in the back remained quiet, letting the pilot do his thing. They were nothing if not complete professionals.

“Initiate silent running,” the voice said.

“Silent running,” the pilot said. “See you tonight.”

“Godspeed, *Nereus*.”

The pilot did something then that no civilian submersible pilot looking for a shipwreck would ever do. He switched the radio off. Then he switched his locator beacon off. His lifelines to the surface were cut.

Could the *Aegean Explorer* still see the *Nereus* on sonar? Sure. But the *Explorer* knew where the *Nereus* was. In a little while, even that wouldn't be true. The *Nereus* was a tiny dot in a vast sea.

For all intents and purposes, the *Nereus* was gone.

Reed Smith took another deep breath. This must be the thirtieth time he had gone below the surface in one of these things, in training and in the real world, but he still couldn't get over it. Just fifteen feet down and the sea became bright blue as the sunlight from the surface was scattered and absorbed. On the color spectrum, red was absorbed first, casting a blue patina over the undersea world.

It became bluer and darker as the sub sank through the depths.

"It's beautiful," Eric Davis said from behind them.

"Yes, it is," the pilot said. "I never get tired of it."

They dropped through the blue into deep, still darkness. It wasn't complete, though. Smith knew that a small amount of light from the surface still reached them. This was the twilight layer. Below them, even deeper, was midnight.

The black enveloped them. The pilot didn't turn his lights on, navigating with his instruments instead. Now there was nothing to see.

Smith allowed himself to drift. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then another. And another. He let the hangover take him. He had a job to do, but not yet. The pilot, Bolger, would tell him when his time came. Now he just floated in his mind. It was a pleasant sensation, listening to the hum of the engines and the occasional soft murmuring of the two men in the capsule with him, as they made small talk about one thing or another.

Time passed. Possibly a long time.

"Smith!" Bolger hissed. "Smith! Wake up."

He spoke without opening his eyes. "I'm not asleep. Are we there yet?"

"No. We have a problem."

Smith's eyes popped open. He was surprised to see near total darkness everywhere around him. The only lights came from the red and green glow of the instrument panel. *Problem* was not a word he wanted to hear hundreds of meters below the surface of the Black Sea.

"What is it?"

Bolger's stubby finger pointed at the sonar display. Something big was on there, maybe three kilometers to their northwest. If it wasn't a blue whale, which it almost certainly was not, then it was a ship of some kind, probably a submarine. And there was only one country Smith knew of that operated real subs in these waters.

"Aw hell, why did you turn the sonar on?"

"I had a bad feeling," Bolger said. "I wanted to make sure we were alone."

"Well, clearly we're not," Smith said. "And you're advertising our presence."

Bolger shook his head. "They knew we were here." He pointed at two much smaller dots, behind them to the south. He pointed at a similar dot ahead and just to their east, less than a kilometer out. "See these? Not good. They're converging on our location."

Smith ran a hand over his head. "Davis?"

"Not my department," the man in the back said. "I'm here to rescue your asses and scuttle the sub in case of a system malfunction or pilot error. I'm in no position to engage an enemy from inside here. And at these depths I couldn't open the hatch if I wanted to. Too much pressure."

Smith nodded. "Yeah." He looked at the pilot. "How far to the target?"

Bolger shook his head. "Too far."

"Rendezvous spot?"

"Forget it."

"Can we evade?"

Bolger shrugged. "In this? I guess we can try."

“Take evasive action,” Smith nearly said, but he didn’t get the chance. Suddenly, a bright light came on directly in front of them. The effect in the tiny capsule was blinding.

“Turn it around,” Smith said, shielding his eyes. “Unfriendly.”

The pilot sent the *Nereus* into an abrupt 360-degree spin. Before he could finish the maneuver, another blinding light came on behind them. They were surrounded, front and back, by submersibles like this one. Like this one, except Smith was familiar with the enemy submersibles. They’d been designed and built back in the 1960s, during the era of pocket calculators.

He nearly punched the screen in front of him. Dammit! None of this even took into account that large object further out there, probably a hunter-killer.

The mission, highly classified, was going to be a dead loss. But that wasn’t the worst of it. Not even close. The worst of it was Reed Smith himself. He couldn’t be captured, not at any cost.

“Davis, options?”

“I can scuttle with the team inside here,” Davis said. “But personally, I’d rather let them have this hunk of junk and live to fight another day.”

Smith grunted. He couldn’t see a thing. And his only choices were to die inside this bubble, or... he didn’t want to think about the other choices.

Terrific. Whose idea was this again?

He reached down to his calf and opened the zipper on his cargo pants. There was a tiny, two-shot Derringer taped to his leg. It was his suicide gun. He ripped the tape off his calf, barely feeling it as the hair was torn away. He put the gun to his head and took a deep breath.

“What are you doing?” Bolger said, alarm rising in his voice. “You can’t fire that in here. You’ll blow a hole in this thing. We’re a thousand feet below the surface.”

He gestured at the bubble all around them.

Smith shook his head. “You don’t understand.”

Suddenly, the special ops kid was behind him. The kid wriggled like a thick snake. He had Smith’s wrist in a powerful grip. How did he move so fast in such a tight space? For a moment, they grunted and wrestled, barely able to move. The kid’s forearm was around Smith’s throat. He banged Smith’s hand against the console.

“Drop it!” he screamed. “Drop the gun!”

Now the gun was gone. Smith pushed down with his legs and wrenched himself backward, trying to shake the kid off of him.

“You don’t know who I am.”

“Stop!” the pilot shouted. “Stop fighting! You’re hitting the controls.”

Smith managed to slip out of his seat, but now the kid was on top of him. The kid was strong, immensely strong, and he forced Reed down between the seat and the edge of the sub. He wedged Reed in there and pushed him into a ball. The kid was on top of him now, breathing heavily. His coffee breath was in Reed Smith’s ear.

“I can kill you, okay?” the kid said. “I can kill you. If that’s what we need to do, okay. But you can’t fire the gun in here. Me and the other guy want to live.”

“I got big problems,” Reed said. “If they question me... If they torture me...”

“I know,” the kid said. “I get it.”

He paused, his breath coming in harsh rasps.

“Do you want me to kill you? I’ll do it. It’s up to you.”

Reed thought about it. The gun would have made it easy. Nothing to think about. One quick pull of the trigger, and then... whatever was next. But he enjoyed this life. He didn’t want to die now. It was possible that he might slip the noose on this. They might not discover his identity. They might not torture him.

This could all be a simple matter of the Russians confiscating a high-tech sub, and then doing a prisoner swap without asking a lot of questions. Maybe.

His breathing started to calm down. He never should have been here in the first place. Yes, he knew how to tap into communications cables. Yes, he had undersea experience. Yes, he was a smooth operator. But...

The inside of the sub was still bathed in bright, blinding light. They had just given the Russians quite a show in here.

That in itself was going to be worth a few questions.

But Reed Smith wanted to live.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay. Don’t kill me. Just let me up. I’m not going to do anything.”

The kid began to push himself up. It took a moment. The space in the sub was so tight, they were like two people knocked down and dying in the crush of the crowds at Mecca. It was hard to get untangled.

In a few minutes, Reed Smith was back in his seat. He had made his decision. He hoped it turned out to be the right one.

“Turn the radio on,” he said to Bolger. “Let’s see what these jokers have to say.”

CHAPTER TWO

10:15 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time
The Situation Room
The White House, Washington, DC

“It seems that it was a poorly designed mission,” an aide said. “The issue here is plausible deniability.”

David Barrett, nearly six feet, six inches tall, stared down at the man. The aide was blond with thinning hair, a touch overweight, in a suit that was too big at the shoulders and too small around the midsection. The man’s name was Jepsum. It was an unfortunate name for an unfortunate man. Barrett didn’t like men who were shorter than six feet, and he didn’t like men who didn’t keep themselves in shape.

Barrett and Jepsum moved quickly through the hallways of the West Wing, toward the elevator that would take them down to the Situation Room.

“Yes?” Barrett said, growing impatient. “Plausible deniability?”

Jepsum shook his head. “Right. We don’t have any.”

A phalanx of people strode with Barrett, ahead of him, behind him, all around him—aides, interns, Secret Service men, staff of various kinds. Once again, and as always, he had no idea who half these people were. They were a tangled mass of humanity, zooming along, and he stood a head taller than nearly all of them. The shortest of them could be a different species from him altogether.

Short people frustrated Barrett to no end, and more so every day. David Barrett, the president of the United States, had come back to work too soon.

Only six weeks had passed since his daughter Elizabeth was kidnapped by terrorists and then recovered by American commandos in one of the most daring covert operations in recent memory. He’d had a breakdown during the crisis. He had stopped functioning in his role, and who could blame him? Afterward, he had been wrung out, exhausted, and so relieved Elizabeth was safe that he didn’t have the words to fully express it.

The entire mob moved into the elevator, packing themselves inside like sardines into a can. Two Secret Service men had entered the elevator with them. They were tall men, one black and one white. The heads of Barrett and his protectors loomed over everyone else in the car like statues on Easter Island.

Jepsum was still looking up at him, his eyes so earnest he almost seemed like a baby seal. “...and their embassy won’t even acknowledge our communications. After the fiasco at the United Nations last month, I don’t think we can anticipate much cooperation.”

Barrett couldn’t follow Jepsum, but whatever he was saying, it lacked forcefulness. Didn’t the president have stronger men than this at his disposal?

Everyone was talking at once. Before Elizabeth was kidnapped, Barrett would often go on one of his legendary tirades just to get people to shut up. But now? He just allowed the whole mess of them to ramble, the noise from the chattering coming to him like a form of nonsensical music. He let it wash over him.

Barrett had been back on the job for five weeks already, and the time had passed in a blur. He had fired his chief of staff, Lawrence Keller, in the aftermath of the kidnapping. Keller was another short stack—five foot ten at best—and Barrett had come to suspect that Keller was disloyal to him. He had no evidence of this, and couldn’t even quite remember why he believed it, but he thought it best to get rid of Keller anyway.

Except now, Barrett was without Keller's smooth gray calm and ruthless efficiency. With Keller gone, Barrett felt unmoored, at loose ends, unable to make sense of the onslaught of crises and mini-disasters and just plain *information* he was bombarded with on a daily basis.

David Barrett was beginning to think he was having another breakdown. He had trouble sleeping. Trouble? He could barely sleep at all. Sometimes, when he was alone, he would start hyperventilating. A few times, late at night, he had found himself locked in his private bathroom, silently weeping.

He thought he might like to enter therapy, but when you were president of the United States, engaging with a shrink was not an option. If the newspapers got hold of it, and the cable talk shows... he didn't want to think about that.

It would be the end, to put it mildly.

The elevator opened into the egg-shaped Situation Room. It was modern, like the flight deck of a TV spaceship. It was designed for maximum use of space—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.

Except for Barrett's own seat, every plush leather seat at the table was already occupied—overweight men in suits, thin and ramrod-straight military men in uniform. A tall man in a dress uniform stood at the far head of the table.

Height. It was reassuring somehow. David Barrett was tall, and for most of his life he had been supremely confident. This man preparing to run the meeting would also be confident. In fact, he exuded confidence, and command. This man, this four-star general...

Richard Stark.

Barrett remembered that he didn't care much for Richard Stark. But right now, he didn't care much for anyone. And Stark worked at the Pentagon. Maybe the general could shed some light on this latest mysterious setback.

"Settle down," Stark said, as the crowd the elevator had just expelled moved toward their seats.

"People! Settle down. The president is here."

The room went quiet. A few people continued to murmur, but even that died out quickly.

David Barrett sat down in his high-backed chair.

"Okay, Richard," he said. "Never mind the preliminaries. Never mind the history lesson. We've heard it all before. Just tell me what in God's name is going on."

Stark slipped a pair of black reading glasses onto his face and looked down at the sheets of paper in his hand. He took a deep breath and sighed.

On screens around the room, a body of water appeared.

"What you're seeing on the screens is the Black Sea," the general said. "As far as we can tell, about two hours ago, a small, three-man submersible owned by an American company called Poseidon Research was operating deep below the surface, in international waters more than one hundred miles southeast of the Crimean resort of Yalta. It appears to have been intercepted and seized by elements of the Russian Navy. The stated mission of the sub was to find and mark the location of an ancient Greek trading vessel believed to have gone down in those waters nearly twenty-five hundred years ago."

President Barrett stared at the general. He took a breath. That didn't seem bad at all. What was all the hubbub about?

A civilian submarine was doing archaeological exploration in international waters. The Russians were rebuilding their strength after a disastrous fifteen years or so, and they wanted the Black Sea to be their own private lake again. So they got irritated and overstepped. All right. Lodge a complaint with the embassy and get the scientists back. Maybe even get the sub back, too. It was all a misunderstanding.

“Forgive me, General, but this sounds like something for the diplomats to work out. I appreciate being kept informed of developments like this, but it seems like it’s going to be easy to skip the crisis on this one. Can’t we just have the ambassador—”

“Sir,” Stark said. “I’m afraid it’s a bit more complicated than that.”

It instantly annoyed Barrett that Stark would interrupt him in front of a room full of people. “Okay,” he said. “But this better be good.”

Stark shook his head and sighed again. “Mr. President, Poseidon Research International is a company funded and run by the Central Intelligence Agency. It’s a front operation. The submersible in question, *Nereus*, was masquerading as a civilian research vessel. In fact, it was on a classified mission under the aegis of both the CIA Special Operations Group and the Joint Special Operations Command. The three men captured include a civilian with high-level security clearances, a CIA special agent, and a Navy SEAL.”

For the first time in more than a month, David Barrett felt an old familiar sensation rising within him. Anger. It was a feeling he enjoyed. They sent a submarine on a spy mission in the Black Sea? Barrett didn’t need the map on the screen to know the geopolitics involved.

“Richard, pardon my French, but what in the hell were we doing with a spy submarine in the Black Sea? Do we want to have a war with the Russians? The Black Sea is their backyard.”

“Sir, with all respect intended, those are international waters open to navigation, and we intend to keep them that way.”

Barrett shook his head. Of course we did. “What was the sub doing there?”

The general coughed. “It was on a mission to tap into Russian communications cables at the bottom of the Black Sea. As you know, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russians lease the old Soviet naval port at Sebastopol from the Ukrainians. That port was the mainstay of the Soviet fleet in the region, and serves the same purpose for the Russian Navy. As you can imagine, the arrangement is an awkward one.

“Russian telephone lines and computer-based communications cables run across Ukrainian territory in Crimea to the border with Russia. Meanwhile, tensions have been rising between Russia and Georgia, just to the south of there. We are concerned a war could break out, if not now, then in the near future.

“Georgia is very friendly with us, and we’d like for both them and Ukraine to join the NATO alliance one day. Until they do join NATO, they are vulnerable to a Russian attack. Recently, the Russians laid communications cables along the sea floor from Sebastopol to Sochi, completely circumventing the cables that run across Crimea.

“The mission of the *Nereus* was to find the location of those cables, and if possible, tap into them. If the Russians decide to attack Georgia, the fleet at Sebastopol is going to know in advance. We’re going to want to know that, too.”

Stark paused.

“And the mission was a total failure,” David Barrett said.

General Stark didn’t fight it.

“Yes, sir. It was.”

Barrett had to give him credit for that. A lot of times, these guys came in here and tried to spin shit into gold right in front of his eyes. Well, Barrett wasn’t having it anymore, and Stark got a couple of points for not even trying.

“Unfortunately, sir, the failure of the mission is not really the major issue we’re facing. The issue we need to deal with at this time is that the Russians have not acknowledged they’ve taken the sub. They also refuse to respond to our inquiries as to its whereabouts, or to the conditions faced by the men who were on board. At the moment, we’re not even sure if those men are alive or dead.”

“Do we know for a fact that they took the sub?”

Stark nodded. “Yes, we do. The sub is outfitted with a radio locator beacon, which has been turned off. But it is also outfitted with a tiny computer chip that broadcasts its location to the satellite global positioning system. The chip only works when the sub is at the surface. The Russians appear not to have detected it yet. It’s embedded deep within the mechanical systems. They will have to take the entire sub apart, or destroy it, to render the chip inoperable. In the meantime, we know they’ve raised the sub to the surface, and have taken it to a small port several miles south of Sochi, near the border with the former Soviet state of Georgia.”

“And the men?” Barrett said.

Stark half nodded and half shrugged. “We believe they’re with the ship.”

“No one knows this mission took place?”

“Just us, and them,” Stark said. “Our best guess is there may have been a recent intelligence leak among the mission participants, or within the agencies involved. We hate to think that, but Poseidon Research has operated out in the open for two decades, and there has never been any indication that its security was breached before.”

An odd thought occurred to David Barrett then.

What’s the problem?

It was a secret mission. The newspapers didn’t know anything about it. And the men involved well knew the risks they were taking. The CIA knew the risks. The Pentagon brass knew the risks. On some level, they must have known how foolish it was. Certainly, no one had asked the president of the United States for permission to carry out the mission. He was only hearing about it after disaster had struck.

That was one of his least favorite aspects of dealing with the so-called intelligence community. They tended to tell you things after it was already too late to do anything about them.

For an instant, he felt like an angry dad who has just learned his teenage son was arrested for vandalism by the local town cops. *Let the kid rot in jail for the night. I’ll pick him up in the morning.*

“Can we leave them there?” he said.

Stark raised an eyebrow. “Sir?”

Barrett looked around the room. All eyes were on him. He was acutely sensitive to the two dozen pairs of eyes. Young eyes in the back rows, wizened eyes with crow’s feet around the table, owl eyes behind glasses. But the eyes, which normally showed such deference, now seemed to look at him with something else. That something might be confusion, and it might be the beginning of...

Pity?

“Can we leave them there, and quietly negotiate their release? That’s what I’m asking. Even if it takes some time? Even if it takes a month? Six months? It seems like negotiations would be one way to avoid yet another incident.”

“Sir,” the general said. “I’m afraid we can’t do that. The incident has already happened.”

“Right,” Barrett said.

And just like that, he snapped. It was quiet, like a twig snap. But he’d had enough. The man had contradicted him one time too many. Did he even realize who he was speaking to? Barrett pointed at the general with a long finger.

“The horse is already out of the barn. Is that what you’re telling me? Something has to be done! You and your shadow puppets made a stupid play, out on the edge all by yourselves, and now you want the official, popularly elected government to bail you out of your mess. Again.”

Barrett shook his head. “I’m sick of it, General. How does that sound to you? I can’t stand it anymore. All right? My instinct here is to leave those men with the Russians.”

David Barrett scanned the eyes in the room again. Many of them were looking away now, at the table in front of them, at General Stark, at shiny reports bound with plastic ring binders. Anywhere but at their president. It was as if he had made a particularly ripe-smelling boo-boo in his pants. It was as if they knew something he didn’t know.

Stark instantly confirmed the truth of that.

“Mr. President, I wasn’t going to bring this up, but you leave me no choice. One of the men on that crew has had access to intelligence of the most sensitive nature. He has been an integral part of covert operations on three continents for more than a decade. He has encyclopedic knowledge of American spy networks inside Russia and China for starters, not to mention Morocco and Egypt, as well as Brazil, Colombia, and Bolivia. In a few cases, he established those networks himself.”

Stark paused. The room was dead quiet.

“If the Russians torture this man during interrogation, the lives of dozens of people, many of them important intelligence assets, may as well be forfeit. Worse than that, the information those people have access to will in turn become transparent to our opponents, leading to even more deaths. Extensive networks, which we’ve spent years building, could be rolled up in a short period of time.”

Barrett stared at Stark. The gall of these people was breathtaking.

“What was that man doing in the field, General?” Acid dripped from every word.

“As I indicated, sir, Poseidon Research International had been operating for decades under no obvious suspicion. The man was hiding in plain sight.”

“Hiding...” Barrett said slowly. “In plain sight.”

“That’s what it’s called, sir. Yes.”

Barrett said nothing in response. He just stared. And Stark finally seemed to realize that his explanations were not nearly good enough.

“Sir, and again this is with all respect due, I had nothing to do with the planning or execution of this mission. I didn’t know anything about it until this morning. I’m not part of Joint Special Operations Command, nor am I employed by the Central Intelligence Agency. I do, however, have complete faith in the judgment of the men and women who do...”

Barrett waved his hands over his head, as if to say STOP.

“What are our options, General?”

“Sir, we have only one option. We need to rescue those men. As fast as we can, if possible before interrogations begin. We need to scuttle that sub as well, and that’s crucial. But this one individual... we need to either rescue him, or eliminate him. As long as he’s alive and in Russian hands, we have a potential disaster unfolding.”

It was a moment before David Barrett spoke again. The general wanted to rescue the men, which suggested a secret mission. But the reason they were captured in the first place was a security breach. There’s been a security breach, so let’s plan more secret missions? It was circular thinking at its finest. But Barrett hardly felt the need to point that out. Hopefully, it was clear to even the numbest imbecile in this room.

An idea occurred to him then. There was going to be a new mission, and he was going to assign it, but not to the CIA or the Pentagon. They were the ones who had brought this problem about in the first place, and he could hardly trust them to resolve it. It would be stepping on toes to give the job to someone else, but it was clear that they had brought this on themselves.

He smiled inwardly. As painful as this situation was, it also presented him with an opportunity. He had the chance here to seize some of his power back. It was time to take the CIA and the Pentagon, the NSA, the DIA, all of these well-established spy agencies, out of the game.

Knowing what he was about to do made David Barrett feel like the boss again, for the first time in a long while.

“I agree,” he said. “The men should be rescued, and as quickly as possible. And I know exactly how we’re going to do it.”

CHAPTER THREE

10:55 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time
Arlington National Cemetery
Arlington, Virginia

Luke Stone stared down the trench at Robby Martinez. Martinez was screaming.

“They’re coming through on all sides!”

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

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

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

Turbaned, bearded Taliban fighters poured over the sandbagged walls of the outpost. They slid, they fell, they jumped down. Men screamed all around him.

A man came over the wall with a metal hatchet.

Luke shot him in the face. The man lay dead against the sandbags, a gaping cavern where his face had just been. The man had no face. But now Luke had the hatchet.

He waded into the fighters surrounding Martinez, swinging wildly. Blood spattered. He chopped at them, sliced them.

Martinez reappeared, somehow still on his feet, stabbing with the bayonet.

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

“You okay?”

Martinez shrugged. His face was red with blood. His shirt was saturated with it. Whose blood? His? Theirs? Martinez gasped for air and gestured at the bodies all around them. “I’ve been better than this before. I can tell you that.”

Luke blinked and Martinez was gone.

In his place were row upon row of plain white gravestones, thousands of them, climbing the low green hills into the distance. It was a bright day, sunny and warm.

Somewhere behind him, a lone bagpiper played “Amazing Grace.”

Six young Army Rangers carried the gleaming casket, draped in the American flag, to the open gravesite. Martinez had been a Ranger before he joined Delta. The men looked sharp in their dress greens and their tan berets, but they also looked young. Very, very young, almost like kids playing dress-up.

Luke stared at the men. He could barely think about them. He took a deep breath. He was beat. He couldn’t remember a time—not in Ranger school, not during the Delta selection process, not in war zones—when he had been this tired.

The baby, Gunner, his newborn son... wouldn’t sleep. Not at night, and hardly in the day. So he and Becca weren’t getting any sleep, either. Also, Becca couldn’t seem to stop crying. The doctor had just diagnosed her with postpartum depression, complicated by exhaustion.

Her mom had come out to the cabin to live with them. It wasn’t working. Becca’s mom... where to begin? She had never held a job in her life. She seemed baffled that Luke left every morning to make the long commute to the Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC. She seemed even more baffled that he didn’t reappear until evening.

The rustic cabin, beautifully situated on a small bluff above Chesapeake Bay, had been in her family for a hundred years. She had been going to the cabin since she was a little girl and now acted like she owned the place. In fact, she did own the place.

She was making noises that she, Becca, and the baby should relocate to her house in Alexandria. The hardest part for Luke was that the idea was beginning to seem sensible.

He had started to indulge fantasies of arriving at the cabin after a long day, the place dead silent. He could almost watch himself. Luke Stone opens the old humming refrigerator, grabs a beer, and walks out to the back patio. He's just in time to catch the sunset. He sits down in an Adirondack chair and...

CRACK!

Luke nearly jumped out of his skin.

Behind him, a seven-man team of riflemen had fired a volley into the air. The sound echoed across the hillsides. Another volley came. Then another.

A twenty-one-gun salute, seven guns at a time. It was an honor that not everyone merited. Martinez was a highly decorated combat veteran in two theaters of war. Dead now, by his own hand. But it didn't have to be that way.

Three dozen servicemen stood in formation near the grave. A smattering of Delta and former Delta operators stood in civilian clothes further away. You could tell the Delta guys because they looked like rock stars. They dressed like rock stars. Big, broad, in T-shirts and blazers, khaki pants. Full beards, earrings. One guy had a wide, closely cropped Mohawk hairdo.

Luke stood alone, dressed in a black suit, scanning the crowd, looking for something he expected to find: a man named Kevin Murphy.

Near the front was a row of white folding chairs. A middle-aged woman dressed in black was comforted by another woman. Near her, an honor guard made up of three Rangers, two Marines, and an Airman carefully took the flag from the casket and folded it. One of the soldiers lowered to one knee in front of the grieving woman and presented the flag to her.

"On behalf of the president of the United States," the young Ranger said, his voice breaking, "the United States Army, and a grateful nation, please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your son's honorable and faithful service."

Luke looked at the Delta guys again. One had broken away and was walking alone up a grassy hillside through the white stones. He was tall and wiry, with blond hair shaved close to his head. He wore jeans and a light blue dress shirt. Thin as he was, he still had broad shoulders and muscular arms and legs. His arms seemed almost too long for his body, like the arms of an elite basketball player. Or a pterodactyl.

The man walked slowly, in no particular hurry, as though he had no pressing engagements. He stared down at the grass as he walked.

Murphy.

Luke left the service and followed him up the hill. He walked much faster than Murphy did, gaining ground on him.

There were a lot of reasons why Martinez was dead, but the clearest reason was he had blown his own brains out in his hospital bed. And someone had brought him a gun with which to do it. Luke was about one hundred percent sure he knew who that someone was.

"Murphy!" he said. "Hold on a minute."

Murphy looked up and turned around. A moment ago, he had seemed lost in thought, but his eyes had come instantly alert. His face was narrow, birdlike, handsome in its own way.

"Luke Stone," he said, his voice flat. He didn't seem pleased to see Luke. He didn't seem displeased. His eyes were hard. Like the eyes of all Delta guys, there was a cold, calculating intelligence in there.

"Let me walk with you a minute, Murph."

Murphy shrugged. "Suit yourself."

They fell into step with each other. Luke slowed down to accommodate Murphy's pace. They walked for a moment without saying a word.

"How are you doing?" Luke said. It was an odd nicety to offer. Luke had gone to war with this man. They had been in combat together a dozen times. With Martinez gone, they were the last two survivors of the worst night of Luke's life. You would think there'd be some intimacy between them.

But Murphy didn't give Luke anything. "I'm fine."

That was all.

No "How are you?" No "Did your baby come?" No "We need to talk about things." Murphy was not in the mood for conversation.

"I heard you left the Army," Luke said.

Murphy smiled and shook his head. "What can I do for you, Stone?"

Luke stopped and gripped Murphy's shoulder. Murphy faced him, shrugging Luke's hand off.

"I want to tell you a story," Luke said.

"Tell away," Murphy said.

"I work for the FBI now," Luke said. "A small sub-agency within the Bureau. Intelligence gathering. Special operations. Don Morris runs it."

"Good for you," Murphy said. "That's what everybody used to say. Stone is like a cat. He always lands on his feet."

Luke ignored that. "We have access to information. The best. We get everything. For example, I know you were reported AWOL in early April and were dishonorably discharged about six weeks later."

Murphy laughed now. "You must have done some digging for that, huh? Sent a mole in to examine my personnel file? Or did you just have them email it to you?"

Luke pressed on. "Baltimore PD has an informer who's a close lieutenant of Wesley 'Cadillac' Perkins, leader of the Sandtown Bloods street gang."

"That's nice," Murphy said. "Police work must be endlessly fascinating." He turned and started walking again.

Luke walked with him. "Three weeks ago, Cadillac Perkins and two bodyguards were assaulted at three a.m. while entering their car in the parking lot of a nightclub. According to the informer, just one man attacked them. A tall, thin white man. He knocked the two bodyguards unconscious in three or four seconds. Then he pistol-whipped Perkins and relieved him of a briefcase containing at least thirty thousand in cash."

"Sounds like a daring white man," Murphy said.

"The white man in question also relieved Perkins of a gun, a distinctive Smith & Wesson .38, with a particular slogan engraved in the grip. *Might Makes Right*. Of course, neither the attack, nor the theft of the money, nor the loss of the gun was reported to the police. It was just something this informer talked about with his handler."

Murphy was not looking at Luke.

"What are you telling me, Stone?"

Luke looked ahead and noticed they were approaching the John F. Kennedy gravesite. A crowd of tourists stood along the edge of the two-hundred-year-old flagstones and snapped photos of the fire of the eternal flame.

Luke's eye wandered to the low granite wall at the edge of the memorial. Just above the wall, he could see the Washington Monument across the river. The wall itself had numerous inscriptions taken from Kennedy's inaugural address. A famous one caught Luke's attention:

ASK NOT WHAT YOUR COUNTRY CAN DO FOR YOU...

"The gun Martinez used to kill himself had the inscription *Might Makes Right* on the grip. The Bureau traced the gun and discovered it had previously been used to commit two execution-style

murders believed to be associated with the Baltimore drug wars. One was the torture killing of Jamie ‘Godfather’ Young, the previous leader of the Sandtown Bloods.”

BUT WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOUR COUNTRY.

Murphy shrugged. “All these nicknames. Godfather. Cadillac. Must be hard to keep track of them.”

Luke kept going. “Somehow, that gun found its way from Baltimore all the way south to Martinez’s hospital room in North Carolina.”

Murphy looked at Stone again. Now his eyes were flat and dead. They were murderer’s eyes. If Murphy had killed one man before, he had killed a hundred.

“Why don’t you get to the point, Stone? Say what’s on your mind, instead of telling me some children’s fable about drug lords and stickup men.”

Luke was so angry he could almost punch Murphy in the mouth. He was tired. He was aggravated. He was heartbroken by Martinez’s death.

“You knew Martinez wanted to kill himself...” he began.

Murphy didn’t hesitate. “You killed Martinez,” he said. “You killed the whole squad. You. Luke Stone. Killed everyone. I was there, remember? You took a mission you knew was FUBAR because you didn’t want to countermand an order from a maniac with a death wish. And this was... for what? To further your career?”

“You gave Martinez the gun,” Luke said.

Murphy shook his head. “Martinez died that night on the hill. Just like everybody else. But his body was too strong to realize that. So it needed a push.”

They stared at each other for a long moment. For an instant, in his mind’s eye, Luke was back in Martinez’s hospital room. Martinez’s legs had been shredded, and could not be saved. One was gone at the pelvis, one below the knee. He still had the use of his arms, but he was paralyzed from just below his ribcage down. It was a nightmare.

Tears began to stream down Martinez’s face. He pounded the bed with his fists.

“I told you to kill me,” he said through gritted teeth. “I told you... to... kill... me. Now look at this... this mess.”

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

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

Luke shook the memory away. He was back on a green hill in Arlington, on a sunny early summer day. He was alive and mostly well. And Murphy was still here, offering his version of a lecture. Not one that Luke wanted to hear.

There was a crowd of people all around them, looking at Kennedy’s flame and quietly murmuring.

“True to form,” Murphy said. “Luke Stone has failed upward. Now he finds himself working for his old commanding officer at a super-secret civilian spy agency. They got nice toys there, Stone? Of course they do, if Don Morris is running it. Cute secretaries? Fast cars? Black helicopters? It’s like a TV show, am I right?”

Luke shook his head. It was time to change the subject.

“Murphy, since you went AWOL, you’ve committed a string of solo armed robberies in Northeast cities. You’ve been targeting gang members and drug dealers, who you know are carrying large amounts of cash, and who won’t report...”

Without warning, Murphy’s right fist flew outward. It moved like a piston, connecting with Luke’s face just below his eye. Luke’s head snapped back.

“Shut up,” Murphy said. “You talk too much.”

Luke took a stumble step and crashed into the person behind him. Nearby, someone else gasped. The sound was loud, like a hydraulic pump.

Luke went several steps backward, pushing through bodies. For a split second, he had a familiar floating sensation. He shook his head to clear the cobwebs. Murphy had tagged him a good one.

And Murphy wasn't done. Here he came again.

People streamed by on both sides, trying to get away from the fight. An overweight woman, well dressed in a beige skirt and jacket ensemble, fell to the flagstones between Luke and Murphy. Two men rushed to help her up. On the other side of this little pile, Murphy shook his head in frustration.

To Luke's right was the low chain barrier that separated visitors from the eternal flame. He stepped over it, onto the wide cobblestones and out into the open. Murphy followed. Luke shrugged out of his suit jacket, revealing the shoulder holster and his service gun underneath. Now someone screamed.

"Gun! He's got a gun!"

Murphy gestured at it, a half-smile on his face. "What are you gonna do, Stone? Shoot me?"

The crowd of people flowed down the hill, a mass exodus of humanity, moving fast.

Luke unfastened the holster and dropped it to the cobblestones. He circled to his right, the eternal flame of the John F. Kennedy grave just behind him, the flat grave markers of the Kennedy family in front of him. In the far distance, he caught another glimpse of the Washington Monument.

"You sure you want to do this?" Luke said.

Murphy stepped across the face of one of the Kennedy gravestones.

"There's nothing I would rather do."

Luke's hands were up. His eyes honed in on Murphy. Everything else dropped away. He saw Murphy as though the man were bathed in some strange light, like a spotlight. Murphy had the reach advantage by a mile. But Luke was stronger.

He gestured with the fingers of his right hand.

"Then come on."

Murphy attacked. He feinted a left jab, but came in hard with the right. Luke slipped it and delivered his own hard right hand. Murphy pushed Luke's right arm out and away. Now they were close. Right where Luke wanted to be.

Suddenly they were grappling. Luke kicked Murphy's leg out, lifted him high, and brought him down to the ground with a thud. Luke could feel the impact of Murphy's body—the flagstones vibrated with it. Murphy's head bounced off the rough, round stone platform that housed Kennedy's flame.

Most men would be done. But not Murphy. Not a Delta.

His right hand pistoned out again. The fingers tore at Luke's face, trying to find his eyes. Luke pulled his head back.

Now came Murphy's left, a punch. It hit the side of Luke's head. His ears rang.

Here came the right again. Luke blocked it, but Murphy was pushing up off the ground. He launched himself at Luke and they tumbled backward, Murphy on top. The metal canister that held the flame, six inches high, was just to Luke's right.

A breeze blew and the fire was on them. Luke could feel the heat of it.

With all of his strength, he grabbed Murphy and rolled hard to his right. Murphy's back hit the eternal flame. Fire surged all around them as they rolled up and over the top of it. Luke landed on his left side and used his momentum to keep rolling.

He climbed on top of Murphy and grabbed his head in both hands.

Murphy punched him in the face.

Luke shrugged it off and slammed Murphy's head against the concrete.

Murphy's hands tried to push him away.

Luke slammed his head again.

"FREEZE!" a deep-throated voice screamed.

The muzzle of a gun was pressed to Luke's temple. It jabbed him there, hard. In the corner of his eye, Luke saw two big black hands holding the gun, and a blue uniform looming behind them.

Instantly, Luke put his hands in the air.

"Police," the voice said, only slightly calmer now.

"Officer, I'm Agent Luke Stone, with the FBI. My badge is in that jacket over there."

Now there were more blue uniforms. They swarmed Luke, pulling him away from Murphy. They pushed him to the ground and held him face down against the stone. He went as limp as possible, offering no resistance. Hands roamed his body, searching him.

He looked at Murphy. Murphy was getting the same treatment.

Don't have a weapon on you, Luke thought.

In a moment, they pulled Luke to his feet. He looked around. There were ten cops here. At the far edge of the action, a familiar figure loomed. Big Ed Newsam, watching from a modest distance.

A cop handed Luke his jacket, his holster, and his badge.

"Okay, Agent Stone, what seems to be the problem here?"

"No problem."

The cop gestured at Murphy. Murphy sat on the flagstones, arms around his knees. His eyes looked a bit fuzzy, but coming back.

"Who is that guy?"

Luke sighed and shook his head. "He's a friend of mine. Old Army buddy." He cracked a ghost of a smile and rubbed his face. The hand came away bloody. "You know, sometimes these reunions..."

Most of the cops were already moving away.

Luke stared down at Murphy. Murphy was making no effort to get up. Luke reached into the pocket of his jacket and came out with a business card. He looked at it for a second.

Luke Stone, Special Agent.

In the corner was the SRT logo. Under Luke's name was a phone number that would reach a secretary at the office. There was something absurdly pleasing about that card.

He flipped it at Murphy.

"Here, you idiot. Call me. I was going to offer you a job."

Luke turned his back on Murphy and walked toward Ed Newsam. Ed was in a dress shirt and dark tie and had a blazer draped over his shoulder. He was as big as a mountain. His muscles rippled under his clothes. His hair and beard were jet black. His face was young, not a line on his skin.

He shook his head and smiled. "What are you doing?"

Luke shrugged. "I don't really know. What are you doing?"

"They sent me to get you," Ed said. "We've got a mission. Hostage rescue. High priority."

"Where?" Luke said.

Ed shook his head. "Classified. We won't know until the briefing. But they want us ready to move as soon as the briefing is over."

"When's the briefing?"

Ed had already turned and was heading back down the hill.

"Now."

CHAPTER FOUR

12:20 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time
Headquarters of the Special Response Team
McLean, Virginia

“Don’t worry. You look real pretty.”

Luke was in the men’s room of the employee locker room. His shirt was off and he was washing his face in the sink. A deep scratch ran down his left cheek. The lower right side of his jaw was red and bruised and beginning to swell. Murph had clocked him a good one along there.

Luke’s knuckles were raw and ripped up. The wounds were open, and blood was still running a little bit. He had clocked Murph a few good ones himself.

Behind him, big Ed loomed in the mirror. Ed had put his blazer back on and was every bit the consummate, well-dressed professional. Luke was supposed to be Ed’s superior officer in this job. He couldn’t put his own suit jacket back on because it was dirty from when he had thrown it on the ground.

“Let’s go, man,” Ed said. “We’re already late.”

“I’m going to look like something the cat dragged in.”

Ed shrugged. “Next time do what I do. Keep an extra suit, plus an extra set of office casual, right here in your locker. I’m surprised I need to teach you this stuff.”

Luke had put his T-shirt back on and was starting to button up his dress shirt. “Yeah, but what do I do now?”

Ed shook his head, but he was grinning. “This is what people expect from you anyway. Tell them you were doing a little tae kwon do sparring in the parking lot during your coffee break.”

Luke and Ed left the locker room and bounced up the concrete stairwell to the main floor. The conference room, as close to state-of-the-art as Mark Swann could get it, was down the end of a narrow side hallway. Don tended to call it the Command Center, though Luke felt that was stretching the facts a bit. One day, maybe.

Nervous butterflies bounced against the walls of Luke’s intestines. These meetings were a new thing for him, and he couldn’t seem to get used to them. Don told him it would come to him in time.

In the military, briefings were simple. They went like this:

Here’s the goal. Here’s the plan of attack. Questions? Input? Okay, load gear.

These briefings never went like that.

The door to the conference room was straight ahead. It was open. The room was somewhat small, and twenty people inside would make it look like a crowded subway car at rush hour. These meetings gave Luke the willies. There were endless discussions and delays. The press of people made him claustrophobic.

Invariably there would be bigwigs from several agencies and their staffers milling around, the bigwigs insisting on having their say, the staffers typing into BlackBerry phones, scratching out notes on yellow legal pads, running in and out, making urgent phone calls. Who were these people?

Luke crossed the threshold, followed closely by Ed. The overhead fluorescents were bright and dazzling.

There was nobody in the room. Well, not nobody, but not many. Five people, to be exact. Luke and Ed make it seven.

“Here are the men we’ve all been waiting for,” Don Morris said. He was not smiling. Don didn’t like to wait. He looked formidable in a dress shirt and slacks. His body language was relaxed, but his eyes were sharp.

A man stepped in front of Luke. He was a tall and thin four-star, in impeccable dress greens. His gray hair was trimmed to the scalp. There wasn't a stray whisker anywhere on his clean-shaven face—whiskers knew better than to defy him. Luke had never met the man, but he knew him in his bones. He made his bed every morning before doing anything else. You could bounce a quarter off it. He probably did, just to make sure.

“Agent Stone, Agent Newsam, I'm General Richard Stark, Joint Chiefs of Staff.”

“General, it's an honor to meet you.”

Luke shook his hand before the man moved on to Ed.

“We were very proud of what you boys did a month ago. You're both a credit to the United States Army.”

Another man stood there. He was a balding man, maybe somewhere in his forties. He had a large round gut and pudgy little fingers. His suit did not fit well—too tight at the shoulders, too tight around the center. His face was doughy and his nose was bulbous. He reminded Luke of Karl Malden doing a TV commercial about credit card fraud.

“Luke, I'm Ron Begley of Homeland Security.”

They also shook hands. Ron didn't mention last month's operation.

“Ron. Good to meet you.”

No one said a word about Luke's face. That was a relief. Though he was sure he would hear about it from Don after the meeting was over.

“Boys, won't you sit down?” the general said, waving a hand at the conference table. It was gracious of him, to invite them to sit at their own table.

Luke and Ed took seats near Don. There were two other men in the room, both wearing suits. One was bald and had an earpiece that disappeared inside his jacket. They looked on impassively. Neither man said a word. No one introduced them. To Luke, that meant enough said.

Ron Begley closed the door.

The major surprise here was there were no other SRT people in the room.

General Stark looked at Don.

“Ready?”

Don opened his big hands as if they were flowers opening their petals.

“Yes. This was all we needed. Do your worst.”

The general looked at Ed and Luke.

“Gentlemen, what I'm about to share with you is classified information.”

* * *

“What are they not telling us?” Luke said.

Don looked up. The desk he sat behind was polished oak, wide and gleaming. There were two pieces of paper on it, an office telephone, and an old, battered Toughbook laptop with a sticker on the back of the screen depicting a red spearhead with a dagger on it—the logo of Army Special Operations Command. Don was a clean desk kind of guy.

On the wall behind him were various framed photographs. Luke spotted the one of four shirtless young Green Berets in Vietnam—Don was on the right.

Don gestured at the two chairs in front of the desk.

“Have a seat. Take a load off.”

Luke did.

“How's your face?”

“It's a little sore,” Luke said.

“What did you do, slam the car door on it?”

Luke shrugged and smiled. “I ran into Kevin Murphy at Martinez’s funeral this morning. Remember him?”

Don nodded. “Sure. He was a decent soldier as Delta goes. Bit of a chip on his shoulder, I suppose. How did he look... after you ran into him?”

“Last I saw, he was still on the ground.”

Don nodded again. “Good. What was the issue?”

“He and I are the last men standing from that night in Afghanistan. There are some hard feelings. He thinks I could have done more to abort the mission.”

Don shrugged. “It wasn’t your mission to abort.”

“That’s what I told him. I also gave him my business card. If he calls me, I’d like you to consider hiring him here. He’s Delta trained, combat experienced, three tours that I know of, doesn’t wet his pants when the fur starts to fly.”

“He’s out of the service?”

Luke nodded. “Yeah.”

“What’s he up to?”

“Armed robbery. He’s been taking down drug kingpins in various cities.”

Don shook his head. “Jesus, Luke.”

“All I ask is you give him a chance.”

“We’ll talk about it,” Don said. “When and if he calls.”

Luke nodded. “Fair enough.”

Don pulled one of the pieces of paper on his desk closer to him. He slipped a pair of black reading glasses on the tip of his nose. Luke had seen him do this a few times now, and the effect was jarring. Superhuman Don Morris wore reading glasses.

“Now to matters a little more pressing. The things we didn’t talk about at the briefing are as follows. This mission comes straight from the Oval Office. The president took it away from the Pentagon and the CIA because he thinks there’s a leak somewhere. If the Russians manage to crack open this captured CIA guy, who knows what’s gonna come out of him. We are looking at a large potential setback, things need to move very fast, and privately, the president is furious.”

“That’s why we’re on our own?”

Don raised a finger. “We have friends. You’re never quite on your own in this business.”

“Mark Swann can...”

Don put a finger to his lips. He pointed around the room and raised his eyebrows. Then he shrugged. The message was: let’s not talk about what Mark Swann can do. No sense sharing that information with the people in the gallery.

Luke nodded and changed direction mid-sentence. “...get us access to all kinds of databases. Lexis Nexis, that kind of thing. He’s a madman with a Google search.”

“Yeah,” Don said. “I think he’s got a subscription to the *New York Times* online. He says he does, anyway.”

“Who was the guy from Homeland Security?”

Don shrugged. “Ron Begley? Desk jockey. He worked at Treasury when September eleventh happened. Fraud, counterfeiting. When they created Homeland, he switched over. Seems to be stumbling and fumbling his way up the ladder. I don’t think he’s a problem for us.”

Don stared at Luke for a long moment.

“What do you think of this mission?” he said.

Luke didn’t look away. “I think it’s a deathtrap, to be honest with you. It scares me. We’re supposed to drop into Russia undetected, rescue a bunch of guys...”

“Three guys,” Don said. “We’re allowed to kill them, if that’s easier.”

Luke wouldn’t even entertain that thought.

“Rescue a bunch of guys,” he repeated, “torch a submarine, and get back out alive? That’s a tall order.”

“Who would you send on it?” Don said. “If you were me?”

Luke shrugged. “Who do you think?”

“Do you want it?”

Luke didn’t answer right away. He thought of Becca and baby Gunner, in the cabin just across the Chesapeake on the Eastern Shore. God, that little baby...

“I don’t know.”

“Let me tell you a story,” Don said. “When I was a commander in Delta, a bright-eyed young guy came in. He had just qualified. Came out of the 75th Rangers, like you did, so he wasn’t green. He’d been around the block. But he had an energy, this kid, as though it was all new to him. Some guys come into Delta and they’re already grizzled as hell at the age of twenty-four. Not this guy.

“I tapped him for a mission right away. I was still going on missions myself in those days. I was deep into my forties by then, and the brass at JSOC wanted to put me out to pasture, but I wouldn’t hear of it. Not yet. I wouldn’t send my men into places where I wouldn’t go myself.

“We parachuted into the Democratic Republic of Congo. Way upriver, out beyond anything resembling law and order. It was a night drop, of course, and the pilot put us in the water. We crawled up out of those swamps looking like we’d all been dipped in shit. There was a warlord up there, called himself Prince Joseph. He called his ragtag militia Heaven’s...”

“Heaven’s Army,” Luke said. Of course he knew the story. And of course he knew all about the new Delta recruit Don was describing.

“Three hundred child soldiers,” Don said. “Eight men went up there, eight American soldiers, no outside support of any kind, and put bullets in the brains of Prince Joseph and all his lieutenants. A perfect operation. A humanitarian mission, with no ulterior motives but to do the right thing. Bang! Decapitation strike.”

Luke took a deep breath. The night had been terrifying and exhilarating all wrapped into one adrenaline rush of a package.

“The international aid societies came in and did what they could with the children, repatriated them, fed them, loved them, reeducated them to be human again, if that was even possible. And I kept tabs. Many of them eventually made it back to their home villages.”

Don smiled. No, he positively beamed.

“In the morning, I lit up a victory cigar along the bank of the mighty Congo. I was still smoking them in those days. My men were with me, and I was proud of every single one of them. I was proud to be an American. But my newbie was quiet, thoughtful. So I asked him if he was all right. And you know what he said?”

Now Luke smiled. He sighed and shook his head. Don was talking about him. “He said, ‘All right? Are you kidding me? I live for this.’ That’s what he said.”

Don pointed at him. “That’s right. So I’ll ask you again. Do you want this mission?”

Luke stared at Don for another long moment. Don was a drug dealer, Luke realized. A pusher. He sold you on a feeling, a rush, that you could only get one way.

An image of Becca holding Gunner again flashed across the screen in his mind. Everything had changed when that baby was born. He remembered Becca giving birth. She was more beautiful in those moments than he had ever seen her.

And they were planning to build a life together, the three of them.

What was Becca going to think about this mission? When he sold her the last one, when she was about to give birth, she had been upset. And that one was an easy sell—just a quick trip to Iraq to arrest a guy. Of course, it turned into much more than that, full-on combat and the rescue of the president’s daughter, but Becca had only learned about it after the fact.

Here, she would know the deal going in: Luke was going to infiltrate Russia and attempt to rescue three prisoners. He shook his head.

There was no way he could tell her that.

“Luke?” Don said.

Luke nodded. “Yeah. I want it.”

CHAPTER FIVE

**3:45 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time
Queen Anne's County, Maryland
Eastern Shore of Chesapeake Bay**

“You're home early.”

Luke looked at his mother-in-law, Audrey, taking his time, soaking her in. She had deep-set eyes with irises so dark, they seemed almost black. She had a sharp nose, like a beak. She had tiny bones and a thin frame. She reminded him of a bird—a crow, or maybe a vulture. And yet, in her own way, she was attractive.

She was a well-preserved fifty-nine now, and Luke was aware that as a young woman in the late 1960s, she had done some modeling for newspaper and magazine advertisements. As far as he knew, it was the only work she had ever done.

She had been born into an arm of the Outerbridge family, vastly wealthy New York City and New Jersey landowners since before the United States became a country. Her husband, Lance, came from the equally old-money St. John family of New England lumber barons.

As a general rule, Audrey St. John frowned upon work. She didn't understand it, and she especially didn't understand why someone would do the kind of dangerous, dirty work that occupied Luke Stone's time. She seemed continually flabbergasted that her own daughter, Rebecca St. John, would marry someone like Luke.

Audrey and Lance had never accepted him as their son-in-law. They had been a toxic influence on this relationship since well before he and Becca exchanged their vows. Her presence here was going to make it that much harder to talk to Becca about this latest assignment.

“Hi, Audrey,” Luke said, trying to sound cheerful.

He had just walked in. He had taken off his tie and unbuttoned the top two buttons of his dress shirt, but so far that was his only nod toward being home. He reached into the refrigerator and came out with a cold beer.

It was full summer now, and the weather was fine. The surroundings here were beautiful. He and Becca were living at her family's cabin in Queen Anne's County. The house had been in the family for over a hundred years.

The place was an ancient, rustic place sitting on a small bluff right above the bay. It was two floors, wooden everything, with creaks and squeaks everywhere you stepped. The kitchen door was spring-loaded, and slammed shut with enthusiasm. There was a screened-in porch facing the water, and a newer stone patio with commanding views right on the bluff.

They had started gradually replacing the generations-old furniture to make the place more suited for everyday living. There was a new sofa and new chairs in the living room. One Saturday morning, by hook or by crook, and by sheer animal will, Luke and Ed Newsam had managed to insert a king-sized bed in the upstairs master bedroom.

Even with those upgrades, the sturdiest thing in the house remained the stone fireplace in the living room. It was almost as if the stately old hearth had been there, looking out over Chesapeake Bay since biblical times, and someone with a sense of humor had built a small summer cabin all around it.

It really was an incredible place. Luke loved it there. Yes, it was far from his office. Yes, if the SRT job really did pan out, and it looked like it was going to, they were going to have to move closer. But for now? Paradise. The ninety-minute commute home didn't seem nearly as bad, just knowing that this was the payoff at the end of it.

He glanced out the window. Becca was on the patio, feeding the baby. Luke would have loved nothing more than to take a seat out there with them, gaze out at the water and the sky, and just sit

there until the sun went down. But it wasn't to be. Unfortunately, he had to pack for his trip. And before he even started, he had to do the hardest thing—announce that he was going.

“Did you get punched on the job?” Audrey said.

Luke shrugged. Even though he could feel them well enough, he had almost forgotten the scrape on his cheek and the swollen jaw line. Pain was an old friend of his. When it wasn't excruciating, he could barely feel it. There was almost something comforting about it.

He cracked open the beer and took a slug. It was ice cold and delicious. “Something like that. But you should see the other guy.”

Audrey didn't laugh. She made a sort of half-grunt and went upstairs.

Luke was tired. It had already been a long day, with Martinez laid to rest, the fight with Murphy, and everything else. And really, it was just getting started. He intended to be here for an hour before he headed right back to the city again, from there to Turkey, and then, if all the signs were favorable, over to Russia.

He went outside. Becca nursing the baby was like an impressionist painting, her bright red jumper and floppy sun hat against the green grass, and the vast sweep of pale blue sky and dark water. There was a double-mast tall ship replica at full sail in the distance, moving slowly to the west. If he could press STOP and freeze this moment in time, he would do it.

She looked up, saw him there, and smiled. Her smile lit him up. She was as pretty as ever. And a smile was a good thing, especially these days. Maybe the darkness of this postpartum depression was beginning to lift.

Luke took a deep breath, sighed quietly, and smiled himself.

“Hello, beautiful,” he said.

“Hello, handsome.”

He leaned down and shared a kiss with her.

“How's the baby boy today?”

She nodded. “Good. He slept for three hours, Mom kept an eye on him, and I even got to take a nap. I don't want to promise anything, but we might be turning a corner here. I hope so.”

A long pause drew out between them.

“You're home early,” she said. That was the second time in the past five minutes someone had said that. He took it as a bad omen. “How did your day go?”

Luke sat down across the small round table from her and took a sip of his beer. As always, he believed that when trouble was brewing, the thing to do was to get right to the meat of it. And if he could get past the worst of it, maybe it would happen too fast for Audrey to come out here and pile on.

“Well, I have an assignment.”

He noticed himself fudging. He didn't call it a mission. He didn't call it an operation. What kind of assignment was it? Was he going to interview a local craftsman for the weekly newspaper? Maybe it was a high school science project?

Instantly, she was wary.

Her eyes stared deep into his, searching there. “What is it?”

He shrugged. “It's a diplomatic snafu, really. The Russians took three American archaeologists prisoner, and confiscated their little submarine. They were diving in the Black Sea, looking for the wreck of an old trading ship from ancient Greece. They were in international waters, but the Russians felt they were too close to Russian territory.”

Her eyes never wavered. “Are they spies?”

Luke took another sip of his beer. He let out a sound, a short bark of laughter. She was good at this. She'd already had a lot of practice. She went right for the open vein.

He shook his head. “You know I can't tell you that.”

“And you're going to go where, and do what?”

He shrugged. “I’m going to Turkey, to see if we can get them released.” The statement was true, as far as it went. It also overlooked an entire continent’s worth of detail. It was a sin of omission.

And she also knew that. “To see if we can get them released? Who are *we*?”

Now it was a chess match. “The United States of America.”

“Come on, Luke. What are you not telling me?”

He sipped the beer again and scratched his head. “Nothing of substance, hon. The Russians are holding three guys. I’m going to Turkey. They want me there because I have experience in the kind of mission that led to this. If the Russians are willing to negotiate, I probably won’t even be directly involved.”

Behind Luke, the screen door slammed. Becca’s eyes looked past him for a second. Dammit! Here came Audrey.

Becca’s eyes were suddenly angry. Tears welled up in them. No! The timing couldn’t be worse. “Luke, the last time you went abroad, I was almost nine months pregnant. You were going to Iraq to arrest someone, remember? A police job, I think you called it. But it turned out you were going to rescue the president’s...”

He raised a finger. “Becca, you know that isn’t true. I did go to arrest someone, and the arrest was uneventful...”

That was a lie. Another lie. The arrest was a slaughterhouse.

“...daughter from Islamic terrorists. Your helicopter crashed. You and Ed fought Al Qaeda militants on a mountaintop.”

“All of that happened after we were already there.”

“I’m not stupid, Luke. I can read between the lines of newspaper reports. The articles admitted that dozens of people were killed. That tells me there was a bloodbath and you were right in the middle of it.”

Luke raised his hands a tiny amount, as if she had just pulled the world’s tiniest gun on him. The baby was still there, suckling away as if none of this was happening.

“It’s an assignment, hon. It’s my job. Don Morris...”

Now she raised a finger. “Don’t you Don Morris me. I don’t even blame Don anymore. If you didn’t want to go on these suicide missions, then he couldn’t get you to go. It’s really that simple.”

Now she was crying, the tears pouring down.

“What’s going on?” a voice said. The voice was too eager. It sensed blood in the water, and was moving in for the kill.

“Hi, Audrey,” Luke said, without even turning around.

Becca stood and handed Audrey the baby. She looked down at Luke, her eyes hard. Her entire body was shaking now from the tears.

“What if you die?” she said. “We have a son now.”

“I know that. I’m not going to die. As always, I’m going to be very careful. Even more so now, because of Gunner.”

Becca stood there next to her mother, her hands balled up in fists. She looked like a toddler who was about to start shrieking in the middle of the supermarket. Her mother, in contrast, was calm, simpering, self-satisfied. She bounced the baby in her thin, birdlike arms and cooed to him in quiet baby talk.

“It’s going to be okay,” Luke said. “It’s going to be fine. I know it is.”

Abruptly, Becca stormed off, up the small hill toward the house. A moment later, the screen door slammed again.

Now Luke and Audrey stared at each other. Audrey had the sharp, predatory eyes of a hawk. Her mouth opened.

Luke raised a hand and shook his head. “Audrey, please don’t say a word.”

Audrey ignored him. “One day, you’re going to come back here and you’re not going to have a wife anymore,” she said. “Or a house to live in, for that matter.”

CHAPTER SIX

8:35 p.m. Eastern Standard Time The Skies Above the Atlantic Ocean

“Rock and roll,” Mark Swann said.

“Hip-hop, son,” Ed Newsam said. “Hip-hop.”

He held his big hand out across the narrow aisle of the small jet plane and Swann gave him a smooth, slow tap. Then Swann turned his own hand over and Ed appeared to place a few coins in Swann’s palm. They had just acted out the whole “gimme five, keep the change” brother man hand jive.

Since the last mission, Newsam and Swann had become unlikely friends.

Luke watched them. Ed lounged in his seat, steely-eyed, huge, neatly dressed in khaki cargo pants and a form-fitting SRT T-shirt. Ed’s job was weapons and tactics. Both his hair and his beard were close-cropped and the edges perfectly even. He looked exactly like what he was—no one to mess with.

Meanwhile, Swann looked like anything other than a federal agent. He wore black-framed glasses. His hair was pulled into a long ponytail. He wore a T-shirt that said BLACK FLAG, with a photo of a man diving from a stage into a swarming crowd. He stretched his long legs out into the aisle, an old pair of ripped jeans on his skinny legs, with a pair of bright yellow Chuck Taylors as an obstacle for any passersby. His feet were huge.

The two men had originally bonded over a love of the 1980s rap group Public Enemy, and a similar sarcastic sense of humor. Now they were bonding over God only knew what. Youthful male energy? Unlimited possibility?

The guys were enjoying themselves, ramping up for another trip to the back of beyond. That was good. These guys needed to be dialed in and razor sharp.

Luke himself didn’t feel half as much enthusiasm. He felt exhausted, more emotionally than physically. Of course, he was the only one here with a newborn baby, an angry wife, and a conniving mother-in-law. He was also the only one who had made the three-hour round trip out to the Eastern Shore and back.

Newsam and Swann had gone to Red Lobster instead. It seemed like they might have had a few drinks with their seafood dinner.

“Are you guys ready to work?” Luke said.

Ed shrugged. “Born ready.”

“Rock and roll,” Swann said again.

The six-seat Lear jet screamed north and east across the sky. The jet was dark blue with no markings of any kind. They’d left from a small private airport west of the city twenty minutes earlier. This could be a corporate plane on a business trip, or a bunch of rich kids off on a European romp.

Behind them and to their left was the last of the early evening sunlight. Ahead and to their right was the onrushing night.

Luke felt like he often felt at moments like this—as though he was plunging into something beyond his understanding. The missions didn’t bother him. He was nervous, but not really afraid. He had seen so much combat now that very few things shook his confidence. What he didn’t understand was the context.

Why? Why were they doing this? Why did the major players do what they did? Why were there terrorists and terrorist groups? Why were Russia and America, and numerous other countries, always entangled behind the scenes, pulling strings and manipulating the action like puppet masters?

When he was younger, these questions had never bothered him. Understanding geopolitics was not part of his job description. Good guys over here, bad guys over there.

He would deliberately misquote the line from the famous poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” “Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do or die.” Rather than “theirs,” he would make it “ours.” For years, he had used it as a motto of sorts.

But now he wanted to know more. It was no longer enough to kill and die for reasons that were never explained. It was possible that Martinez’s suicide had finally rammed that home for him.

For the moment, the source of most of his knowledge was a woman nearly ten years younger than him. He glanced back at Trudy Wellington, the science and intel officer, sitting one row behind them.

She was dressed casually in jeans, a blue T-shirt, and pink socks. The T-shirt had two short words across the front, in small white lettering: Be Nice. She had kicked off her sneakers when they got on the plane. She was curled up with a clipboard, a thick file folder, and a bunch of paperwork. She pored through it, marking things with a pen. She had hardly spoken since the plane had taken off.

Sensing Luke staring at her, she looked up with big eyes behind her round red glasses. She was beautiful.

Trudy... what went on inside that mind of hers?

“Yes?” she said.

Luke smiled. “I thought you might want to fill us in on what we’re all doing here. They told us next to nothing at the briefing, most of it being classified. Once Don took the mission, he said you would know what was going on by the time we got airborne.”

Ed and Swann were watching them now.

“And we are officially airborne,” Swann said.

Luke glanced out his window again. The sun was well behind them now, the day fading into nothingness. Hours from now, as they moved further east, the sky would begin to brighten. He checked his watch. Nearly nine o’clock.

“What do you say, Trudy? Ready to school us kids?”

Trudy made a bizarre sort of military salute with her right hand. It was awful. Luke did not glance back at Ed for fear of laughing.

“Ready, captain.”

She stood and moved to the forward seat so that the four of them were together.

“I’m going to assume that none of you have any prior knowledge of this mission, the people involved, the current state of our relationship with Russia, or the task placed before us,” she said. “It might make this conversation a little longer than necessary, it might not. But it tends to guarantee we’re all on the same page. Sound okay?”

Luke nodded. “Good.”

“Sounds okay,” Ed said.

“It’s a long flight,” Swann said.

Trudy nodded. “Then let’s begin.”

She paused, took a deep breath, and looked at the page in front of her. Then she launched into her story.

* * *

“Earlier today our time, yesterday their time, the Russians seized the American research submersible *Nereus* from international waters in the Black Sea. The confrontation took place about one hundred forty-five miles southeast of the Crimean resort of Yalta. Yes, where the famous World War Two meeting took place between FDR, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin.”

Ed Newsam smiled. “That’s some deep history right there.”

“FDR?” Swann said. “The guy who got assassinated in, uh... Denver?”

Trudy smiled. She almost seemed to blush. Luke shook his head and almost laughed out loud. Tough crowd for a history lesson.

“*Nereus* was a sitting duck. A Russian destroyer tracked its location from the time it dropped from its mother ship. The destroyer and two smaller ships from the Russian Coast Guard converged on *Nereus*. Once they had it hemmed in, they dropped three bathyscaphes, which surrounded *Nereus* at close quarters, and escorted it to the surface. They also took the crew into custody.”

“Who are they?” Luke said.

Trudy sifted through her files and brought a different paper to the top.

“A crew of three. The sub’s pilot is forty-four-year-old Peter Bolger, official residence Falmouth, Massachusetts. Graduate of Maine Maritime Academy, class of 1983. Four years in the Coast Guard, honorable discharge 1987, rank of lieutenant. Spent nearly a decade piloting ships for Wood’s Hole Oceanographic Institution in Cape Cod, in cooperation with numerous colleges, universities, and aquariums. Hired by Poseidon Research International, November 1996. To the naked eye, this is a civilian who has spent his entire adult life on the water, much of that conducting research. The presence of someone like Bolger is probably meant to give PRI a veneer of reality.”

“He’ll probably be the weak link when it comes to getting them out,” Luke said.

Trudy nodded. “According to his dossier, he is five foot nine, and weighs two hundred thirty or two hundred forty pounds.”

“How does he fit in the sub?” Swann said.

Ed shrugged. “Could be all muscle.”

Now Trudy shook her head. “It isn’t.” She held up a photo of Peter Bolger. He wasn’t morbidly obese, but he wasn’t going to run the hundred-yard dash, either.

“Next,” Luke said.

Trudy brought the next sheet to the top.

“Eric Davis, twenty-six-year-old graduate student from the University of Hawaii, on a research fellowship to Wood’s Hole. Where do they come up with this stuff? He’s really a twenty-eight-year-old Navy SEAL named Thomas Franks. Naval ROTC at the University of Michigan, graduated magna cum laude. Entered the Navy upon graduating, and immediately applied for BUD/S. Tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq, one each, as well as classified missions under Joint Special Operations Command. His mission here was to protect the other two men, and to scuttle the *Nereus* in the event of an accident or other mishap. Clearly, he didn’t do any of that.”

“Clearly,” Swann said.

“He’s our strongest link,” Luke said. “If we get to these guys, and they’re alive, it will be good to get a weapon or weapons into his hands. The major danger with Franks is that he may prematurely engineer some sort of escape attempt on his own, or acquire a weapon and come out shooting. Okay, next.”

Trudy brought up the last piece of paper. “Reed Smith, thirty-six-year-old mission commander,” she said. “A ghost. Total wild card. His true identity and age are Top Secret. I have nothing on him at all, other than he’s been employed as a research associate at PRI for the past six months. Where he came from, and what he’s been up to, is anybody’s guess. He is the man that the CIA and the Pentagon are most concerned about. There are apparently a lot of secrets inside that little head of his.”

Swann looked at Luke. “Black ops. I’m surprised he and Franks haven’t toppled the Russian government by now.”

Luke smiled. “I love your sense of humor, Swann. That’s why I let you live.”

He looked at Trudy. “I’d like a little context, if you have it. Where they took the *Nereus*, and the Russian state of readiness when... if... we go in there.”

Trudy nodded. “I have some. The *Nereus* was taken into the holds of an old shipping freighter and has been brought to the Port of Adler, just south of the Black Sea resort city Sochi, and just north of the Russian border with Georgia. They are attempting to hide the *Nereus* and pretend they don’t have it. They’re acting as though the freighter has made a normal call into port. And at least as of when we left Washington, there was no evidence they’ve moved the *Nereus* crew to another location. There’s been very little action on those docks at all.”

“They know we’re watching,” Swann said.

“That seems to be the case,” Trudy said.

“And the rest?” Luke said. “How ready are they?”

Trudy pursed her lips. “I can give you my own theory.”

“Tell me,” Luke said.

“It’s a little involved.”

Luke waved a hand. “It’s not my bedtime yet.”

Trudy nodded. “Vladimir Putin is playing whack-a-mole with debacles of various kinds. The Kursk disaster. The Beslan school massacre. Who knows when that will stop? But in the meantime, he is making progress on numerous fronts. He has cemented his iron grip on the government. The Russian economy, while still a shambles by our standards, is enjoying more prosperity than it’s seen in fifteen years, primarily because of high worldwide oil and natural gas prices. Pentagon threat assessments suggest that the military is better funded, somewhat better trained, and the soldiers are getting better pay than they’ve seen in a long while. They are modernizing some weapon systems, especially ballistic missile systems.

“Russia is on a long, hard road back to its former place in the world. There’s no telling if they’ll make it. But there’s also no doubt that since Putin took over, they are in fact on that road. Previously, they were upside down in a ditch by the side of the road.”

“What does this mean to us?” Luke said.

“It means they took that sub to put us on notice,” Trudy said. “The Black Sea was indisputably theirs for generations. Except for the Turkish coast, it was a Russian bathtub. We barely even put ships in there for years on end. They’re telling us they’re back, and they’re not going to let us put spy ships in there any time we like.”

“Yes, but is it really true?” Luke said. “Are they back? If we go in there and try to rescue those men, are we going to walk into a buzz saw?”

Trudy shook her head, offering the ghost of a smile. “No. They’re not back. Not yet. Morale is still low. Command and control is still poor. Corruption is rampant. Lots and lots of infrastructure and equipment are degraded or nonfunctional. With a clever enough plan, and a fast-moving attack, I think you’ll catch them flat-footed. I don’t say this lightly, but I think we can get the men out of there.”

Luke stared at her. He thought of her plan for taking out the renegade American military contractor Edwin Lee Parr and his ragtag militia in Iraq, and her optimistic assessment of the odds of doing so. At the time, Luke had been dismissive of her, her plan, and her assessment.

Then the whole thing turned out very similar to how she had described it. Luke and Ed still had to go in there and do it, but that part was a given.

“Boy, I hope you’re right,” he said.

* * *

Luke had fallen into a restless sleep. His dreams were strange, frightening, and rapidly shifting. A night skydive. As he fell, his parachute wouldn’t open. Below him was a wide expanse of dark river. Alligators, dozens of them, watched him fall from the sky. They converged on him. But his leg was attached to a bungee cord. He bounced, a long slow-motion bounce, just above the water, his arms hanging down, the alligators lunging and snapping at him.

Then it was daytime. A Black Hawk helicopter had been shot out of the sky. Its tail rotor was gone, the chopper spinning out of control and coming down hard. Luke ran across a field, an old, empty soccer stadium, toward the chopper. If he could just get there before it hit, he could catch it and save those men on board. But the grass was growing all around him, reaching up, twisting, pulling at his legs, slowing him down. His arms were out, reaching... He was too late. He was too late.

God, the chopper was coming down sideways. Here... it... came...

He bucked awake in the midst of midair turbulence—the plane shuddered, then rode the unsettled air like a roller coaster. Luke glanced around. The lights were out. For a moment, he wasn't sure if he was asleep or awake. Then he noticed the rest of his team, sprawled out unconscious in various parts of the darkened cabin.

He gazed out his window—he couldn't see anything but a blinking light on the wing. Far below, the ocean was vast, endless, and black. The sun was far behind them now, the day long gone.

They'd been flying for hours, and they had more to go.

Hours from now, as they moved further east, the sky would begin to brighten. He checked his watch. Just after midnight back in DC, which meant that in Sochi, it was a little after eight a.m. Morning already.

Watching the clock gave him the sense of events surging out ahead. The Russians could move those men any time they wanted. They could have already moved them during the night.

It was frustrating to be trapped on this plane with the clock ticking.

Luke hadn't gotten much shut-eye, but he knew he wasn't going to fall asleep again. He had a lot weighing on him. The ghosts of the past. Becca and Gunner. The uncertain future of a baby born into a terrible world. This dangerous mission.

He got up, went to the tiny kitchenette at the back of the plane. He passed Ed Newsam and Mark Swann, who were dozing on opposite sides of the aisle from each other. Without turning on a light, he poured half a mug of hot water from the spigot and mixed some instant coffee, black with a touch of sugar. He tasted it. Eh. It wasn't bad. He grabbed an apple Danish wrapped in plastic and went back to his seat.

He turned on the overhead spotlight.

He glanced across the aisle from him. Trudy was asleep, curled into a ball. She was young for this job. It must be nice to know so much at such a tender age. He thought of himself in his early twenties. He'd been like that off-brand superhero, the one made out of granite, whose answer to any problem was to put his head down and run through walls. Not a lot going on upstairs.

He shook his head and looked at the paperwork in his lap. She had given him a ton of useful data. He had satellite imagery of the freighter, including close-ups of the upstairs catwalks and the rooms where the men were thought to be held, and the holds below where the sub was likely hiding.

Luke had to admit that the sub wasn't a major priority for him personally, but he knew that others didn't agree. They wanted that thing destroyed. Okay. If it was possible, and it didn't jeopardize the men, okay. He would do it.

Hmmm. What else did he have? A bunch of stuff. Schematics of the freighter. Maps and satellite imagery of the surrounding city streets, the docks, and the long seawall that protected the port from the Black Sea. Long-view maps and imagery of the entire area, with the sprawling beach resort of Sochi just to the north, the wide open water, and the border with Georgia to the south, tantalizingly close.

So near, and yet so far.

What else? Assessments of troop strength at the port and nearby facilities—best guesses, really. Assessments of first responder capabilities in metropolitan Sochi—good once upon a time, but underfunded and badly degraded now. Assessments of morale—low across the board. The two apocalyptic Chechen wars and the resulting terrorist attacks on civilian soft targets, combined with

the Kursk disaster, had heads rolling among the Russian military brass, and the frontline troops in disarray.

Luke didn't doubt it. The shock of September 11, along with repeated setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan, bad press at home... it had left a lot of people on this side of the fence feeling the same way. American equipment, training, and personnel were generally tip-top, but people were people, and when things went sideways, it hurt.

He let the information wash over him.

Don had promised him more people when he arrived in Turkey, deep cover operatives with local knowledge, fluency in the Russian language, and experience in fast-moving, hard-hitting black ops. Don didn't say where they were coming from, only that they would be the best available. He had promised Luke methods for both him and Ed, moving separately, to enter Russia undetected. He had promised Luke any materials he wanted, within reason—guns, bombs, cars, airplanes, whatever.

A picture began to emerge...

Yeah. He started to imagine the broad outlines of it. In an ideal world... if he got everything he wanted... with the element of surprise... total commitment... and moving at warp speed...

He could see how this just *might* work.

* * *

“They used to call me Monster.”

Luke stared at Ed. They were the only two awake, sitting in the back seats of the plane. But now Luke was fading. Further up, Trudy was still curled into a ball, and Swann was sprawled out, his long legs crossing the aisle.

The window shades were down, but Luke could see bits of sunlight peeking in along the bottom edges. Wherever they were in the world, it was morning now.

Luke had just laid out the mission to Ed, as he was starting to imagine it. He was thinking he might get a little feedback. Did this part seem possible? Was there a gaping hole he was overlooking? What kind of weapons should they carry? What kind of equipment did they need?

Instead, he got this: “They used to call me Monster.”

It was all the answer he needed, he supposed. The man was a monster. If it came to it, he would go at this problem with half a plan and a handful of rusty nails.

“Somehow, that doesn't surprise me,” Luke said.

Ed shook his head. He was half asleep himself. “Not because of my size. Because I was so evil. I grew up in Crenshaw, in LA. Four kids, I was the oldest. The closest thing to a grocery store in the neighborhood was a place that sold liquor, lottery tickets, and cans of soup and tuna fish. My mom couldn't keep the lights on sometimes.

“I said, un-unh. It ain't gonna be like this. It's not right we gotta live this way, and I'm gonna fix it. I was out working on the corner at twelve, trying to get that money. I was running with the worst of the worst by fifteen, and I was worse than they were. In and out of juvie. I wasn't fixing anything.”

Ed sighed heavily. “Ten of those nights, I could have easily died. People did. I was getting shot at long before I ever saw Iraq, or Afghanistan, or any of these other classified places I supposedly never went.”

He squinted and shook his head. “I came before a judge when I was seventeen. She told me I could now be tried as an adult. I could see real time in big-boy jail. Or I could get a suspended sentence and join the United States Army. Up to me.”

He smiled. “What else was I gonna do? I joined. I got to basic, drill sergeant there, name of Brooks, immediately had a hard-on for me. Master Sergeant Nathan Brooks. Didn't like me, and decided he was gonna break me.”

“Did he?” Luke said. He had trouble picturing such a thing, but this wasn’t the first time he had heard something along these lines. “Did he break you?”

Ed laughed. “Oh yeah. He broke me. Then he broke me again. And again. I’ve never been broken so bad in my life. He saw me coming a mile away. Made me his personal project. He said, ‘You think you hard, nigger? You ain’t hard. You ain’t even seen hard yet. But I’m gonna show it to you.’”

“Was he a white guy?” Luke said.

Ed shook his head. “Nah. In those days, if a white man called me nigger, I’d have just killed him. He was a down home brother, from South Carolina someplace. I don’t know. He broke me right in half. And when he was done, he put me back together again, a little better than before. Now I was something other people up the line could at least work with, make something out of.”

He was silent for a moment. The airplane shuddered across a patch of turbulence.

“I never really found the right way to thank that guy.”

Luke shrugged. “Well, it’s not over. Send him some flowers. A Hallmark card. I don’t know.”

Ed smiled, but it was wistful now. “He’s dead. Maybe a year ago. Forty-three years old. He’d already been in the service twenty-five years. He could have retired any time. Apparently, he volunteered for Iraq instead, and they gave it to him. He was on a convoy that got ambushed near Mosul. I don’t know all the details. I saw it in *Stars and Stripes*. Turns out he was a highly decorated guy. I didn’t know that about him when he was running me into the ground. He never mentioned it.”

He paused. “And I never told him what he meant to me.”

“He probably knew,” Luke said.

“Yeah. He probably did. But I should have said it anyway.”

Luke didn’t disagree.

“Where’s your mom?” he said instead.

Ed shook his head. “Still in Crenshaw. I tried to get her to move out east near me, but she wouldn’t hear of leaving. All her friends are there! So me and my sister chipped in and bought her a little bungalow six blocks away from the old rat hole apartment building where we used to live. A chunk of my pay every month goes to paying the mortgage on that thing. Right in the old neighborhood I used to risk my life trying to get her out of.”

He sighed heavily. “At least there’s food in the fridge and the lights are on. I guess that’s all I care about. She says, ‘Ain’t nobody gonna mess with me. They know you’re my son. And you’re gonna come see ’em if they do.’”

Luke smiled. Ed did too, and this time the smile was more genuine.

“She’s impossible, man.”

Now Luke laughed. After a moment, so did Ed.

“Listen,” Ed said. “I like your plan. I think we can pull it off. A couple more guys, the right ones...” He nodded. “Yeah. It’s doable. I need to catch about forty more winks, and maybe I’ll have a few thoughts of my own, some things to add.”

“Sounds good,” Luke said. “I look forward to that. I’d prefer not to get anybody on our team killed out there.”

“Especially not us,” Ed said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

June 26

6:30 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time

Special Activities Center, Directorate of Operations

Central Intelligence Agency

Langley, Virginia

“It seems the president has lost his marbles.”

“Oh?” the old man smoking the cigarette said. It sounded like he had marbles in his throat. His teeth were dark yellow. Receding gums made them long. They seemed to click together when he spoke. The effect was horrifying. “Do tell.”

They were deep inside the bowels of headquarters. Most places inside the building, smoking was now off limits. But here in the inner sanctum? Anything was allowed.

“I’m sure you’ve already heard,” Special Agent Wallace Speck said.

He sat across a wide steel desk from the old man. There was almost nothing on the desk. No phone, no computer, not a piece of paper or a pencil. There was only a white ceramic ashtray, filled to overflowing with used cigarette butts.

The old man nodded. “Refresh my memory.”

“Yesterday he suggested that the crew of the *Nereus* be left to rot in Russian hands. He said this in front of twenty or thirty people.”

“Skip the easy stuff,” the old man said. They were in a room without windows. He took a deep drag on his cigarette, held it, and then let loose a plume of blue smoke. The ceiling was at least fifteen feet above their heads, and the smoke drifted upward toward it.

“Well, he walked that sentiment back. But he’s cut us and our friends out of the rescue operation, in favor of our new little brother at FBI.”

“Skip,” the old man said.

Wallace Speck shook his head. The old man looked like hell. How was he even still alive? He’d been chain smoking cigarettes since before Speck was born. His face was like ancient newsprint, turning almost as yellow as his teeth. His wrinkles had wrinkles. His body had no muscle tone at all. His flesh seemed to hang on bone.

The thought gave Speck a brief flashback to eating at a fancy restaurant one time. “How’s the chicken tonight?” he said to the waiter. “Beautiful,” the waiter said. “It falls right off the bone.”

The old man’s meat was anything but beautiful. But his eyes were still as sharp as razors, as focused as lasers. They were the only things left.

Those eyes regarded Speck. They wanted the dirt. They wanted the parts that people like Wallace Speck worried about sometimes. He could dig up the dirt, and he did. That was his job. But sometimes he wondered if the Special Activities Center of the CIA wasn’t overstepping its mandate. Sometimes he wondered if the *special activities* didn’t amount to treason.

“The man has trouble sleeping,” Speck said. “It seems he hasn’t gotten over the kidnapping of his daughter. He relies on Ambien to sleep, and he often washes his pill down with a glass of wine, or two. It’s a dangerous habit, for obvious reasons.”

Speck paused. He could give the old man paperwork, but the man didn’t want to look at paper. He just wanted to listen. Speck knew that. “We have audiotape and transcripts of a dozen telephone calls to his family ranch in Texas over the past ten days. The conversations are with his wife. In each call, he expresses his desire to leave the presidency, move back to the ranch, and spend time with his family. During three of those calls, he breaks down crying.”

The old man smiled and took another deep drag on the smoke. His eyes became slits. His tongue darted out. There was a piece of tobacco there at the tip of it. He looked like a lizard. “Good. More.”

“He has a sort of hero worship obsession with Don Morris, our little upstart rival at the FBI Special Response Team.”

The old man made a hand motion like a wheel spinning.

“More.”

Speck shrugged. “The president has a little dog, as you know. He has taken to walking it on the White House grounds late at night. He becomes angry if he runs across any Secret Service agents while he’s out there. A few nights ago, he came across two inside of ten minutes, and threw a temper tantrum. He called the night supervisory office and told them to stand their men down. He no longer seems to grasp that the men are there to protect him. He thinks they’re there to annoy him.”

“Hmmm,” the old man said. “Would he try to run away?”

“I would say it seems implausible,” Speck said. “But with this president, you never can tell what he’s going to do.”

“What else?”

“The political action group has begun to look at options for removal,” Speck said. “Impeachment is out because of the split in Congress. Also, the speaker of the House is a close ally of David Barrett’s and on the same page with him about most issues. He is very unlikely to pursue impeachment, or allow it to happen on his watch. Removal by the Twenty-fifth Amendment appears to be out as well. Barrett probably isn’t going to admit his inability to discharge his duties, and if the vice president attempts to...”

The old man held up his hand. “I get it. Skip. Tell me this: do we have Secret Service agents in nighttime operations on the White House grounds? Men who are loyal to us?”

“We do,” Speck said. “Yes.”

“Good. Now tell me about the Russia rescue operation.”

Speck shook his head. “We have no details. Don Morris is notoriously tight-fisted with information. But the bench isn’t deep over there, at least not yet. We can assume he’s given it to his two best agents, Luke Stone and Ed Newsam, young guys, both former Delta Force operators with extensive combat experience.”

“The ones who rescued the president’s unfortunate daughter?”

Speck nodded. “Yes.”

The old man smiled. His teeth were like yellow fangs. He could pass for the oldest of vampires, one who hadn’t tasted blood in a long, long time. “Cowboys, aren’t they?”

“Uh... I think they tend to shoot first, and then...”

“Are we planning to interdict? Derail their operation in some way?”

“Ah...” Wallace Speck said. “It’s certainly been on the table as an option. I mean, at the moment we don’t have that much...”

“Don’t do it,” the old man said. “Get out of their way and let it rip. Maybe they’ll get themselves killed. Maybe they’ll start a world war. Either way, it’s good for us. And if David Barrett does anything crazy, I mean really crazy, be ready to swoop in and take control of the situation.”

Wallace Speck stood to leave.

“Yes sir. Anything else?”

The old man looked at him with the ancient eyes of a demon. “Yes. Try to smile a little more, Speck. You’re not dead yet, so make an effort to enjoy your time here. This is supposed to be fun.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

**11:20 p.m. Moscow Daylight Time (3:20 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time)
Port of Adler, Sochi District
Krasnodar Krai
Russia**

“Are they sure they want us to play this concert?” Luke said into the blue plastic satellite phone in his hand. “I think it’s going to be pretty loud.”

He leaned against an old black Lada sedan, made in Hungary. The boxy little car reminded him of an old Fiat or Yugo, just not as fancy as those. It seemed to be made of welded sheets of scrap metal. It gave off a faint smell of burning oil. The faster it went, the more it seemed to vibrate, like it was coming apart at the seams. Luckily, it was not the getaway car.

Nearby, his driver, a heavyset Chechen named Aslan, was smoking a cigarette and urinating through a chain-link fence. Aslan preferred it if you called him Frenchy. This was because when Chechnya collapsed, he had escaped the Russians by disappearing to Paris for a few years. His three brothers and his father had all died in the war. Now Frenchy was back, and Frenchy hated Russians.

They were in an empty parking lot near the mouth of the Mzymta River. A moist, pungent odor of untreated sewage wafted up from the water. From here, a bleak boulevard of warehouses ran along the waterfront to a small cargo port, guarded by a gatehouse and razor-topped fencing. In the glow of weak yellow sodium arc lamps, he could see men moving around by the gate.

The grand old Communist Party dachas, the new hotels and restaurants, and the glimmering Black Sea beaches of Sochi were just five miles up the road. But Adler was as desultory and depressing as a Russian port should be.

There was a delay as Mark Swann’s reedy voice bounced all over the world, from encrypted networks to black satellites, and finally to Luke’s phone. Swann’s voice trembled with nervous excitement.

Luke shook his head and smiled. Swann was in a penthouse suite with beautiful Trudy Wellington, in a five-star hotel in Trabzon, Turkey. They were supposedly a rich young newlywed couple from California. If bullets started to fly, Swann would be watching it on a computer screen, nearly but not quite live, via satellite. That’s why his voice was shaking.

“We are green light,” Swann said. “They understand we might get some complaints from the neighbors.”

“And the disco ball?”

“Right where we said it would be.”

Luke gazed across at a rusty old mid-sized cargo ship, the *Yuri Andropov II*, resting at dock. He mused that an old KGB torture specialist like Andropov must be spinning in his grave that this thing was named after him. It must be somebody’s idea of a joke.

The disco ball, of course, was the missing submersible, *Nereus*. Its GPS chip was still pinging from inside one of the holds on that ship.

“And the instruments?” The instruments were the crew of the *Nereus*.

“Upstairs in the closet, as far as we know.”

“Aretha? What does she have to say?”

Trudy Wellington’s voice came on, just for a second.

“Your friends are already partying on the beach.”

Luke nodded. Just south of here was the border with the former Soviet Republic of Georgia. The Georgians and the Russians were currently at each other’s throats. Trudy suspected they were going to have a little shooting war one of these days, but hopefully it wouldn’t start tonight.

The Georgian beach resort town of Kheivani was right across that border. It was a quiet, sleepy place compared to Sochi. There was a retrieval crew on a dark beach there, waiting to receive the rescued prisoners, if any of this even got that far.

From the beach, the prisoners would be moved away from the border, deeper into Georgia, and then out of the country. Eventually, when they reached a safe place, they would be debriefed about this whole mess.

None of that was Luke's department. By design, he knew nothing about how it would go. Don and Big Daddy Cronin had cooked up that part. Luke didn't even know who was involved. You could cut his fingers off and gouge his eyes out, and he couldn't tell you a thing about it.

"Has the big man joined the band?" Luke said.

Ed Newsam's voice came on. A howl of wind and the roar of heavy engines nearly drowned him out. "He's in the dressing room and ready to get on stage. The sooner the better, as far as he's concerned."

Luke sighed. "All right," he said, and the weight of the decision settled onto his shoulders like a boulder. People were probably about to die. You knew that going in. You just didn't know which ones.

"Let's do it."

"See you in Vegas," Swann said.

"Be sure to catch the fireworks show," Ed shouted. "I hear it's gonna be good."

The call went dead. Luke dropped the satellite telephone to the broken blacktop of the parking lot. He raised his boot and brought it down hard on the phone, cracking the plastic casing apart. He did it again. And again. And again. Then he kicked the shattered remnants through an open runoff drain and into the water.

He still had one more.

He looked up.

Frenchy was there. His face was broad and his skin seemed thick, almost like a rubber mask. His hair was jet black and swooped backward. He was clean-shaven to blend in better with Russian society. Normally, his people had thick beards for Allah.

Frenchy wore a dark, loose-fitting windbreaker jacket over his big body. The night was a little warm for that. His hard eyes stared at Luke.

"Yes?" Frenchy said.

Luke nodded. "Yes."

Frenchy took a deep drag of his cigarette. He slowly exhaled the smoke. Then he smiled and nodded.

"I am happy."

* * *

"Fast," Ed Newsam said. He was speaking to no one. This was good because no one would ever be able to hear him.

"Very, very fast."

He stood in the cockpit, his feet bare, hands on the wheel of a boat shaped like a giant wedge. The boat was long and narrow, with a very long bow. At the stern, there were five big 275-horsepower engines. The boat itself only had two seats.

In America, they would call it a Cigarette boat, or a Go Fast. In the days before satellite tracking, drug traffickers in South Florida used these things to outrun the Coast Guard. This boat wasn't packed with cocaine, though.

In the nose of the boat, way up at the bow, was a tiny compartment. That compartment was packed with a small amount of TNT.

Ed ran hard in the night, lights off, bouncing over the swells. His engines roared, a huge sound. The wind howled around him. In front of him, maybe three clicks ahead, was the mostly dark coastline of Georgia. Behind him were the bright lights of Sochi. Sochi was enjoying its post-communist, big money heyday. Expensive boats like this were easy to come by.

In fact, behind Ed and running just as hard, was another speedboat.

That boat was driven by a nutty Georgian daredevil named Garry. Ed couldn't see Garry back there. Garry's lights were also off. And he couldn't hear Garry. There was too much noise to hear anything. But he knew Garry was back there. He had to be.

Ed's life depended on it.

Garry, along with Stone's crazy Chechen driver, Frenchy, had been provided by Big Daddy Bill Cronin. Big Daddy was CIA, and they weren't supposed to involve the CIA in this, but they did it anyway. The danger was that the CIA had sprung a leak somewhere.

"Bill Cronin's paychecks come from CIA," Don Morris had said. "But the man is a law and a world unto himself. If he gives us operators, they won't be talkers. There will be no security breaches. I can assure you of that."

So Garry was back there with Ed's and Luke's and everybody's lives in his hands.

To Ed's left, the east, there was a long stone seawall, jutting far out into the water. It protected a small port area. He ran the length of it, coming at it on a diagonal. He slowed, just a touch, and made the sharp turn in toward land.

He glanced at the sky, scanning for aircraft.

Nothing. All clear.

That seawall was topped with concrete docks. It ran parallel to land, a hundred meters from the shore. The seawall and the shore formed a narrow pass a thousand meters long. At the far end was the cargo ship, the *Yuri Andropov II*.

Ed's job was to punch a hole in it. A hole, maybe a small fire. Enough to cause a distraction, a misdirection. Enough to let Stone and Frenchy sneak onto the boat, release the prisoners, and maybe even scuttle that sub.

The Russians knew the Americans were watching them from the skies. So these docks looked like they had minimal activity. Just an old cargo ship, not too much security, nothing to see here.

But Ed knew there were gun men on those docks. Driving this boat up that pass was going to be running a gauntlet.

He reached the mouth of the pass. He took a deep breath.

"Garry, you better be there."

He opened the throttle all the way. The engines screamed.

The boat burst forward, even faster than before.

Land raced by on either side of him, the seawall on his left, the shore on his right. But he kept his eyes on the prize. He could see it now, the *Andropov*, looming far ahead. It was docked perpendicular to him, showing him its whole length.

"Beautiful."

To his left, men ran along the docks. He saw them as tiny stick figures, moving slow, much too slow.

He ducked way down, already knowing what they would do. An instant later, automatic gunfire ripped up the side of the boat. He felt it more than heard it or saw it. It was altering his course, the thudding impacts of the high-caliber rounds.

The windshield shattered.

The *Andropov* was coming closer, growing larger.

There was an iron bar on the floor. Ed picked it up. One end had a gripping tool, almost like a hand. He placed this onto the steering wheel. He wedged the far end into a metal slot welded onto the floor.

Old school, but it would do the trick. It would keep the boat going more or less straight ahead. He glanced up. The *Andropov* was big now.

It seemed like it was RIGHT THERE.

“Uh-oh, time to go.”

He darted to the right side of the boat, away from the gunfire. He squatted, all the power in his legs, and leapt to his right, over the gunwale. He curled into a ball, like a child doing a cannonball at the local swimming pool.

The boat zoomed away while he was in the air.

Dimly, he had the sensation of falling, falling through the sky. A long time passed. He crashed into the water and for a moment the blackness was all around him. He moved through it like a torpedo, no feeling except the feeling of dark speed.

At first there was a loud roar, and then the muffled sounds of the deep.

For a moment, he thought about floating in the womb, bathed now in warm light. It occurred to him that the beacon light on his life vest had activated. The vest yanked him to the surface, back to the roar and the spray of the boat’s wake.

He gasped for air and dove again. For another few seconds, those gunners were going to be looking for him.

After that...

He bobbed to the surface again. Everything was dark—the night, the water, everything.

For a moment he could not see the boat. Then he spotted it. It was moving fast, dwindling, dwindling. It was tiny in the looming shadow of the freighter.

Ed dove below the surface again, to the safety of the darkness.

* * *

Luke leaned on the Lada, pretending to smoke a cigarette. Everybody around here smoked, so he figured it might help his disguise. He had tried it a couple of times before in high school but never caught the hang of it. He liked football better.

He took a drag, held it in his mouth for a few seconds, then let the whole mess blow out again. It tasted like smog. He nearly laughed at himself. If anyone was watching, they would see how ridiculous he looked.

He pitched the lit cigarette into the gutter.

The Lada was parked fifty yards from the security gate of the small port. Frenchy was over there at the gate, asking the guards for directions. There was a small knot of men, silhouettes in the fog, shadows thrown by the yellow lamps, talking and laughing through the gate. Frenchy was kind of a funny guy. He could crack anybody up.

Frenchy was smoking effortlessly. Smoke one down to the nub, pitch it, and light another one. That was Frenchy.

Suddenly gunshots rang out. They came from the other side of the wharf. Three hundred yards away, Luke saw the muzzle flashes of the guns.

POP! POP! POP! POP!

Now men were shouting. A man screamed in terror, a high falsetto wail.

Someone opened up with a heavy gun, full auto. Luke could hear the metallic stomp of the rounds being unleashed.

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

Now the guards were running away from the gate, back toward the action. That was Luke’s cue. Just like that, they were in.

But then Frenchy did something unexpected. As soon as the guards turned from him, he had a gun in his hand. He took a two-handed stance and started firing. His shots were LOUD.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

He shot the running guards in their backs. They spun to face him, and he shot them in their fronts. Poor guys, they didn't know if they were coming or going.

"Frenchy!" Luke almost shouted, but didn't.

"Dammit!" he said instead.

The man hated Russians. Luke knew that going in. Don knew it. Big Daddy knew it. But no one expected him to start killing Russians the second he got a chance.

Luke reached into the car and pulled out the heavy bolt cutters. He set the incendiary beneath the dashboard for one minute. Then he dashed to Frenchy's side.

"You're my driver! You're not supposed to kill anybody!"

Frenchy shrugged. "Russians," he said. "Cowards."

"You shot them in the back." To Luke the implications of that were clear. Who's the coward around here?

But it wasn't clear to Frenchy. He nodded and smiled. "Yes. I did."

Luke put the clippers to the thick chain looped through the fence links and cut it. He dropped the cutters and shoved the gate open. Now they were really in.

Ba-BOOOOOOOM!

Ahead of them, a massive explosion ripped open the night.

A flash of light appeared. On the heels of that came a sound like boulders rushing downhill. An avalanche. The explosion rent the sky in oranges, reds, and yellows. For a split second, it turned night into day. It was *not* what Luke expected.

The explosion was so big that the ground trembled violently. Luke nearly lost his feet. Everything went sideways. For a moment, he thought the explosion was enough to tear the docks off their moorings. A giant flaming fireball went straight into the sky.

Ed's boat had hit like a torpedo.

That was going to bring people. No doubt about it. Luke pulled his gun out, an MP5. His weapon of choice. *The murder weapon*. He started to run.

Frenchy was several steps ahead of him. The big Chechen reached the first man down, a guard who was trying to crawl forward, and finished him with a shot to the back of the head. BANG. Without pausing, he moved on to the next one. BANG.

Cold-blooded. He had just been sharing a laugh with these guys.

Three guards were still running out ahead of them. It was too late to let them live. Frenchy had scuttled that. Luke sprayed them with the MP5. They all dropped.

Now Luke was moving fast. He blew ahead of Frenchy, left him to clean up the mess. Ahead, the freighter, the *Yuri Andropov II*, was on fire. Oil or gasoline on the surface of the water had also caught. The whole area was fast becoming an apocalypse.

How much TNT had they put in that speedboat?

BOOM! Another explosion went up behind him. The Lada.

A second later, a smaller explosion went up. The Lada's gas tank. Good. That flaming car at the gate would add to the confusion when the cavalry got here.

Luke reached where the freighter was docked lengthwise along the pier. The heat here was already intense, though the fire was on the other side of the boat. Flames ten stories high reached into the night. The fire shouldn't be that...

BOOOOOM!

Another long explosion rent the night, ripping out from somewhere inside the freighter. The docks trembled and Luke was nearly knocked off his feet again. The wind from a blast wave hit him.

What the hell was going on?

The ship was secured to the pier with giant shipping chains. Luke strapped his gun to his back, crossed the low barrier along the dock's edge, grabbed a chain, and swung out over the water. He pulled himself, moving like a spider along the shipping chain on a diagonal up to the first deck.

There was no one on this deck. He moved along the catwalk, fast but careful, much like a cat himself. He came to a steel stairway. Gun out again, he moved cautiously to the top. Already, he could hear sirens behind him. Reinforcements were on their way. He'd better make this quick.

He stopped just short of the top of the steps and poked his head over the top. This was the deck. It was loud up here. A clarion bell was shrieking. Across the deck, the fire surged. Men had reached the firefighting equipment and were attempting to put the fire out. They sprayed it with powerful hoses—flame retardant or water, Luke couldn't tell. From the smoke and the flames, all he could really see were vague forms moving through the chaos.

GA-BOOOOM!

Another explosion came, this one from directly beneath the firefighters. The deck erupted upward, and the men flew into the air, their bodies lit up like torches.

Luke stopped. He popped the magazine out of his gun and slipped it into his jacket. It was probably half-full. He pulled out a new forty-round magazine, slid it into the gun, and drove it home with his fist.

He gazed out at the deck. Flames shot through the hole. Burning corpses, ten, maybe twelve, littered the ground.

Ordnance.

The ship was a floating weapons depot. What else would cause these explosions? The Russians had loaded up this old rust bucket freighter with bombs. Was this what they were reduced to? That hadn't been in any intelligence assessment Luke had...

BOOOOM!

Another explosion ripped through the ship somewhere.

Now the fire just burned, unchecked, the flames crackling, the heat coming off it in waves. This thing was going to disintegrate. It was going to blow apart. It could happen any time. There wasn't a moment to waste.

"Oh, man."

Luke got up and ran across the deck, through the surge of heat. At the far end was a corridor. He raced along it. There were heavy steel doors on either side.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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