

JACK MARS



PRIMARY

THREAT

THE FORGING OF LUKE STONE--BOOK 3

The Forging of Luke Stone

Jack Mars

Primary Threat

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Mars J.

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

ISBN 978-1-64-029760-9

“One of the best thrillers I have read this year.” --Books and Movie Reviews (re Any Means Necessary) In PRIMARY THREAT (The Forging of Luke Stone— Book #3), a ground-breaking action thriller by #1 bestseller Jack Mars, elite Delta Force veteran Luke Stone, 29, leads the FBI’s Special Response Team as they respond to a hostage situation on an oil rig in the remote Arctic. Yet what at first seems like a simple terrorist event may, it turns out, be much more. With a Russian master plan unfolding rapidly in the Arctic, Luke may have arrived at the precipice of the next world war. And Luke Stone may just be the only man standing in its way. PRIMARY THREAT is a standalone, 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 978-1-64-029760-9

© Mars J.

© Lukeman Literary Management Ltd

Содержание

CHAPTER ONE	7
CHAPTER TWO	11
CHAPTER THREE	16
CHAPTER FOUR	21
CHAPTER FIVE	24
CHAPTER SIX	29
CHAPTER SEVEN	31
CHAPTER EIGHT	37
CHAPTER NINE	40
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	50

Jack Mars

Primary Threat: The Forging of Luke Stone – Book #3 (an Action Thriller)

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 seven 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!

Copyright © 2019 by Jack Mars. All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior permission of the author. This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be resold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Jacket image Copyright Getmilitaryphotos, used under license from Shutterstock.com.

BOOKS BY JACK MARS

LUKE STONE THRILLER SERIES

ANY MEANS NECESSARY (Book #1)
OATH OF OFFICE (Book #2)
SITUATION ROOM (Book #3)
OPPOSE ANY FOE (Book #4)
PRESIDENT ELECT (Book #5)
OUR SACRED HONOR (Book #6)
HOUSE DIVIDED (Book #7)

FORGING OF LUKE STONE PREQUEL SERIES

PRIMARY TARGET (Book #1)
PRIMARY COMMAND (Book #2)
PRIMARY THREAT (Book #3)
PRIMARY GLORY (Book #4)

AN AGENT ZERO SPY THRILLER SERIES

AGENT ZERO (Book #1)
TARGET ZERO (Book #2)

HUNTING ZERO (Book #3)
TRAPPING ZERO (Book #4)
FILE ZERO (Book #5)
RECALL ZERO (Book #6)
ASSASSIN ZERO (Book #7)
DECOY ZERO (Book #8)

CHAPTER ONE

September 4, 2005

5:15 p.m. Alaska Daylight Time (9:15 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time)

Martin Frobisher Oil Platform

Six Miles North of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

The Beaufort Sea

The Arctic Ocean

No one was ready when the killing started.

Moments before, the man they called Big Dog stood at the rail in quilt-lined coveralls, steel-toed boots, thick leather gloves, and a faded yellow baseball cap that said *Hunt Hard* across the front.

It was cold out, but Big Dog didn't feel the cold anymore. And it was nowhere near as cold as it was going to be. All around him was the vastness of the Arctic—gray sky, dark water punctuated with bright white ice, as far as the eye could see.

He smoked a cigarette and watched a double-hulled personnel boat working its way through the ice floes in the bleak light of late afternoon. You couldn't call it sunlight. The cloud cover was constant now, like a heavy blanket, and Big Dog hadn't seen a speck of sunlight in at least a week. It was easy to lose track of the sun. It was easy to lose track of everything.

"They're early," Big Dog said out loud to himself.

That boat didn't sit quite right with him. It gave him an uncertain feeling in his gut. It looked a lot like a boat that would bring crew members out to the rig after a break. In fact, from here he could make out at least a dozen men on the deck of the boat, preparing to disembark when they reached the dock.

But shift changes didn't happen early, and boats didn't appear unscheduled and unannounced. Not out here. He tried to run through the possible reasons for that boat in his mind. But he was hung over again, and the jackhammer pain in his head, combined with the brain fog from lack of sleep, made it hard to think.

No matter. It would all get worked out when they got here. It was just barely possible that someone made a mistake. A lot of people in the Arctic had no idea what day it was. No one here spoke of Monday or Tuesday or Wednesday or Thursday. What would be the point? Every twelve hours was the same, working or sleeping, working or sleeping. Time blended, blurred, faded into hard steel and cold white oblivion.

Whoever they were, no matter what they were doing, they would have to come talk to Big Dog. Big Dog wasn't as mean as he once had been. He had grown up on the reservation, what he called half Blackfoot Indian, and half "American." And once upon a time, he'd been as mean as they came.

Six feet, seven inches tall, 250 pounds when he was light, 275 when he was carrying beer muscle. Past fifty years old now, he was easier, less quick to anger, possibly even a little bit compassionate. Still, he was the biggest man out this way, maybe the biggest man in the Arctic, and this was his oil rig.

Big Dog had been on the crew that built this thing. For five years, he had been the crew foreman. He was not a geologist, he was not the driller, and he was not a college-educated company man, but make no mistake. There were more than ninety men on this rig at any given time, and every single one of them, even the bosses, reported to him.

It was a half-billion-dollar hunk of steel, the *Martin Frobisher*—"The Bish," as the roughnecks who worked it, and lived on it for two weeks at a time, tended to call it. The Bish was a royal blue and yellow tower, platforms and blocks of machinery stacked high over the hole where the drill entered the ocean floor. The top of this tower stood forty stories above the water. It was positioned more

than 250 miles above the Arctic Circle, on a six-acre man-made island just offshore from the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

The Bish was owned by a small company called Innovate Natural Resources. Innovate had contracts with all the biggies—BP, ExxonMobil, ConocoPhillips—but this was Innovate’s own rig. Big Dog often thought the heavy hitters let Innovate operate out here because it gave them plausible deniability about what was going on. Innovate did the dirty work, and if anyone found out about it, Innovate would take the fall.

The island was reachable by ice road over the frozen sea most of the year. But not in summer, and not even in September. Not anymore. The permanent ice was gone—melted—and the water was open all summer. With summer over, the seasonal ice was starting to fill in.

As Big Dog watched, the boat pushed through the last of it and pulled up to the dock. A couple of Bish dockworkers began to tie the boat’s lines when a strange thing happened. It was so strange that several seconds passed before Big Dog’s mind could grasp it.

Men jumped off the boat and shot the dock hands.

CRACK! came the sharp report of gunfire, echoing across the distance in the still, cold air. In the fading light, miniature men fell dead with each shot.

CRACK!

CRACK!

Suddenly Big Dog was running. His heavy boots pounded across the iron rails of the deck, and he burst through the doors of the doghouse, the command center. It was like the pilot house of a ship, only instead of watching the open sea, men watched the drill all day. There were three men inside this time of day. As Big Dog came in, the men were already up and moving, breaking into the cabinet where the rifles were stored. The rifles were meant for polar bears, not invasions.

“What the hell is going on?” Big Dog said.

A heavysset man with glasses, Aaron, a company man, tossed a heavy rifle to Big Dog. It had a banana magazine poking from the bottom of it, and a scope up top.

Big Dog chambered a round.

Aaron shook his head. “No idea. We tried to raise them on the radio, but no answer. We figured we’d wait until they got here. Then they got here and started shooting.”

He gestured at the closed circuit security screens.

On one screen, a group of men moved up the docks. They were dressed in black, for cold weather, faces covered except for the eyes, and draped with guns and ammunition belts. As Big Dog watched, one of them approached a man writhing on the dock, pulled a pistol, and shot the man in the head.

“Aw no,” Big Dog said.

It hurt him. It hurt him to his core. And it made him angry. This was his rig, and those were his men being killed out there. During his decades in the Arctic oil industry, nothing like this had ever happened. Were there fights? Sure. Fist fights, knife fights, fights with pool cues and iron pipes. Gunfights, even? Yes, once in a rare while, someone pulled a gun.

But this?

No way.

And it wouldn’t stand.

The men in the control room stared at Big Dog.

The first thing Big Dog did when he left the reservation at the age of seventeen, he joined the Marine Corps. They spotted his eye right away, and they made him a sniper.

“The sons of bitches,” he said.

He didn’t care who they were or what they thought they were doing, it wasn’t going to stand. He went back out onto the deck, rifle cradled in his thick hands.

Below him, the group of men was running through the compound now, running for the Quonset huts that served as housing, the rec hall, the mess hall. Clarion alarms were screeching, and men were starting to emerge from everywhere, running. There was confusion, and there was fear.

Shooting came easy to Big Dog. Men had their skills, he supposed, the things that came easy. This was one of his. He sighted through the scope and put one of the black-jacketed invaders in the middle of the circle. The man was RIGHT THERE, so close Big Dog could reach out and touch him. Big Dog squeezed the trigger. The rifle bucked in his hands and pushed against his shoulder.

BANG!

The sound echoed far away across the ice and water.

It was a center mass hit, chest high. The man threw up his arms and dropped his gun. He was knocked backward, off his feet, and he tumbled across the frozen ground.

Not good. That told Big Dog the man was wearing body armor. The bullet didn't pierce him—it knocked him backward. He was going to feel that thing for a while, and he was going to be sore as hell tomorrow, but he wasn't going to be dead.

Not yet, anyway.

Big Dog ejected the spent shell and chambered another round. He sighted again and found his man crawling along the ground.

He put the circle around the man's head.

BANG.

The echo drifted away across the vast, empty wastes. Blood sprayed where the man's head had just been. Automatically, without thought, Big Dog ejected the shell and chambered a new round.

Next.

Another black-jacketed bastard kneeled by the dead guy. He seemed to be checking vital signs. Checking them for what? Half the man's head was gone.

Big Dog smiled and put the new guy's head in the circle, dead center. The guy was an idiot.

BANG.

But not anymore.

The second man's head exploded just as the first had done, a spray of red in the air, like the white spray from the blowhole of a humpback whale just below the surface. The two dead men slumped together now, black mounds on white ground.

Big Dog pulled the gun down to get a wider view of the field. The scene was chaos. Men were running everywhere. Men were shooting. Men were falling dead.

Too late, he saw two men in black, both taking a knee. They pointed guns up at him. From this distance, he couldn't tell what the men were carrying. They were small submachine guns, compact, Uzis maybe, or MP5s.

Less than a second passed.

Big Dog pushed away from the iron railing just as the first spray of bullets hit. They went right through him and he felt himself doing a spastic, jittering dance. Then the pain came, as if on time delay.

His feet slipped backward, out from under him, and he fell forward onto the railing. He thought he might vomit over the side.

But his height, and his momentum, carried his whole body forward. There was an awkward moment when it seemed he was perched on the rail, all the weight on his stomach. Then he was falling. He scabbled madly for the iron slats behind him, but it was no use.

A second or two passed. Then IMPACT.

Time stopped. He drifted. When he opened his eyes again, it seemed he was gazing up at a dark sky. The last of the bleak day had passed, and the cold stars in their millions were coming out, playing hide and seek behind skittering clouds. He blinked and it turned to daylight again.

He knew what had happened. He had fallen to the iron deck two stories below the doghouse level. He had hit hard. His whole body must be broken. His skull must be cracked.

Also, when the memory came, it was like the bullets were piercing him again. His body jerked convulsively. He had been shot with machine guns.

There was no telling how much time had passed. It could have been minutes. It could have been hours. He tried to move. It hurt to do anything. That was a good sign—he could still feel. There was a lot of dark liquid around him on the deck—his blood. He wheezed as he breathed, like a hydraulic lift going bad, fluid bubbling from his mouth.

Somewhere, not far, gunshots were still ringing out. Men were shouting. Men were screaming in pain, or in terror.

Shadows moved across him.

Two men stood there, looking down. They both wore heavy black jackets with white patches. The image on the patches seemed to be an eagle or another bird of prey. They wore green camouflage pants, like an army would wear on land, someplace where the world wasn't covered in white. And they wore heavy black boots.

The men's faces were covered in black balaclavas. Only their eyes showed. Their eyes were hard, without sympathy.

What did these guys think they were doing?

"Who...?" Big Dog said.

It was hard to speak. He was dying. He knew that. But he wasn't someone who threw in the towel. Never before, and not now.

"Who are you?" he managed to say.

One of the men said something in a language Big Dog didn't understand.

He raised a pistol and pointed it down at Big Dog. The hole at the end of the barrel was there, like a cave. It seemed to loom larger and larger.

The other man said something. It was a serious thing. Neither of them laughed. Their flat expressions didn't change. They probably thought they were doing Big Dog a favor, putting him out of his misery.

Big Dog didn't mind a little pain. He didn't believe in heaven, or hell. When he was young, he had prayed to his ancestors. But if his ancestors were out there, they hadn't seen fit to respond.

Maybe there was life after death, maybe there wasn't.

Big Dog would rather take his chances here on Earth. The rig doctor might be able to patch him up. A medevac helicopter might come and bring him to the small trauma center in Deadhorse. An Apache helicopter might come and wipe these guys out.

Anything could happen. As long as he was breathing he was still in the game. He raised a bloody hand. Amazing he could still move his arm.

"Wait," he said.

I don't want to die now.

Big Dog. For decades, that's what practically everyone had called him. His ex-wife called him Big Dog. His bosses called him Big Dog. The president of the company had flown in here one time, shook his hand, and called him Big Dog. He grunted at the thought of it. His real name was Warren.

A small flash of light and flame appeared from the black maw at the end of the man's gun. The darkness came and Big Dog didn't know if he'd really seen that light, or if this whole thing had been a dream all along.

CHAPTER TWO

9:45 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time

The Situation Room

The White House

Washington, DC

“Mr. President, your thoughts?”

Clement Dixon was too old for this. That was his major thought.

He sat at the head of the table, and all eyes were on him. Over a long career in politics, he had learned to read eyes, and facial expressions, with the best of them. And what his face reading told him was this: the high-powered people looking at the white-haired gentleman presiding over this emergency meeting had all reached the same conclusion as Dixon himself.

He was too old.

He had been a Freedom Rider since the very first ride, May 1961, risking his life to help desegregate the South. He had been one of the young speakers on the streets during the Chicago Police Riot of August 1968, and had been tear-gassed in the face. He had spent thirty-three years in the House of Representatives, first sent there by the good people of Connecticut in 1972. He had served as Speaker of the House twice, once during the 1980s, then again up until just a couple of months ago.

Now, at the age of seventy-four, he suddenly found himself President of the United States. It was a role he had never wanted or imagined for himself. No, wait. Scratch that—when he was young, a teenager, early twenties, he had pictured himself one day as President.

But the America he had imagined himself President of was not *this* America. This was a divided place, embroiled in two publicly acknowledged foreign wars, as well as half a dozen clandestine “black operations”—operations so black, apparently, that the people overseeing them were reluctant to describe them to their superiors.

“Mr. President?”

In his youth, he had never imagined himself President of an America still utterly dependent on fossil fuels for its energy needs, where twenty percent of the population lived in poverty, and another thirty percent teetered on the verge of it, where millions of children went hungry every night, and more than a million people had nowhere to live. A place where racism was still alive and well. A place where millions of people could not afford to get sick, and people often had to decide between taking their prescription medications and eating. This was not the America he had dreamed of leading.

This was a nightmare America, and suddenly he was in charge of it. A man who had spent his whole life standing up for what he believed was right, and fighting for the highest ideals, now found himself crawling through the muck. This job offered nothing but trade-offs and gray areas, and Clement Dixon was right in the middle of it all.

He had always been a religious man. And these days he found himself thinking of how Christ had asked God to let the cup pass him by. Unlike Christ, however, his place on this cross was not pre-ordained. A series of mishaps and bad decisions had brought Clement Dixon to this place.

If President David Barrett, a good man whom Dixon had known for many years, hadn't been murdered, then no one would have looked to Vice President Mark Baylor to take his place.

And if Baylor hadn't been implicated by a mountain of circumstantial evidence in that murder (not enough to charge him, but more than enough to see him disgraced and banished from public life), then he wouldn't have resigned, leaving the Presidency to the Speaker of the House.

And if Dixon himself hadn't agreed last year to spend just one more term as Speaker, despite his advanced age...

Then he wouldn't have found himself in this position.

Even if he'd just had the strength of will to *turn the damn thing down*... Just because the Line of Succession dictated that the Speaker assume the job, didn't mean he had to *accept the job*. But too many people had fought for too long to see a man like Clement Dixon, the fiery standard bearer of classical liberal ideals, become President. As a practical matter, he could not walk away.

So here he was—tired, old, limping through the hallways of the West Wing (yes, *limping*—the new President of the United States had arthritis in his knees and a pronounced limp), overwhelmed by the sheer weight of the thing entrusted to him, and compromising his ideals at every turn.

“Mr. President? Sir?”

President Dixon was sitting in the egg-shaped Situation Room. Somehow, the room reminded him of a TV show from the 1960s—the show was called *Space: 1999*. It was a silly Hollywood producer's idea of what the future must look like. Stark, empty, inhuman, and designed for maximum use of space. Everything was sleek and sterile, and exuded zero charm.

Large video screens were embedded in the walls, with a giant screen at the far end of the oblong table. The chairs were tall leather recliners like the captain on the control deck of a starship might have.

This meeting had been called at short notice—as usual, there was a crisis on. Outside of every seat at the table being taken, and a few along the walls, the room was mostly empty. The usual suspects were here, including a few overweight men in suits, along with thin and ramrod-straight military men in uniform.

Thomas Hayes, Dixon's new Vice President, was also here, and thank heavens for that. Having come aboard straight from being governor of Pennsylvania, Thomas was accustomed to making executive decisions. He was also on the same page with Dixon about many things. Thomas helped Dixon form a unified front.

Everyone knew that Thomas Hayes had designs on the presidency himself, and that was fine. He could have it, as far as Clement Dixon was concerned. Thomas was tall, and handsome, and smart, and he projected an air of authority. Yet the most prominent thing about him was his very large nose. The national press had already started to tweak him about it.

Just wait, Thomas, Dixon thought. *Wait until you're President*. The political cartoonists were drawing Clement Dixon as the absent-minded professor, a cross between Mark Twain and Albert Einstein with their shoes untied, and minus the homespun humor or penetrating intelligence.

Boy, they would sure have fun with that Hayes nose.

A tall man in a green dress uniform stood at the far head of the table, a four-star general named Richard Stark. He was thin and very fit, like the marathoner he surely was, and his face appeared to be chiseled from stone. He had the eyes of a hunter, like a lion, or a hawk. He spoke with utter confidence—in his impressions, in the information given him by his underlings, in the ability of the United States military to hammer any problem into submission, no matter how thorny or complicated. Stark was practically a caricature of himself. He seemed as if he'd never experienced a moment of uncertainty in his lifetime. What was the old saying?

Often incorrect, but never in doubt.

“Explain it again,” President Dixon said.

He could almost hear the silent groans from around the room. Dixon hated to have to hear it again. He hated the information as he understood it, and he hated that one more try ought to make him understand it completely. He didn't want to understand it.

Stark nodded. “Yes, sir.”

He pointed with a long wooden pointer at the map on the large screen. The map showed the North Slope borough of Alaska, a vast territory at the northern edge of the state, inside the Arctic Circle, and bordering on the Arctic Ocean.

There was a red dot in the ocean just north of land's end. The land there was marked ANWR, which Dixon well knew stood for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge—he was one of the people who had fought for decades to have that sensitive region protected from oil exploration and drilling.

Stark spoke:

“The Martin Frobisher drilling platform, owned by Innovate Natural Resources, is located here, in the ocean six miles north of the Arctic Wildlife Refuge. We don't have an exact census at the time of the attack, but an estimated ninety men live and work on that platform, and a small surrounding artificial island, at any given time. The platform operates twenty-four hours a day, three hundred sixty-five days a year, in all but the most severe weather.”

Stark paused and stared at Dixon.

Dixon made a hand motion like a wheel spinning.

“I got it. Please continue.”

Stark nodded. “A little over thirty minutes ago, a group of heavily armed, unidentified men attacked the platform and the encampment. They arrived by boat, on a vessel made to appear as a personnel tender bringing workers to the island. An unknown number of workers have been killed or taken hostage. Preliminary reports, gleaned from video and audio feeds, suggest that the invaders are of foreign, but still unknown, origin.”

“What suggests this?” Dixon said.

Stark shrugged. “They don't seem to be speaking English. Although we have no clear audio yet, our language experts believe they are speaking an eastern European, likely a Slavic, language.”

Dixon sighed. “Russian?”

The day he took over this thankless job, indeed moments after he took the Oath of Office, he had unilaterally stood American forces down from a confrontation with the Russians. The Russians had done him a favor and responded in kind. And Dixon had then been subjected to merciless and scathing criticism from the warmongering quarters of American society. If the Russians turned around and attacked now...

Stark shook his head the slightest amount. “Not sure yet, but we think not.”

“That narrows it down,” Thomas Hayes said.

“Do we have any idea what they want?” Dixon said.

Now Stark shook his head completely. “They haven't contacted us, and refuse to answer our attempts at contact. We have flown over the complex with helicopter gunships, but except for a few fires, the place currently seems deserted. The terrorists, and the prisoners, are either inside the rig itself, or inside complex buildings, away from our prying eyes.”

He paused.

“I imagine you want to go in with force and take the rig back,” Dixon said.

Stark shook his head again. “Unfortunately, no. As much as we are one hundred percent certain we can take back the facility through sheer force, doing so will put the lives of any men being held prisoner at risk. Also, the facility is of a sensitive nature, and if we make a large-scale counterattack, we risk calling attention to it.”

A few people in the room began murmuring together.

“Order,” Stark said, without raising his voice. “Order, please.”

“Okay,” Dixon said. “I'll bite. What's sensitive about it?”

Stark looked at a bespectacled man sitting halfway down the table from the President. The man was probably in his late thirties, but he carried some extra weight that made him look almost like an angelic child. The man's face was serious. Heck, he was in a meeting with the President of the United States.

“Mr. President, I'm Dr. Fagen of the Department of the Interior.”

“Okay, Dr. Fagen,” Dixon said. “Just give it to me.”

“Mr. President, the Frobisher platform, although owned by Innovate Natural Resources, is a joint venture between Innovate, ExxonMobil, ConocoPhillips, and the United States Bureau of Land Management. We have extended them a license to do what is known as horizontal drilling.”

On the screen, the image changed. It showed an animated drawing of an oil platform. As Dixon watched, a drill extended downward from the platform, below the surface of the ocean, and into the sea floor. Once underground, the drill changed direction, making a ninety-degree turn and now moving horizontally beneath the bedrock. After a time, it encountered a black puddle beneath the ground, and oil from the puddle began to flow sideways from the drillhead into the pipe following behind it.

“Instead of drilling vertically, which is how the vast majority of drilling was done in the twentieth century, we are now mastering the science of horizontal drilling. What this means is that an oil platform can be many miles from an oil deposit, perhaps a deposit in an environmentally sensitive location...”

Dixon held up a hand. The hand meant STOP.

Dr. Fagen knew what the hand meant without having to ask. Instantly, he stopped speaking.

“Dr. Fagen, are you telling me that the Martin Frobisher, out at sea six miles north of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, is in fact drilling inside the Wildlife Refuge?”

Fagen was staring down at the conference table. His body language alone told Clement Dixon all he needed to know.

“Sir, with the newest technologies, oil platforms can exploit important underground deposits without endangering sensitive flora or fauna, which I know you have previously expressed your concern...”

Dixon rolled his eyes and threw his hands up in the air.

“Aw, hell.”

He looked at the general.

“Sir,” Stark said. “The decision to grant that license was made two administrations ago. It was just a matter of perfecting the technology. Granted, it’s controversial. Granted, neither you nor I may agree with it. But I believe that’s a fish to fry at another time. At this moment, we have a terrorist operation underway, with an unknown number of American civilians already dead, and even more American lives at risk. Time is of the essence. And as much as is possible, I think we need to keep this incident, and the nature of that facility, out of the public eye. At least for now. Later, after we rescue our people and the smoke clears, there will be plenty of time for debate.”

Dixon hated that Stark was right. He hated these...

...*compromises*.

“What do you suggest?” he said.

Stark nodded. On the screen, the image changed and showed a graphic of what appeared to be a group of cartoon scuba divers swimming toward an island.

“We strongly suggest a covert group of highly trained special operators, Navy SEALs, infiltrate the facility, discover the nature of the terrorists and their numbers, decapitate their leadership, and, if at all possible, take back the rig with as little loss of civilian life as circumstances will allow.”

“How many and how soon?” Dixon said.

Stark nodded again. “Sixteen, perhaps twenty. Tonight, within the next several hours, before first light.”

“The men are ready?” Dixon said.

“Yes, sir.”

Dixon shook his head. It was a slippery slope when you were President. That’s what he, despite all his years of experience, had never understood. All his fiery stump speeches, his podium thumping, his demands for a fairer, cleaner world... for what? Everything had been sold down the river before you even started.

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was off limits to drilling. From the surface. So they parked themselves at sea and drilled from beneath it. Of course they did. They were like termites, always biting, gnawing, and turning the sturdiest construction into a house of cards.

And then the men doing the drilling were attacked and held hostage. And as President, what were you supposed to say—“Let them eat cake”?

Not a chance. They were Americans, and on some hard-to-understand level, they were innocents. *Just doing my job, ma’am.*

Dixon looked at Thomas Hayes. Of all the men in this room, Hayes would be the closest to his own thoughts on this. Hayes would probably be feeling boxed in, betrayed, frustrated, and flabbergasted, just like Clement Dixon.

“Thomas?” Dixon said. “Thoughts?”

Hayes didn’t even hesitate. “I understand it’s a discussion for another time, but I’m shocked to hear that we’re drilling in a natural environment that needs to be cherished and protected. I’m shocked, but not surprised, and that’s the worst part.”

He paused. “After these men are rescued, and as you say the smoke clears, I think we need to revisit the moratorium on drilling, and make it crystal clear that no drilling means no drilling, whether from the surface or from under the sea.

“Further, if there is going to be a military action here, I think we need to make sure there’s civilian oversight of the entire operation from beginning to end. No offense, General, but you guys at the Pentagon have a tendency to swing at mosquitoes with sledgehammers. I think we’ve heard about one too many wedding receptions in the Middle East being annihilated by drone strikes.”

General Stark looked like he was about to say something in reply, then stopped himself.

“Can you do that, General Stark?” Dixon said. “No matter how many military assets are involved, can you guarantee me civilian oversight and participation during the entire operation?”

The general nodded. “Yes, sir. I know the exact civilian agency for the job.”

“Then do it,” Dixon said. “And save those men on the rig if you can.”

CHAPTER THREE

10:01 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time

Ivy City

Northeast Washington, DC

A large man sat on a metal folding chair, in a quiet corner of an empty warehouse. He shook his head and moaned.

“Don’t do this,” he said. “Don’t do this thing.”

He was blindfolded, but even with the rag obscuring part of his face, it was easy to see that he was bruised and beaten. His mouth was swollen. His face was covered by sweat and some blood, and the back of his white T-shirt was stained with perspiration. There was a dark stain across the crotch of his blue jeans, where he had wet himself moments ago.

From the ends of his shirtsleeves to his wrists was a dense tangle of tattoos. The man looked strong, but his wrists were manacled behind his back, and his arms were secured to the chair with heavy chains.

His feet were bare, and his ankles were also cuffed with steel manacles—they were cuffed so close together that if he managed to stand up and tried to walk, he would have to bounce instead.

“Do what thing?” Kevin Murphy said.

Murphy was tall, slim, very fit. His eyes were hard, and there was a small scar across his chin. He wore a blue dress shirt, dark dress pants, and polished black Italian leather shoes. His sleeves were rolled just a couple of turns up his forearms. There was nothing ruffled, sweaty, or bloody about him. He did not appear to have made any sort of strenuous exertion. Indeed, he could be on his way to a late dinner at a nice restaurant. The only things that didn’t quite fit his look were the black leather driving gloves he wore on his hands.

For a few seconds, Murphy and the man in the chair were like statues, standing stones at some medieval burial site. Their shadows slanted away diagonally in the bleak yellow half-light illuminating this small corner of the vast warehouse.

Murphy took a few steps away across the stone floor, his footfalls echoing in the cavernous space.

He was dealing with an odd combination of feelings right now. For one, he felt relaxed and calm. He was just settling in to the interview, and he had the next few hours if he needed them. No one was coming here.

Outside of the gates to this warehouse was a slum. It was a concrete wasteland, dismal shops all crammed together, liquor stores, check cashing, and payday loan places. Crowds of women carrying plastic bags waited at bus kiosks in the daytime, drunken men on street corners held beer cans and cheap wine in brown paper bags all day and into the night.

Right now, Murphy could hear the sounds of the neighborhood: passing cars, music, shouts and laughter. But it was getting late, and things were beginning to quiet down. Even this neighborhood eventually went to sleep.

So yes, in the near term, Murphy had time. But in the larger sense, time was not his friend. He was a former Delta Force operator and a probationary employee of the FBI Special Response Team. He had performed well so far, including what was considered a brilliant performance in a smoking hot gunfight up in Montreal during his very first assignment.

What no one understood was how brilliant that performance really was. He had played both sides, and before the battle, convinced former CIA operative Wallace Speck, the so-called “Dark Lord” himself, to wire two and a half millions dollars to Murphy’s anonymous account on Grand Cayman.

Now Speck was in federal prison and facing the death penalty. That left a question looming large in Murphy's life: Was Speck talking to his captors? And if so, what was he saying?

Did Speck even know who Kevin Murphy was?

"Don't kill me," the man in the chair said.

Murphy smiled. Nearby to the man was another chair. Murphy's sports jacket was draped over it. Underneath the jacket were his holster and his gun. In the pocket of his pants was the large sound suppressor that fit the gun like a hand fits a glove.

Made for each other. How did that old TV ad go? *Perfect together.*

"Kill you? Why would I do that?"

The man shook his head and began to cry. His big upper body heaved with sobs. "Because that's what you do."

Murphy nodded. True enough.

He stared at the man. Sniveling bastard. He hated guys like this. Vermin. The guy was a cold-hearted murderer. A bully. A wannabe tough guy. A man with the words BANG and POW! tattooed across his knuckles.

This was the type of guy who killed helpless innocent people—partly because that's what he was paid to do, but also partly because it was easy, and because he liked doing it. Then, when he ran across someone like Murphy, he fell all to pieces and started to beg. Murphy himself had certainly killed a lot of people, but as far as he knew, he had never once killed a noncombatant or an innocent party. Murphy specialized in killing men who were hard to kill.

But this guy?

Murphy sighed. He had no doubt he could make this guy crawl across the floor like a worm, if he wanted.

He shook his head. It didn't interest him. All he really wanted was information.

"Some weeks ago, right around the time our dear departed President first disappeared, you killed a young woman named Nisa Kuar Brar. Don't deny it. You also killed her two children, a four-year-old girl and a babe in arms. The four-year-old was wearing Barney the Purple Dinosaur pajamas at the time. Yeah, I saw pictures of the crime scene. These people you killed were the wife and daughters of a cab driver named Jahjeet Singh Brar. The whole family were Sikhs, from the Punjab region of India. You bluffed your way into their apartment in Columbia Heights by claiming you were a DC Metro cop named Michael Dell. That's pretty funny. Michael Dell. Did you think that was funny?"

The man shook his head. "No. Absolutely not. None of that's true. Whoever told you all that was a liar. They lied to you."

Murphy's smile broadened. He shrugged. He almost laughed.

This guy...

"Your accomplice told me. A guy who was calling himself Roger Stevens, but whose real name was Delroy Rose." Murphy paused and took another deep breath. Sometimes he got worked up in situations like this. It was important he stay calm. This meeting was about information, and nothing else.

"Any of this starting to ring a bell with you now?"

The man's shoulders slumped. He sobbed quietly, his body shaking.

"No. I don't know who that..."

"Shut up and listen to me," Murphy said. "Okay?"

He didn't touch the man or move closer to him, but the man nodded and didn't say another word.

"Now... I already interviewed Delroy at length. He was helpful, but only up to a point. Things got a little messy, so at the end of the day, I'm willing to believe he told me everything he knew. I mean, who would go through all that suffering just to... what? Protect *you*? Protect someone else like you? No. I think he probably gave me everything he had. But it wasn't enough."

“Please,” the man said. “I’ll tell you everything I know.”

“Yes, you will,” Murphy said. “And hopefully without a lot of foolishness.”

The man shook his head, emphatically, energetically. For a moment, he was like a mechanical doll, one that you wind up and its head shakes until the key in the back winds down again.

“No. No foolishness.”

“Good,” Murphy said. He walked to the man and lifted the bloody rag from his eyes. The man’s eyes gaped and rolled in their sockets, then settled on Murphy.

“You can see me, right?”

The man nodded, very helpful. “Yes.”

“Do you know who I am?” Murphy said. “Yes or no. Don’t lie.”

The man nodded again. “Yes.”

“What do you know about me?”

“You’re some kind of Special Forces dude. CIA. Navy SEAL. Black ops. Something like that.”

“Do you know my name?”

The man stared straight at him. “No.”

Murphy wasn’t sure he believed him. He threw out a softball to test the guy.

“Did you kill Nisa Kuar Brar and her two children? There’s no sense lying now. You’ve seen me. All the cards are on the table.”

“I killed the woman,” the man said without hesitating. “The other guy killed the kids. I had nothing to do with that.”

“How did you do the woman?”

“I pulled her into the bedroom and strangled her with a length of computer cable. Ethernet Cat 5. It’s strong, but not sharp. It does the job without a lot of blood.”

Murphy nodded. That was exactly how it was done. No one without inside information about the crime scene would know that. This guy was the killer. Murphy had his man.

“What about Wallace Speck?”

The man shrugged. “What about him?”

Now Murphy’s shoulders slumped.

“What do you think we’re doing here, you moron?” he said. His voice echoed through the darkness. “You think I’m out here in this concrete shoebox with you, in the middle of the night, for my health? I don’t like you that much. Did Speck hire you to kill that woman?”

“Yes.”

“And what does Speck know about me?”

The man shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Murphy’s fist pistoned out and connected with the man’s face. He felt the bone across the bridge of the man’s nose break. The man’s head snapped back. Two seconds later, blood began to flow from one nostril, down the man’s face and across his chin.

Murphy took a step back. He didn’t want to get any blood on his shoes.

“Try again.”

“Speck said there was a black ops guy, special ops. He had an inside track on the whereabouts of the President’s Chief of Staff. Lawrence Keller. The special ops guy was going up to Montreal, he was part of the team that was supposed to rescue Keller. Maybe he was the driver. He wanted money. After that...”

The man shook his head.

“You think I’m that guy?” Murphy said.

The guy nodded, abject, in despair.

“Why do you think that?”

The man said something in a quiet voice.

“What? I didn’t hear you.”

“I was there,” the man said.

“In Montreal?”

“Yes.”

Murphy shook his head. He smiled. He laughed this time, just a bit.

“Oh, buddy.”

The guy nodded.

“What did you do, ditch when it got hot?”

“I saw where it was going.”

“And you saw me.”

It wasn't a question, but the guy answered it anyway.

“Yeah.”

“Did you tell Speck what I looked like?”

The guy shrugged. He was staring at the concrete floor.

“Talk!” Murphy said. “I don't have all night.”

“I never spoke to him after that. He was in jail before the sun came up.”

“Look at me,” Murphy said.

The guy looked up.

“Tell me again, but don't look away this time.”

The man looked directly into Murphy's eyes. “I haven't talked to Speck. I don't know where they're holding him. I don't know if he's talking or not. I have no idea if he knows who you are, but if he does, he obviously hasn't given you up yet.”

“Why didn't you run?” Murphy said.

It wasn't an idle question. Murphy was facing the same choice himself. He could disappear. Now, tonight. Or tomorrow morning. Sometime soon. He had two and a half million dollars in cash. That would last a man like him a long time, and with his... unique skills... he could top it up once in a while.

But he would spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder. And if he ran, one person who might creep up behind him was Luke Stone. That wasn't a pleasant thought.

The guy shrugged again. “I like it here. I like my life. I have a little son that I see sometimes.”

Murphy didn't like that, the way the guy slipped his son into the conversation. This cold-blooded killer, a man who had just admitted to murdering a young mother, and who was an accessory to the murder of two small children and only God knew what else, was trying to play the sympathy card.

Murphy went to the chair and pulled his gun out of the holster. He screwed the sound suppressor onto the barrel of the gun. It was a good one. This wasn't going to make a lot of noise. Murphy often thought it sounded like an office stapler punching through stacks of paper. Clack, clack, clack.

“You have no reason to kill me,” the man said from behind him. “I haven't told anybody anything. I'm not going to talk to anybody.”

Murphy hadn't turned around yet. “You ever hear of tying up loose ends? I mean, you do work in this business, don't you? Speck might know who I am, he might not. But you definitely do.”

“You know how many secrets I'm sitting on?” the guy said. “If I ever got taken in, believe me, you would be the least of what interests them. I don't even know who you are. I don't know your name. I saw a guy that night. Dark hair, maybe. Short. Five foot nine. Could have been anybody.”

Murphy turned and faced him now. The man was sweating, the perspiration popping out on his face. It wasn't that hot in here.

Murphy took the gun and pointed it at the center of the man's forehead. No hesitation. No sound. He didn't say a word. Every line was etched clean, and the man seemed to be bathed in a circle of bright white light.

The guy was talking fast now. “Look, don't do it,” he said. “I have cash. A lot of cash. I'm the only one who knows where it is.”

Murphy nodded. “Yeah, me too.”

He pulled the trigger and...

CLACK.

It was a little louder than normal. He hadn't figured on the echo in the big empty space. He shrugged. Didn't matter.

He left without looking twice at the mess on the floor.

Ten minutes later, he was in his car, driving on the Beltway. His cell phone rang. The number was blocked. It didn't mean anything. It could be good, it could be bad. He picked it up.

“Yes?”

A female voice: “Murph?”

Murphy smiled. He recognized the voice instantly.

“Trudy Wellington,” he said. “What a lovely time of night to hear from you. If you tell me where you're calling from, I'll be right over.”

She almost laughed. He heard it in her voice. Get them laughing. That was the way into their heart, and into their bedroom.

“Ah... Yeah. Get your mind out of the gutter, Murph. I'm calling from the SRT offices. There's a crisis and we've been pulled in. Don wants a bunch of people in here now, as fast as possible. You're one of them.”

CHAPTER FOUR

10:20 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time
Fairfax County, Virginia
Suburbs of Washington, DC

“What do you think, baby?”

Luke Stone whispered the words. Probably no one could hear them but him.

He sat on the long white sofa in his new living room, holding his four-month-old baby boy, Gunner, in his lap. Gunner was a big, heavy baby. He wore a diaper and a blue T-shirt that said *World’s Best Baby*.

He had drifted off to sleep in Luke’s arms some time ago. His little tummy rose up and down, and he snored softly as he slept. Were babies supposed to snore? Luke didn’t know, but somehow the sound was comforting. More, it was beautiful.

Now Luke just held Gunner in the semi-darkness and gazed around the room, trying to make sense of the house.

The place was a gift from Becca’s parents, Audrey and Lance. That, all by itself, was hard to swallow. He could never afford this place on his government salary, which was a big upgrade from what he’d been making in the Army. Becca wasn’t working at all. The two of them together, even if Becca had been working, couldn’t afford this house. And that finally brought home to Luke just how much money Becca’s family really had.

He had known they were rich. But Luke had grown up without money. He didn’t know what rich was. He and Becca had been living at her family’s cabin, which fronted Chesapeake Bay on the Eastern Shore. To Luke, that one-hundred-year-old cabin, even though it was an hour-and-a-half commute from his job, had been a spectacular living arrangement. Luke was accustomed to sleeping on the hard ground, or not sleeping at all.

But this place?

He glanced around the house. It was a modern home, with floor to ceiling windows, like something out of an architectural magazine. It was like a glass box. When winter came, when it snowed, he could picture how it might be like one of those old snow globes people used to have when he was a kid. He pictured this coming Christmastime—just sitting in this stunning sunken living room, the tree in the corner, the fireplace lit, the snow coming down all around.

And that was just the living room. Never mind the oversized country kitchen with the island in the middle and the giant double-door refrigerator, freezer on the bottom. Never mind the master bed and master bath. Never mind the rest of the place. And never mind that this house was about a twelve-minute drive from the office.

From Luke’s spot on the sofa, he could see out the big south- and west-facing windows. The house sat up on a little rolling hillock of grass. The height extended his vantage point. The house was in a quiet neighborhood of other large houses, set back from the street. There was no parking on the street. In this neighborhood, people parked in their own driveways or garages.

They hadn’t met many of their neighbors yet, but Luke imagined they were lawyers, maybe doctors, maybe people with high-level jobs at corporations. He had mixed feelings about it. Not the people, but the place.

For one, he didn’t trust Audrey and Lance.

Becca’s parents had never liked him. They had always made this clear. Even after Gunner was born, they were grudging at best about letting him and Becca use the cabin. Audrey especially was a master at the snide comment and the undermining maneuver.

He pictured her in his mind—there was something about her that reminded him of a crow. 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. And she tended to hover nearby, like a harbinger of bad tidings.

But then the Special Response Team had taken on a couple of high-profile operations, and Audrey and Lance had met the legendary Don Morris, pioneer of special operations and the director of the SRT.

Suddenly, they felt that he and Becca needed a better house, and one closer to his work. And just like that, here they were.

He shook his head at the speed of it. He had been known in his career for his sudden reflexes and his fast response time, but this house purchase had happened so fast it nearly made his head spin off his neck.

Two people who had disliked him intensely for years had now just presented him with the greatest gift anyone had ever given him.

He stopped and listened to the quiet. He took a deep breath, almost in tandem with his young son. No. That was wrong. This little boy was the greatest gift he had ever been given. The house was nothing compared to this.

On the table in front of him, his telephone lit up. He stared at it, the blue light throwing crazy shadows in the semi-darkness. The phone was silent because the ringer was off. He hadn't wanted to disturb the baby, or the baby's mama, who was getting some well-deserved and much needed sleep in the bedroom.

He glanced at the time—after ten o'clock. That could only mean a small handful of things. Either an old military buddy was drunk dialing, it was a wrong number, or... He let the phone go until it stopped and went dark.

A moment later, it started up again.

He sighed and glanced at the number. Of course it was work.

He picked up the phone.

"H'lo?"

He said it in the quietest, *I'm asleep why are you bothering me* voice he could muster.

A female voice spoke. Trudy Wellington. He pictured her—young, beautiful, smart, with brown hair cascading over her shoulders.

"Luke?"

"Yes."

She was all business. The thing that had almost happened between them, and which they never talked about, seemed to be dwindling in her rearview mirror. That was probably for the best.

"Luke, we have a crisis. Don is rounding up the usual suspects. I'm already here. Swann, Murphy, and Ed Newsam are on their way."

"Now?" He asked the question even though he knew the answer.

"Yes. Now."

"Can it wait?" Luke said.

"Not really."

"Hmmm."

"And Luke? Bring a bug-out bag."

He rolled his eyes. The job and family life were having trouble meshing. Not for the first time, he wondered if what he did for a living was not compatible with the happy home he and Becca were trying to build for themselves.

"Where are we going?" he said.

"Classified. You'll find out at the briefing."

He nodded. "Okay."

He hung up the phone and took a deep breath.

He hoisted the baby in his arms, stood, and padded down the hall to the master bedroom. It was dark, but he could see well enough. Becca was dozing in the big king-sized bed. He reached down and placed the baby next to her, just touching her skin. In her half-sleep, she made a little sound of pleasure. She put a hand softly on the baby.

He stared down at the two of them for a bit. Mom and baby. A wave of love so intense he would never be able to describe it washed over him. He could barely grasp it himself, never mind express it to another person. It was beyond words.

They were his life.

But he also had to go.

CHAPTER FIVE

11:05 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time
Headquarters of the Special Response Team
McLean, Virginia

“Why are we here?” Kevin Murphy said.

He was dressed in business casual, as though he had just come from a mixer of young professionals.

Mark Swann, dressed in anything but business attire, smirked. He wore a black Ramones T-shirt and ripped jeans. His hair was in a ponytail.

“In the existential sense?” he said.

Murphy shook his head. “No. In the sense of why are we all in this room together in the middle of the night?”

The conference room, what Don Morris sometimes optimistically referred to as the Command Center, was a long rectangular table with a speakerphone device mounted in the center. There were data ports where people could plug in their laptops, spaced every few feet. There were two large video monitors on the wall.

The room was somewhat small, and Luke had been to meetings in here with as many as twenty people. Twenty people made the room look like a crowded train car in the Tokyo subway at rush hour.

“Okay, people,” Don Morris said. Don wore a tight-fitting dress shirt, sleeves halfway up his forearms. He had a cup of coffee in a thick paper cup in front of him. His white hair was cropped very close to his head—as if he’d just gone to the barber this afternoon. His body language was relaxed, but his eyes were as hard as steel.

“Thanks for coming in, and so quickly. But let’s shut up with the banter now, if you don’t mind.”

Around the room, people murmured their assent. Besides Don Morris, Swann, Murphy, and Luke, Ed Newsam was here, slouched low in his chair, wearing a black long-sleeved shirt that hugged his muscular upper body. He wore jeans and yellow Timberland work boots, with the shoelaces untied. He looked like this meeting had awakened him from a deep sleep.

Also here was Trudy Wellington. She was in a blouse and dress pants, as though she had never gone home after work. Her red glasses were pushed up onto her head. She seemed alert, also drinking coffee, and she had already begun tapping information into the laptop in front of her. Whatever was going on, she had been privy to it first.

At the far end of the table, near the video screens, was a tall and thin four-star general, in impeccable dress greens. His gray hair was trimmed to the scalp. His face was devoid of whiskers, as if he had just shaved before he walked in here. Despite the lateness of the hour, the guy looked fresh and ready to go another twenty-four, or forty-eight, or however long it took.

Luke had met him once before, but even if he hadn’t, he already knew the man in his bones. When he woke each morning, he made his bed before doing anything else—that was the first achievement of the day, and set the table for more. Before the sun peeked into the sky, the guy had probably already run ten miles and scarfed down a meal of cold gruel and high octane coffee. He had West Point go-getter written all over him.

Seated at the table near him was a colonel with a laptop in front of him, as well as a stack of paper. The colonel hadn’t looked up from the computer yet.

“Folks,” Don Morris said. “I’d like to introduce you to General Richard Stark of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and his aide, Colonel Pat Wiggins.”

Don looked at the general.

“Dick, the brain trust of the Special Response Team is at your disposal.”

“Such as it is,” Mark Swann said.

Don Morris scowled at Swann, a look one might give a teenage son with a big mouth. But he said nothing.

“Gentlemen,” Stark said, then bowed to Trudy. “And lady. I’ll get right to the point. There is an unfolding hostage crisis in the Alaskan Arctic, and the President of the United States has authorized a rescue. He has stipulated that the rescue involve the oversight and participation of a civilian agency. That’s where you come in.

“When talking with the President, it occurred to me that you give us the best of the both worlds—the Special Response Team is a civilian law enforcement agency, but is loaded with former military special operators. The FBI Director has green-lighted your participation, and Don was kind enough to call this meeting at short notice.”

He looked at the group. “With me so far?”

There was a general murmur of agreement.

The colonel was controlling the video screen from his laptop. A map of northern Alaska appeared, along with a sliver of the Arctic Ocean. A small dot out at sea was circled in red.

“This is a rapidly developing situation. What I can tell you is that an hour and a half ago, an oil rig in the Arctic Ocean was attacked and overwhelmed by a group of heavily armed men. There were approximately ninety men stationed on that rig and the artificial island that surrounds it, and an unknown number of those men were killed in the initial attack. A number were also taken hostage, though we do not know how many.”

“Who attacked the rig?” Luke said.

The general shook his head. “We don’t know. They have refused our attempts at contact, though they have sent video of oil workers gathered in a room and held at gunpoint by men in black masks. Audio from monitoring equipment at the rig has been made available to us by the company that owns the rig. The sound is poor quality, but it does pick up some voices. Besides the English spoken by the oil workers, there appear to be men speaking an Eastern European, possibly Slavic language, though we have no real evidence to back that up.”

On the screen, the map changed to aerial imagery of the rig and the camp surrounding it. The oil rig, probably thirty or forty stories high, dominated the first image. Below the rig were numerous Quonset hut–type buildings, as well as walkways between them. Surrounding the tiny compound was a vast, icy sea.

A blown-up image appeared. It showed the compound and the buildings in close detail. There were no people standing upright anywhere. There were at least a dozen bodies lying on the ground, some with halos of blood around them.

Another image appeared. Stretched across the ground was a large white banner with hand-painted black lettering.

AMERICA LIARS + HYPOCRITES.

“That’s quite a message,” Swann said.

“Admittedly, we have very little to go on. The banner you see certainly suggests an attack by foreign nationals. All of our drone footage shows us a compound devoid of personnel. The attackers appear to have taken all of the surviving workers indoors. Whether that is inside these buildings you see, or aboard the rig itself, we don’t know.”

For a moment, the screen went blank.

“We have a plan to take back the facility, neutralize the terrorists, and rescue however many civilian personnel are still alive. The plan involves an infiltration and assault, primarily using active-service Navy SEALs, but also yourselves. To carry out that plan, we need to get you to the Alaskan Arctic. Which means we need to hurry.”

Ed Newsam raised a hand. “When do you intend to carry out this plan?”

The general nodded. “Tonight. Before first light. Every experience we’ve had with terrorists over the years suggests that allowing a situation to become protracted is a recipe for failure, and even disaster. The public becomes involved, as do the politicians. The media puts it on the twenty-four-hour television doom loop. Second-guessing the government response becomes a national pastime. A long standoff excites and inspires terrorist fellow travelers in other places. Images of blindfolded hostages held at gunpoint...”

He shook his head.

“Let’s not explore that path. The group in question attacked without warning, and so will we. Hitting them before sunrise, under cover of darkness just hours after their own assault, allows us to take back the initiative. A successful incursion, and I have every confidence in its success, will demonstrate to other terror groups that we mean business.”

Stark must have seen the stares coming from the SRT personnel.

“We believe the Special Response Team is the right civilian agency to participate in this operation. If you don’t agree...” He let that hang there.

Luke had to admit he didn’t like where this was going. He had just left his wife and baby son in bed. Now he was supposed to go to the Arctic?

“The Alaskan Arctic has to be four thousand miles from here,” Swann said. “How are we supposed to get our people there before first light?”

Stark nodded again. “Closer to forty-five hundred miles. You’re right, it’s a long way. But we’re four hours ahead of them. At the oil rig, it’s not quite seven thirty p.m. We’ll take advantage of the time difference.”

He paused.

“And we have the technology to get you there faster than you might imagine.”

* * *

“What is he not telling us?” Luke said.

He was sitting in Don’s office, across the wide expanse of desk from the man himself.

Don shrugged. “You know they always hold something back. There’s something classified about the oil rig, perhaps. Or they know more about the perpetrators than they’re letting on. Could be anything.”

“Why us?” Luke said.

“You heard the man,” Don said. “They need civilian participation and oversight. That comes straight from the President. The man is a long-time liberal. He thinks the military is a big scary bogeyman. Little does he know that the civilian agencies are all packed with ex-military.”

“But look at how small we are,” Luke said. “No offense, Don. But NSA is a civilian agency. The FBI is, too. Both have a much longer reach than we do.”

“Luke, we *are* the FBI.”

Luke nodded. “Yes, but the Bureau proper has field offices close to the action out there. Instead, they want to fly us across the continent.”

Don stared at Luke for a long moment. For the first time, it really hit Luke how ambitious Don was. The President wanted the SRT for this gig. But Don wanted it just as badly, if not more so. These missions were feathers in Don’s cap. Don Morris had put together a team of world-beaters, and he wanted the world to know it.

“As you know,” Don said, “the field offices are full of field agents. Investigators and police officers, basically. We are special operations. That’s what we’re designed for, and that’s what we do. We are fast and light, we hit hard, and we’ve earned a reputation, not only for success in difficult circumstances, but also for total discretion.”

Luke and Don looked across the vast desk at one another.

Don shook his head. “Are you having cold feet, son? It’s okay if you are. You don’t have to prove anything to anyone, least of all me. But at this moment, your team is out there gearing up.”

Luke shrugged. “I’m already packed.”

Don’s broad smile suddenly appeared. “Good. I’m sure you’ll all do fine, and you’ll be back here for breakfast.”

* * *

“Let’s go, man,” Ed Newsam said. “This mission ain’t gonna happen by itself.”

Ed was at Luke’s door. He stood there, shouldering a heavy pack. He did not look gung-ho. He did not look excited. If Luke could use one word to describe how Ed looked, he would say it was *resigned*.

Luke sat at his desk staring at the telephone.

“Chopper’s on the pad.”

Luke nodded. “Gotcha. I’ll be right there.”

They were about to leave. Meanwhile, Luke was suffering from an ailment he called thousand-pound telephone syndrome. He was physically unable to pick up the receiver and make a call.

“Dammit,” he whispered under his breath.

He had checked and rechecked his bags. He had his standard gear for an overnight trip. He had his Glock nine-millimeter, in its leather shoulder holster. He had a few extra magazines loaded for the Glock.

A garment bag with two days of clothing changes was draped over the desk. A small bug-out bag packed with travel-size toiletries, a stack of energy bars, and half a dozen Dexedrine pills sat next to the garment bag.

The Dexies were amphetamines—speed. They were practically in the instruction manual for special operators. They would keep you awake and alert for hours on end. Ed sometimes called them “the quicker picker-uppers.”

These were generic supplies, but there was no sense trying to get more specific. They were going to the Arctic, the operation was going to require specialized gear, and that gear would be provided when they landed. Trudy had already sent everyone’s measurements on ahead.

So now he stared at the phone.

He had left the house with barely a word of explanation to her. Of course, she had been asleep. But that didn’t change anything.

And the note on the dining room table didn’t explain anything.

Got called in for a late meeting. May need to pull an all-nighter. Luv you, L

An “all-nighter.” That was rich. It sounded like a college kid cramming for the final exam. He had gotten into the habit of lying to her about the job, and it was becoming a hard habit to break.

What good would it do to tell the truth? He could call her right now, wake her out of a sound sleep, wake the baby and get him to start crying, all to tell her what?

“Hi, honey, I’m heading up to the Arctic Circle to take out some terrorists who attacked an oil rig. There are dead bodies all over the ground. Yeah, looks like I could be walking into another bloodbath. Actually, I might never see you again. Okay, sleep tight. Give Gunner a kiss for me.”

No. Better to just take his chances, do the operation, and trust that between the Navy SEALs and the SRT, they had the best people to get the job done. Call her in the morning, after it was over. If all went well and everyone was in one piece, tell her they had to fly out to Chicago to interview a witness. Keep the fiction rolling along that working for the SRT was mostly some kind of detective job, marred by the occasional outburst of violence.

Okay. That’s what he would do.

“You ready?” a voice said. “Everybody else is boarding the chopper.”

Luke looked up. Mark Swann was standing in the doorway. It was always a little startling to see Swann. With his ponytail, his aviator glasses, the wisp of scraggly beard on his chin, and the rock-n-roll T-shirts he always seemed to wear... he could practically be wearing a sign around his neck: NOT MILITARY.

Luke nodded. "Yeah. I'm ready."

Swann was smiling. No, cancel that. He was positively beaming, like a kid at Christmas. It was an odd thing to be doing when faced with a tedious flight across North America, followed by a nerve-wracking shoot 'em up against an unknown enemy.

"I just found out how they're getting us there," Swann said. "You won't believe it. Absolutely incredible."

"I didn't realize you were even coming on this trip," Luke said.

If anything, Swann's smile grew even broader.

"I am now."

CHAPTER SIX

September 5, 2005

8:30 a.m. Moscow Daylight Time (12:30 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time)

The “Aquarium”

Headquarters of the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU)

Khodynka Airfield

Moscow, Russia

“What news from our friend?” the man named Marmilov said.

He sat at his desk in a windowless basement office, smoking a cigarette. A ceramic ashtray was on the green steel desk in front of him. Although it was early in the morning, there were already five spent cigarette butts in the ashtray. A cup of coffee (with a splash of whiskey—Jameson, imported from Ireland) was also on the desk.

In the morning, the man smoked and drank black coffee. It was how he started his day. He wore a dark suit and his thinning hair was swooped over the top of his head, hardened and held in place by hairspray. Everything about the man was harsh angles and jutting bones. He seemed almost like a scarecrow. But his eyes were sharp and aware.

He had been around a long time, and had seen many things. He had survived the purges of the 1980s, and when the change came, in the 1990s, he had survived that as well. The GRU itself had come through largely intact, unlike its poor little sister, the KGB. The KGB had been broken apart and scattered to the winds.

The GRU was as large and as powerful as it ever was, perhaps more so. And Oleg Marmilov, fifty-eight years old, had played an integral role in it for a long time. The GRU was an octopus, the largest Russian intelligence agency, with its tentacles in special operations, spy networks around the globe, communications interception, political assassinations, destabilizing governments, drug trafficking, misinformation, psychological warfare, and false flag operations, not to mention the deployment of 25,000 elite Spetsnaz troops.

Marmilov was an octopus living inside the octopus. His tentacles were in so many places, sometimes a subordinate would come to him with a report, and he would draw a blank for a moment before thinking:

“Oh yes. *That thing*. How is it going?”

But some of his activities were right on the top of his mind.

Bolted to the top of his desk was a television monitor. To an American of the right age, the monitor would seem similar to the coin-operated TVs that once graced intercity bus stations across the country.

On the screen, live footage from security cameras cycled through. The man assumed there was a delay in the feed, possibly as much as half a minute. Otherwise, the footage was up to the moment.

It was dark in the footage, night had fallen, but Marmilov could see well enough. An iron stairwell climbing the side of an oil rig. A cluster of battered, corrugated aluminum huts on a cold and barren plot of land. A tiny port facility on a frozen sea, with a small, rugged ice cutter ship docked. There didn't appear to be any people in the footage.

Marmilov looked up at the man standing in front of his desk.

“Well? Any news?”

The visitor was a younger man, who, while wearing a drab, ill-fitting civilian business suit, also seemed to stand at military attention. He stared at something in a far imaginary distance, instead of at the man sitting just a few feet before him.

“Yes, sir. Our contact has relayed the message that a group of commandos has been chosen. Most of them are already amassing at the airfield in Deadhorse, Alaska. Several more, who represent the civilian oversight of the project, are en route by supersonic airplane and will arrive within the next few hours.”

The man paused. “From then, it will likely be a very short time before the assault force is deployed.”

“How reliable is this intelligence?” Marmilov said.

The man shrugged. “It comes from a secret meeting held at the White House itself. The meeting could of course be a ruse, but we don’t think so. The President was in attendance, as were members of the military command.”

“Do we know the method of attack?”

The man nodded. “We believe they will deploy frogmen who will swim to the artificial island, emerge from beneath the ice, and mount the attack.”

Marmilov thought about that. “The water must be quite cold.”

The man nodded. “Yes.”

“It sounds like quite a difficult assignment.”

Now the young man showed the ghost of a smile. “The frogmen will be wearing cumbersome underwater gear designed to shield them from the cold, and our intelligence suggests they will carry their weapons in sealed packages. They are hoping for the element of surprise, a sneak attack by highly trained elite divers. The weather is forecast to be very poor, and flying will become difficult. As far as we understand, no simultaneous attack by sea or by air is planned.”

“Can our friends repulse them?” Marmilov said.

“Given advance warning of their approach, and knowing the method of attack, it’s possible that our friends can be waiting for them, and kill them all. After that...”

The man shrugged. “Of course the Americans will bring the hammer down. But that won’t be our concern.”

Oleg Marmilov returned the young man’s smile. He took another deep drag on his cigarette.

“Exceptional,” he said. “Keep me informed of developments.”

“Of course.”

Marmilov gestured at the monitor on his desk. “And naturally, I am a great fan of sport. When the action starts, I will watch every moment of it on the TV.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

12:45 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time (8:45 p.m. Alaska Daylight Time, September 4)
The skies above the Upper Peninsula
Michigan

The experimental airplane rocketed across the black sky.

Luke had never been in a plane quite like it. Everything about it was unusual. As the SRT team had approached it on the tarmac, the lights had been out. Not just the lights on the plane itself, but any nearby runway or airport lights. The plane was just sitting there in something close to total darkness.

Its airframe had an odd shape. It was very narrow, with a drooped nose like a bird dipping its beak into the water. The rear stabilizers had an odd triangular shape that Luke hadn't seen before, and couldn't quite make out.

Inside, the cabin layout was also unusual. Instead of being set up like a typical corporate or Pentagon jet, or even the SRT jet, with bucket-type seats and pull-out tables, the thing was configured like someone's living room.

There was a long sectional couch along one wall, its high back blocking where there would normally be small oval windows. There were two recliners facing it, and between the couch and the chairs, a heavy wooden table, like a coffee table, bolted to the floor. Even stranger, directly across from the sofa was a large flat-panel television, blocking where the other row of windows should be.

Stranger than that, from where Luke was sitting on the couch, to his left was a thick glass partition. A glass door was carved into the middle of it. On the other side of the partition was another passenger cabin, this one with seating more typical of a small passenger jet. And strangest of all, two men were seated inside the cabin, discussing something and looking at the screen of a laptop.

The glass partition was apparently soundproof, because the men seemed to be speaking normally, and Luke couldn't hear anything they were saying. The men were both crew-cutted and of military bearing, one wearing a jacket and tie, and one wearing a T-shirt and jeans. The man in the T-shirt was big and well-muscled.

"It's an SST," Swann said. He was sitting on the couch with Luke, just on the other side of Trudy Wellington, who sat between them, poring over documents on her laptop. The plane's very existence seemed to excite Swann in a way that Luke didn't quite understand.

"Supersonic, but not a fighter plane. A passenger jet. Since the French gave up on the Concorde and the Russians gave up on the Tupolev, no one on Earth will even acknowledge working on supersonic passenger jets."

"I guess someone's been working on this one," Luke said.

Murphy, sitting in one of the recliners, gestured with his head at the glass partition.

"I'm wondering who the monkeys are behind door number three."

Big Ed Newsam, slouched like a large mountain in the other recliner, nodded slowly. "You and me both, man."

"Never mind about that," Swann said. He pointed at the TV screen across from the couch. The screen was currently showing an image of an airplane, skirting the northern border of the United States above the state of Michigan. Data along the bottom showed altitude, equivalent groundspeed, and time to destination.

"Look at those numbers. Altitude 58,000 feet. Groundspeed 1,554 miles per hour, roughly Mach 2, twice the speed of sound. We're in the air a little more than thirty minutes, and we've got only two and a half more hours to go. Absolutely mind-blowing for a jet this size, which I'd guess is about the same profile as a typical Gulfstream. Can you imagine the thrust this thing must put out to overcome the drag? I didn't even hear a sonic boom."

He stopped for a second and looked around.

“Did you hear anything?”

Nobody answered him. Everyone else seemed to have their minds on the destination, the mission, and the mysterious nature of the two men in the other room. How they were getting to the mission was beside the point. To Luke, the plane was just another big boy toy, probably overpriced.

But Swann loved his toys. “Notice something about our flight path. We’re on our way to the Alaskan Arctic, and by far the most efficient way to get there is by crossing into Canada and moving diagonally north and west across their heartland. But we hug the border instead. Why?”

“Because we like inefficiency?” Ed Newsam said, and smiled.

Swann didn’t even catch the joke. He shook his head. “No. Because if we cross into Canada, we have to explain to them what this thing is that’s moving twice the speed of sound above their airspace. They might be one of our closest allies, but we don’t want to tell them about this plane. That tells me it’s classified.”

“As a practical matter,” Trudy said, without glancing up from her computer, “we’ll have to cross into Canada at some point. Alaska isn’t attached to the rest of the United States.”

Swann stared at Trudy.

“Ouch,” Ed said. “Geography lesson. That had to hurt.”

“Can we talk about something else?” Murphy said. “Please?”

Luke looked at Trudy Wellington, sitting next to him. She was curled up on the sofa in a customary pose for her, legs curled under her. She could be sitting on her couch at home, eating popcorn and about to watch a movie. Her curly hair was hanging down, and her red glasses were at the end of her nose. She was scrolling through a screen.

“Trudy?” Luke said.

She glanced up. “Yes?”

“What are we doing here?”

She stared at him. Her owl eyes went wide in surprise.

“Best guess,” he said. “Who are the terrorists, what do they want, why did they hit an oil rig, and why now?”

“Is that going to help you?” she said. “I mean, with the mission?”

Luke shrugged. “It could. We seem to be in the dark about everything, and no one seems interested in enlightening us even a little bit.”

“Or talking to us, for that matter,” Murphy said. He was still staring at the men on the other side of the glass.

“Okay,” Trudy said. “I’ll give you the easy part first. Why hit an oil rig and why now. Then I’ll do a very hazy guess about who they are and what they want.”

Luke nodded. “We’re all ears.”

“I’m going to assume no prior knowledge,” Trudy said.

Ed Newsam was slouched so low in his chair he looked like he might slide off onto the floor. “That’s probably the safest assumption I’ve heard all day.”

Trudy smiled. “The Arctic Ocean is melting,” she said. “People, countries, the media, large corporations, they’re all debating the long-term effects of global warming, or whether it even exists. The consensus among the vast majority of scientists is that it’s happening. No one has to agree with them. But what can’t be denied is that the polar ice caps, which have largely been frozen since the beginning of recorded human history, are now melting, they’re doing it quickly, and at an accelerating pace.”

“Scary,” Mark Swann said. “The end of the world as we know it.”

“And I feel fine,” Murphy added.

Trudy shrugged. “Let’s not go there. Let’s just stick with what we know. And what we know is that each year, the Arctic Ocean has less ice on top of it than the year before. Soon, possibly within

our lifetimes, it's not going to freeze over anymore at all. Already, the ice cover is thinner, and covers less of an area, for less of the year, than at any time we know of.”

“And this means...” Luke said.

“It means the Arctic is opening up. Shipping lanes that never existed before are going to open for traffic. On this side of the world, we're talking about the Northwest Passage that runs between Canadian islands, and which Canada considers inside its sovereign territory. On the other side of the Arctic, we're talking about the Northeast Passage, which hugs the northern coastline of Russia, and which Russia considers its territorial waters. In particular, when the ice opens for good, the Russian Northeast Passage will become the shortest and fastest shipping route between factories in Asia and consumer markets in Europe.”

“And if the Russians control it...” Murphy began.

Trudy nodded. “Correct. They will control much of the world's trade. They can tax it, charge tariffs, and Russian ports that have been mostly frozen outposts for hundreds of years may suddenly become bustling ports of call.”

“And if they so desired, they could...”

Trudy was still nodding. “Yes. They could shut it down. Meanwhile, the Northwest Passage is a little dicey. If you look at a map, it really is part of Canada. But the United States wants to lay claim to it, potentially setting up strife between two neighboring countries, long-term allies, and trading partners.”

“So you think the Russians...” Ed began.

Trudy held up a hand. “But that's not all. There are eight countries that ring the Arctic Ocean. The United States, Canada, and Russia of course, but also Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Finland, and Denmark. Denmark's claim is from owning the territory of Greenland. And the much bigger issue here is that up to one-third of the world's untapped oil and natural gas reserves are thought to be under the ice in the Arctic.”

They all watched her.

“Everybody wants those fossil fuels. Countries that have no valid land claims in the Arctic, like Britain and China, are also getting in on the action, seeking to build alliances and obtain drilling rights. China has started referring to itself as a near-Arctic country. Britain has begun talking a lot about their Arctic partners.”

“That doesn't explain who did it,” Luke said.

Trudy shook her head and her curls bounced the slightest bit. “No. As I said, I was giving you the easy part first. Why attack an oil rig in the Arctic, and why now. The answer is the race is on for Arctic natural resources, and it's going to be a death race. People are going to get killed, in the same way they've been getting killed since oil was discovered in the Middle East in the early part of the twentieth century. The Arctic is an emerging flashpoint for competition among the major powers, and as a result, for violence and even war. It's coming.”

Luke smiled. Trudy always seemed to have the answers, but sometimes she needed to be drawn out a little bit to share her conclusions.

“So... who was it?”

But she wasn't ready to play that game. She just shook her head again.

“Impossible to say with any certainty. There are more actors than just those countries involved. There are indigenous groups spread throughout the Arctic, such as Eskimos, Aleut, Inuit, and many others. All of these groups are worried about the new interest in the Arctic. They're concerned about losing their lands, their cultures, and their traditional hunting rights. They're concerned about oil spills and other environmental disasters. In general, indigenous peoples do not have a history of good experiences with powerful countries and large corporations. They're very leery of what's coming, and some of the groups are already radicalized.”

“But are they big enough, and well-trained...”

“Of course not,” Trudy said. “Not on their own. But we can’t assume anyone is acting by themselves. There are dozens of environmental groups, several of which are also radicalized. There are major corporations, especially oil companies, jockeying for position. There are Middle Eastern countries wondering if oil exploration in the Arctic is about to leave them in the lurch. And of course, there’s Russia and China.”

“The banner,” Luke said.

“Yes. The banner calls America hypocrites and liars. That doesn’t tell us much, but the simplicity and garbled syntax of it suggests that the people who made the banner are not native English speakers. Meanwhile, the apparent professionalism of the attack suggests at least a high level of training, including cold-weather training, and probably combat experience.”

Luke could see where she was headed with this.

“Most of the Arctic countries are either close allies of ours, like Canada, Norway, and Sweden, or have friendly to neutral relations with us, like Iceland, Denmark, and Finland. And I don’t think the Russians or Chinese would attack us directly, especially not after all the recent trouble. But would they fund and train a cat’s paw, a group that either feels disenfranchised by us, or expects they are about to become disenfranchised?”

She paused.

“Of course they would,” Swann said.

Trudy nodded. “They might just.”

“So a new, radical anti-American group, kind of like an Al Qaeda of the Arctic?”

Trudy shrugged. “I can’t say that for sure. Could be an armed and trained indigenous group or groups. Could be white supremacists from the old Viking world, who are hoping to see the glory of the Scandinavian countries restored. Heck, it could be Quebec separatists. I don’t know.”

To Luke’s left, the glass door to the other passenger cabin slid open. The two men came in. “Good guesses, Ms. Wellington,” the older of the two men said. “Probably wrong, but as scenario spinning goes, pretty good nonetheless.”

* * *

The younger guy wore jeans and a T-shirt. The jeans hugged his muscular legs. The T-shirt hugged his muscular chest. The shirt had two words across the front, very small, white on a black background.

GET HARD.

“Guys, I’m Captain Brooks Donaldson, of the United States Naval Special Warfare Development Group, sometimes called DEVGRU, often called SEAL Team Six.”

He was holding up a thick orange wetsuit, complete with hood, gloved hands, and boots. Odd for a Navy SEAL, he had just put down a soft drink can on the table. Luke stared at it. Dr. Peck’s ginger beer.

“I want to talk to you all a little bit about hypothermia. It’s important for us to think about. For all we know of freezing and its physiology, no one can predict exactly how quickly and in whom hypothermia will strike—and whether it will kill when it does. We do know that it’s more likely to kill men than women, and it’s more lethal to the thin and well-muscled—and that pretty well describes everyone in this room—than it is to people with a lot of body fat. It’s least forgiving to people who are ignorant about its effects. In other words, if you’re not prepared for it, and you don’t know what to do about it, it can easily kill you.”

Already, Luke didn’t like where this was going. Nobody had told him to expect anything about wetsuits or hypothermia or Navy SEALs who drank soda pop. The man, Donaldson, indicated the wetsuit in his hands.

“This suit is your first line of defense out there against hypothermia. The demonstration suit is orange, and your operation suits will be black, but don’t let that distract you. Just imagine this one as black. In orange or black, or purple or pink, or any color at all, these are state of the art, probably the best cold-water immersion suits in existence at the current time. It provides both flotation and hypothermia protection. Its features include lifting harness and buddy line, five-fingered insulated gloves for warmth and dexterity, inflatable head pillow, face shield and water-tight face seal, adjustable wrists and ankles, 5mm fire retardant neoprene, hailing whistle, light pocket, and non-slip thick-soled booties. But it’s a little bit of work to put on and take off in stormy conditions. And I’m going to show you how to do that.”

Everyone in the cabin was staring at him.

“Any questions before I begin?”

Murphy raised a hand.

“Yes, Agent...”

“Murphy.”

“Yes, Agent Murphy. Shoot.”

Murphy glanced at the ginger beer can on the table. He scowled, just a little bit. Murphy was an Irishman from the Bronx. It wasn’t clear to Luke what Murphy’s exact thoughts were about that ginger beer, but it sure seemed like he didn’t approve.

“What are we talking about here?”

Donaldson seemed confused. “What are we talking about?”

Murphy nodded. He gestured at the orange wetsuit. “Yeah. That. Why are you telling us about it? We’re not SEALs. We’re not really water people at all. Newsam, Stone, and I are all former Delta Force. Airborne assault. I was 75th Rangers before Delta, Stone was 75th Rangers, Newsam was...”

He paused and looked at Ed. Ed was slumped very low in his chair. Any lower, and he would ooze out onto the floor.

“82nd Airborne,” Ed said.

“Airborne,” Murphy said. “There’s that word again. You can show us that suit from now until we land, and all next week, but that’s not going to suddenly make us into divers.”

“I’ve done some diving,” Ed said.

Murphy stared at him. Luke wasn’t sure, but he didn’t think he’d ever seen someone stare at Ed that way. Murphy was a vehicle that didn’t have reverse.

“Thanks,” he said. “You diving wrecks in Aruba really helps my argument.”

Ed smiled and shrugged.

The SEAL nodded. “I get your point. But this is an underwater operation. We will drop into the water at a temporary camp being constructed right now on a floating ice sheet about a mile and a half from the oil rig. I thought you knew that.”

Luke shook his head. “This is the first we’re hearing of it.”

“There’s no way to go in there by boat,” Donaldson said. “We have to assume that our opponents will have all the approach points covered. They appear to have heavy weaponry available to them. Any boat slogging its way through the ice to that oil rig is going to get hit, and hit hard.”

“Can we come in from the sky?” Luke said.

Donaldson shook his head. “Even worse. They’re expecting a storm to pass through that area in the next few hours. You do not want to be falling from the sky during an Arctic storm, I promise you that. And even if things clear, then they have a clean shot at you as you come down. It’ll be like shooting ducks. There’s only one way in, and that’s to come out from under the ice and take them by surprise.”

He paused. “And we’re going to need all the surprise we can get. As much as we’re going in hard, we need to keep at least one of the attackers alive.”

“Why’s that?” Ed said.

Donaldson shrugged. “We need to know what these men wanted, what their plan was, and whether they acted alone. We want to know everything about them. Assuming they don’t leave us some kind of manifesto, and since no one has claimed responsibility for the attack so far, we have to assume the only way to get that information is to capture at least one of them, and preferably more than one.”

Now Luke really didn’t like it. They were going in under the ice, and when they came up, they were supposed to capture someone. What if they were jihadis who didn’t give up? What if they fought until their last breath?

The whole operation seemed hastily organized and poorly thought through. But of course it was. How could it not be when the plan was to take back the oil rig the same night it was attacked, and in fact, mere hours later?

They had no intel on the attackers. There had been no communication. They didn’t know where they were from, what they wanted, what weapons they had, or what other skills. They didn’t know what the attackers would do if they themselves were attacked. Would they kill all the hostages? Commit suicide by blowing up the rig? No one knew.

So instead, the whole group was going in blind. Worse, Luke’s team was supposed to be the civilian oversight, but they were participating in a mission that was underwater—ice water—something they had no training for. Precious few American soldiers had training for ice water immersion.

“This whole thing,” Murphy said, “strikes me as FUBAR.”

Luke wasn’t sure if he agreed completely. But he was sensitive to the fact that Murphy still probably thought Luke’s poor decisions had led to the deaths of their entire assault team in Afghanistan.

If Murphy, or Ed, or even Swann or Trudy decided they wanted out of this mission, it was fine with Luke. People had to make their own decisions—he couldn’t decide for them.

Suddenly, he wished he had talked to Becca before leaving on this trip. Now it was too late.

“We’ve got less than two hours until our ETA,” the older man said, glancing at his watch. He looked at Donaldson, who was still holding the thick orange bodysuit. Then he made a spinning motion with his hand, like the arms on a clock moving rapidly.

“I suggest you get this demonstration underway.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

9:15 a.m. Moscow Daylight Time (10:15 p.m. Alaska Daylight Time, September 4)

The “Aquarium”

Headquarters of the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU)

Khodynka Airfield

Moscow, Russia

Blue smoke rose toward the ceiling.

“There is a great deal of movement,” the latest visitor, a pot-bellied man in the uniform of the Interior Ministry, said. His voice belied a certain anxiety. It was nothing in the timbre of the voice. It didn’t tremble or crack. You had to have the right ears to hear it. The man was afraid.

“Yes,” Marmilov said. “Would you expect anything less from them?”

Although the office had no windows, the light had changed as the morning progressed. Marmilov’s swooping, hardened hair now resembled a type of dark plastic helmet. The overhead lights seemed so bright it was as if Marmilov and his guest were sitting in the desert at midday, the sun casting deep shadows into the fissures carved into the ancient stone of Marmilov’s face.

People sometimes wondered why a man with such influence chose to run his empire from this tomb, underneath this bleak, crumbling, run-down building well outside Central Moscow. Marmilov knew about this wonder because men, especially powerful men, or those aspiring to be powerful, often asked him this very question.

“Why not a corner office upstairs, Marmilov? Or a man like yourself, whose mandate far surpasses just the GRU, why not get yourself transferred to the Kremlin, with a wide view of Red Square and the opportunity to contemplate the deeds of our history, and the great men who have come before? Or perhaps just watch the pretty girls passing by? Or at the very least, a chance to see the sun?”

Marmilov would smile and say, “I do not like the sun.”

“And pretty girls?” his friendly tormentors might say.

To this Marmilov would shake his head. “I’m an old man. My wife is good enough for me.”

None of this was true. Marmilov’s wife lived fifty kilometers outside the city, in a country estate dating to before the Revolution. He barely ever saw her and neither she nor he had a problem with this arrangement. Instead of spending time with his wife, he stayed in a modern hotel suite at the Moscow Ritz Carlton, and he feasted on a steady diet of young women brought directly to his door. He ordered them up like room service.

He had heard that the girls, and for all he knew, their pimps as well, referred to him as Count Dracula. The nickname made him smile. He couldn’t have chosen a more fitting one himself.

The reason he stayed in the basement of this building, and didn’t move to the Kremlin, was because he didn’t want to see Red Square. Although he loved Russian culture more than anything, during his workday, he didn’t want his actions tainted by dreams of the past. And he especially didn’t want them handicapped by the unfortunate realities and half-measures of the present.

Marmilov’s focus was on the future. He was hell bent on it.

There was greatness in the future. There was glory in the future. The Russian future would surpass, and then dwarf, the pathetic disasters of the present, and perhaps even the victories of the past.

The future was coming, and he was its creator. He was its father, and also its midwife. To imagine it fully, he couldn’t allow himself to become distracted by conflicting messages and ideas. He needed a pure vision, and to achieve this, it was better to stare at a blank wall than out the window.

“No, I wouldn’t,” the fat man, Viktor Ulyanov, said. “But I believe there are some in our circle who are concerned by the activity.”

Marmilov shrugged. “Of course.”

There were always those who were more concerned about the skin on their own necks than on leading the people to a brighter day.

“And there are some who believe that when the President...”

The President!

Marmilov nearly laughed. The President was a speed bump on this country’s path to greatness. He was an impediment, and a minor one at that. Ever since this President had taken the reins from his alcoholic mentor Yelstin, Russia’s comedy of errors had worsened, not improved.

President of what? President of garbage!

The President needed to watch his back, as the saying went. Or he might soon find a knife protruding from it.

“Yes?” Marmilov said. “Concerned that when the President... what?”

“Finds out,” Ulyanov said.

Marmilov nodded and smiled. “Yes? Finds out... What will happen then?”

“There will be a purge,” Ulyanov said.

Marmilov squinted at Ulyanov in the haze of smoke. Could the man be joking? The jest wouldn’t be that Putin finding out would lead to a purge. If handled incorrectly, of course it would. The jest would be that at this late date in the preparations, Ulyanov and unnamed others would suddenly be thinking about such a thing.

“The President will find out after it is too late,” Marmilov declared simply. “The President himself will be the one who is purged.” Ulyanov, and any others he was speaking for, must know this. It had been the plan all along.

“There is concern that we are arranging a bloodbath,” Ulyanov said.

Marmilov blew smoke into the air. “My dear friend, we are not arranging anything. The bloodbath is already arranged. It was arranged years ago.”

Here in Marmilov’s lair, a laptop computer had sprouted like a mushroom next to the small TV screen on his desk. The TV still showed closed circuit footage from security cameras at the oil rig. The laptop showed transcripts of intercepted American communications translated into Russian.

The Americans were tightening a noose around the captured oil rig. A ring of temporary forward bases were appearing on floating ice within a few miles of the rig. Black operations teams were on high alert, preparing to strike. An experimental supersonic jet had received clearance, and landed at Deadhorse perhaps thirty minutes ago.

The Americans were set to strike.

“It was never the intention to hold the rig for very long,” Marmilov said. “This is why we used a proxy. We knew that the Americans would take back their property.”

“Yes,” Ulyanov said. “But the very same night?”

Marmilov shrugged. “Sooner than we expected, but the result will be the same. Their initial assault teams will meet with disaster. A bloodbath, as you say. The bigger, the better. Their hypocrisy regarding the environment will be exposed. And the world will have occasion to remember their war crimes of the not too distant past.”

“And how much of this will blow back to us?” Ulyanov said.

Marmilov took another deep inhale from his cigarette. It was like the breath of life itself. Yes, even here in Russia, even here in Marmilov’s inner sanctum, you could no longer hide from the facts. Cigarettes were bad for you. Vodka was bad for you. Whiskey was bad for you. But if so, why had God made them all so pleasurable?

He breathed out.

“It remains to be seen, of course. And it will depend on the media outlets covering it in each country. But the first dispatches will of course be in our favor. In general, I suspect that events will reflect rather poorly on the Americans, and then, a bit later, they will reflect poorly on our beloved President.”

He paused, and thought about it just a bit more. “The truth, and events will confirm this as they unfold, is the worse the disaster, the better our position.”

CHAPTER NINE

11:05 p.m. Alaska Daylight Time (September 4)
US Navy Ice Camp ReadyGo
Six Miles North of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge
Two Miles West of the Martin Frobisher Oil Platform
The Beaufort Sea
The Arctic Ocean

“No way, man. I can’t do this.”

The night was black. Outside the small modular dome, the wind howled. A frozen rain was falling out there. Visibility was deteriorating. In a little while, it was going to be near zero.

Luke was tired. He had taken a Dexie when the plane landed, and another a few moments ago, but neither one had kicked in.

The whole thing seemed like a mistake. They had traveled across the continent in a mad dash, at supersonic speeds, the mission was about to get underway, and now one of his men was backing out.

“This does not look right at all.”

It was Murphy talking. Of course it was.

Murphy did not want to go on this thrill ride.

The temporary ice camp, basically a dozen modular weatherproof domes on a floating ice sheet, had sprung up like so many mushrooms after a spring rain, apparently in the past two hours. It was one of several camps just like it, ringing the oil rig a safe distance away. The establishment of several camps out here on the periphery was in case the terrorists were watching. The activity was designed to make it hard for them to know where the counterattack was coming from.

Inside each of the domes, a rectangular hole had been cut through the ice, roughly the size and shape of a coffin. The ice here was two or three feet thick. A deck made of some wood-like synthetic material had been snapped into place around each hole. Diving lights had been affixed underwater, giving the hole an eerie blue color. New ice was already forming on the surface of the water.

Luke and Ed were in their neoprene dry suits, sitting in chairs near the hole. Brooks Donaldson was doing the same. Each man was being worked on by two assistants, men in US Navy fleece jackets, who busied themselves putting on the men’s equipment. Luke sat still as a man mounted his buoyancy compensator around his torso.

“How’s it feel?” the guy said.

“Bulky, to be honest.”

“Good. It is bulky.”

Luke’s hands weren’t in his gloves yet. They kept straying to the waterproof zipper across his chest. It was tight and hard to pull. As it should be. It was cold water down there. The zipper made a firm seal. But that meant it was going to be hard to open when they reached the destination.

“How am I supposed to open this thing?” he said.

“Adrenaline,” one of the assistants said. “When the shit starts flying, guys practically rip these suits off with their bare hands.”

Ed laughed. He looked at Luke. His eyes said it wasn’t that funny.

“Oh, man,” he said.

Murphy wasn’t laughing at all. He had come here with them from Deadhorse, but he never even began the process of suiting up.

“This is a death trap, Stone,” he said. “Just like last time.”

“You have nothing to prove to me,” Luke said. “Or anyone. No one has to go. It’s not like last time at all.”

Last time.

The time when they were both in Delta, back in eastern Afghanistan. Luke was the squad leader, and he had failed to overrule a glory hound lieutenant colonel who had led everyone—everyone except Luke and Murphy—to their deaths.

It was true. He could have aborted the mission. Those were his guys—they had no allegiance to the lieutenant colonel at all. If Luke had said stop, the mission would have stopped. But he would have risked a court martial for insubordination. He would have risked his entire military career—a career, oddly enough, which ended that night anyway.

Murphy looked at Ed. “Why are you going?”

Ed shrugged. “I like excitement.”

Murphy shook his head. “Look at that hole, man. It’s like someone dug your grave. Drop a coffin in there and you’re all set.”

Murphy wasn’t a coward. Luke knew that. Luke had been in at least a dozen firefights with him in Delta. He’d been in the shootout with him in Montreal, the one that saved Lawrence Keller’s life and brought President David Barrett’s killers to justice. He’d even had a fistfight with Murphy on top of John F. Kennedy’s eternal flame. Murphy was a tough customer.

But Murphy didn’t want to go. Luke could see he was scared. That might be because Murphy didn’t have the training for this. But it just might be because...

“Okay, guys, listen up!”

A burly man in a Navy fleece had come into the dome. For a split second, as he pushed through the heavy vinyl drapes that formed the airlock to the outside, the wind shrieked. The man’s face was bright red from the cold.

“As I understand it, you were all briefed in Deadhorse.”

The guy stopped. He looked at the empty seat where Murphy should be sitting. Then he looked at Murphy.

Murphy shook his head.

“I ain’t going.”

The guy shrugged. “Suit yourself. But this is a classified operation. If you’re not going, you’re not going to hear what I’m about to say.”

“I’m part of the civilian oversight team,” Murphy said.

The guy shook his head. “My orders are that two members of the civilian oversight team are at the command center in Deadhorse, and the rest of the team is suited up and going in with the SEALs.”

He raised his empty hands as if to say: *That’s all I got.*

“If you’re not at the command center and you’re not suited up, I don’t think you’re on the team.”

Murphy shook his head and sighed. “Ah, hell.”

He shrugged a heavy green parka over his thick coveralls.

“Murph,” Luke said. “Call Swann and Trudy. They’ll get you on a chopper.”

The new guy shook his head. “Choppers are grounded. The storm is coming in hard. We don’t want any accidents out there. The mission is bad enough.”

Murphy cursed under his breath and went out the way the man had just come in. The vinyl flapped and the wind shrieked again. The man watched Murphy leave, then looked at the three divers remaining.

“Okay,” he said. “This is an ice dive, at night, in a storm, in an overhead environment. I almost can’t think of a more challenging assignment. A year ago, we lost two experienced divers in a similar overhead ice environment, but it was a daytime training dive, there was no storm, and they were tethered to their home base. Okay? You should know that.”

“Were they swimming toward a fire?” Ed said.

The man just looked at him. He was in no mood for humor. Luke felt much the same way. There was nothing funny about this.

“As you probably realize, this is not a tethered dive. For much of the swim, the ice above your heads will be frozen solid. You do not want to make contact with it. You want to drop five meters below it, then maintain neutral buoyancy, and good level trim.”

There were four swimmer delivery vehicles at his feet. They were basically small, battery-powered electric torpedoes. Each diver would hold the handle on a vehicle with one hand, and the propulsion would carry him to the destination much faster, and with much less effort, than he could swim by himself.

The man picked one up in both arms. “Who here has used one of these?”

All three hands went up.

The man nodded. “Good. Normally, we would use Mark 8 submarine delivery vehicles, each carrying two to four men, but we couldn’t get them here in time, and the environment is a difficult one in which to deploy them. So we’re going with the handhelds. All right?”

He paused. But no one said a word. It was what it was. It didn’t matter if it was all right or not.

“Watch your compass. You are headed due east. You’ve got seventeen other guys...” He looked at Murphy’s empty chair again. “Sixteen other guys down there. Move with the flow of traffic. This group is the oversight group, so you are taking the rear. If you get confused, you get lost, the way back is due west. This camp is lit up like a Christmas tree down there, so just head for the lights.”

He held up a waterproof helmet, with visor and mask.

“Your head gear has two-way radio communications. Keep chatter to a minimum. Listen for the leaders up ahead. Visibility is going to be low. Your ears might save you. Your mouth might kill you.”

He stared hard at them all.

“No air support. No amphibious support. It could get hot. Keep an eye above you. When you notice open air, you are almost there. As you reach the overhead ice’s edge, turn off your headlamps. The idea, gentlemen, is to take them by surprise.”

The man held up an MP5 machine gun with a pre-mounted magazine. The gun was shrink-wrapped in thick, translucent plastic. He held up a three-pack of grenades, wrapped the same way.

“These things are out of the elements right now. This is one hundred percent waterproof packaging. When you get onto land, use your knives to cut it open.”

He smiled, then shook his head. “If you need to, use your knives to cut yourselves out of those suits, too.”

Luke glanced at Ed. Ed made a grimace, a funny facial expression that Luke had never seen him make before. He looked like a kid in elementary school when the teacher suggested the class should sing some Christmas carols.

The assistants behind Ed lifted his helmet, and then let it settle into place on his head. His breath fogged up the visor.

The assistants behind Luke were about to do the same.

“Any questions?” the man at the front said.

What are we doing? came to mind.

“Good. Then let’s hit it.”

* * *

Murphy was in a bad mood.

“I’m sick of this mission, Swann. I never liked Navy people, and now I really don’t like them.”

The communications here were okay, despite the storm. Swann had explained it to him, but Murphy hadn’t listened to the whole thing. Something about antennas built into these domes, plus satellite signals that penetrated fast moving cloud cover and precipitation, plus the unbreakable encryption Swann was known for...

Whatever.

He waited through the delay as the signal bounced around so the terrorists couldn't trace and listen in.

Murphy was fed up, irritated. He wasn't a diver. Stone and Newsam weren't divers either. The SEALs had been training with elite cold-water dive teams from Norway and Sweden for the past several years. Meanwhile, the unprepared SRT had been tacked onto this mission like some kind of garish hood ornament.

The way that big guy had looked at the empty chair... then at Murphy... then back at the chair. He was lucky they were both on the same team. Murphy would gladly remodel the guy's face with that chair.

"Yeah, I don't get it," Swann said finally. "We're pretty much window dressing back here at mission control. Nobody wants civilian oversight on this thing. They want a rubber stamp. They put us in our own office, away from everybody else, with a couple of computers and a coffee machine."

Murphy smiled. He could picture hardened SEAL and JSOC officers getting a load of the tall, gangly, long-haired, bespectacled computer freak Swann, and the tender young morsel Trudy Wellington, and thinking...

Nothing. The engines powering the typical military brain would grind to a halt. The sight of Swann alone was enough to pour sugar in the gas tank.

Put them in another room, somewhere out of sight.

"Those guys are gonna get themselves killed down there. I tried to tell Stone, but then some Navy chump kicked me out because the briefing was classified."

"Where are you now?" Swann said.

Murphy looked around. He was inside an empty dome, sitting on a chair that until recently must have held a Navy SEAL. The hole in the ice glowed blue. There was a command dome around here somewhere, and after the SEALs went in, the support staff must have gone there to watch the radar blips moving under the ice sheet.

"I'm in hell," Murphy said. "A frozen hell."

Trudy's voice came on. It was musical, like fingers lightly tinkling the piano keys.

"What do you want to do?" she said.

The answer to that was easy enough. Murphy wanted to disappear. He wanted to leave this Arctic wasteland, this pointless terrorist atrocity, whatever it was, go down to Grand Cayman, grab his \$2.5 million in cash, and just evaporate.

It was easier said than done, however. It was going to take planning, and time to engineer a disappearance like that. Time he didn't have. Don still wanted him to do six months in Leavenworth in exchange for an honorable discharge. Meanwhile, Wallace Speck was in custody, out of Murphy's reach, and could start saying unfortunate things at any moment.

The worst-case scenario was Murphy arriving in Leavenworth at the exact moment Speck mentioned his name.

Naturally, these were not things Murphy could talk about with Mark Swann and Trudy Wellington. But there were things he could talk about. Swann and Trudy could help him, not to get out of here, but to get further in.

Stone was wrong. Murphy had something to prove. He always had something to prove. Maybe not to Stone, and maybe not to that Cro-Magnon-skulled SEAL trainer, but to himself. This mission had rubbed him the wrong way. They had catapulted across the country at warp speed, for what? A half-baked operation that was FUBAR before it even got underway. Who dreamed this up, Wile E. Coyote? It was the Iran embassy rescue operation part two, with ice this time instead of sand.

That it seemed so poorly and hastily designed irritated Murphy. The fact that Stone went along with it irritated him more. The fact that Newsam went along with it piled the irritation sky high.

The fact that he, Murphy, couldn't bring himself to squeeze into that claustrophobic diving suit and climb through that grave hole in the ice added a little bit of humiliation to the mix. And the way that mindless drone looked at that chair...

Murphy's hands clenched and unclenched. He had come to terms long ago that part of why he had joined the military, and then Delta Force, was to do something constructive with his anger.

He knew his history. He had studied skilled, prolific killers from past wars. Audie Murphy in World War II. Bloody Bill Anderson during the American Civil War. Much of what drove those guys was rage.

In his mind's eye, he could see Audie Murphy at Colmar, standing alone atop a burning tank killer, mowing down dozens of Germans with a .50 caliber machine gun, while taking enemy fire the entire time.

Murphy, Newsam, and Stone had all taken Dexies earlier. Murphy had been tired and taken two. They were kicking in hard right now. He could feel his heart beginning to pound and his breathing pick up. Items inside this dome began to jump out at him in exquisite detail. He stifled an urge to stand up and do a bunch of jumping jacks.

He could kill someone right now, a lot of someones. And Cayman Island was far away, out of reach for the moment. Stone and Newsam had just sent themselves off with the underwater version of the Donner Party, a frozen suicide mission that could only end in disaster. And there were a bunch of terrorists out there who had already killed innocent people. The men holding that oil rig were bad guys, and no one was going to be bothered all that much if they died.

Murphy's mind began to race along. Swann and Trudy had been banished to their own office, and that was not necessarily a bad thing. They were both wizards with technology. If their communications weren't quarantined... a big if, but...

"Murph? What do you want to do?"

Murphy's eyes were shooting laser beams. His hands could throw flaming fireballs. He was unstoppable right now, the way he'd always been. All these years in combat, and he'd hardly ever seen a scratch. It was amazing how things came together.

"I want a boat," he said, without realizing he would say that. "I want weapons, I want drone support, and I want guidance across the storm to that oil rig."

He paused, his mind moving so fast now, pure images, that he could barely articulate the thoughts in words.

"I want to get in the game."

* * *

Luke jumped into the dark hole.

He dropped through a thin sheen of ice into a surreal underwater world. In an instant, the utilitarian, almost locker-room like environment of the dome was gone, replaced by *this*...

The sea was dark blue, disappearing into the black void below him. Above his head, the ice was a stark bluish white, with glowing rectangles of bright white light marking where the domes were, where the holes had been cut through the ice.

It was an alien place.

He could be an astronaut sailing weightless through deep space.

The most pressing thing he noticed was the cold. It wasn't the frigid cold of jumping into the ocean during late autumn. It didn't penetrate him. The dry suit was perfectly effective at keeping out the ice water that would kill him in moments.

In that sense, he wasn't cold. But he could feel the cold all around him, against the outside of the thick neoprene. His skin felt cold. It was if the cold was alive, and trying to burrow its way in to reach him. If it found a way, he would die down here. It was just that simple.

The only sound he could hear was his own breathing, loud in his ears. He noticed it was fast and shallow, and he concentrated on slowing it down and deepening it. Shallow breathing was the beginning of panic. Panic made you lose your head. In a place like this, it would make you lose your life.

Relax.

Luke put his cylindrical, torpedo-like delivery vehicle into gear, and surged gently forward.

Ahead, the group of divers moved, their headlamps lighting up the dark, casting eerie shadows. Luke half expected a giant shark, a prehistoric megalodon, to suddenly appear out of the darkness in front of them.

As they left the camp behind, he noticed the sea was moving, roiling, and the thick ice ceiling above their heads rippled and surged like land under the effect of a powerful earthquake. He and Ed moved side by side, traveling through the heavy currents, the diver delivery vehicles in their hands doing most of the work.

Luke felt himself being pushed around, he felt the water's attempts to turn him upside down, or send him reeling into Ed, but he rolled with it and pushed on.

He glanced at Ed. Ed had good trim, his body nearly horizontal, pitched forward just a touch, his head up. Luke could not see Ed's face beneath his helmet. The effect was alienating. Ed could be an imposter, or a machine.

Murmured voices started to come through the helmet radio. Luke could barely hear them, and couldn't make out what they said. The sound of his breathing apparatus was much louder than the radio. It was going to be hard to communicate.

He glanced back. The lights penetrating into the darkness from above were fading into the distance. They had already left the base camp behind.

Time entered a strange sort of fugue state. He glanced at his watch. He had set the mission timer just before he had dropped into the water. It had clocked a little over ten minutes since that moment.

They passed the edge of the ice sheet and the ceiling above them became dark, even black, punctuated with moving blocks of ice. Everything went dark now, lit only by their headlamps, and the headlamps ahead of them.

They were already close, and it had happened much faster than he expected.

Steady... steady.

He passed a small device, glowing green in the darkness. It was a metal box, perhaps ten meters to his right. At a guess, it was a meter tall and half a meter wide. There were controls of various kinds along one side. It was small enough and far away enough that he almost didn't see it at all.

It was a robot, what Luke knew as a remotely operated underwater vehicle, or ROV. It was attached to a thick yellow tether that disappeared into the black distance to the north. The tether was probably its primary electricity source. It probably also contained the wires that controlled it, and through which it sent data back to... where?

It had a large round eye, likely the lens of a camera.

Hadn't anyone else noticed this thing?

He tried to make a turn in that direction, but his momentum carried him past before he could get anywhere near it. Ed turned to look at him. Luke tried to point to the ROV, but it was well behind him now, and the suit and the equipment were too bulky.

They should go back, grab that thing, and at least inspect it. No one said anything about remote controlled cameras being deployed on this mission. It was sending images to someone.

They needed to cut that tether.

The murmuring inside his helmet grew louder now, but somehow he still couldn't make out the words. One by one, the headlamps ahead of him winked out, ushering in total darkness.

The first commandos were reaching the shoreline.

Luke glanced back one last time. The lights of the camp were far away, like stars in the night sky. If you got lost, you were supposed to make for those.

The green robot drifted, already far behind, watching him. At this distance, it could be a nothing more than a piece of green bioluminescence.

He reached up to turn off his headlamp. To his left, Ed's light winked out.
And that's when the screaming started.

* * *

Murphy hated everyone.

He realized the truth of it, he was raging, and he let that rage take him. It was a cold, sick world, and it deserved nothing less than his complete disdain. Disdain and hate. Hate guided him. Hate nourished and sustained him. Hate protected him from harm.

You couldn't kill officious military dinks that kicked you out of meetings and mocked you with their eyes. That was against the rules. That would land you in jail. But you *could* kill the enemy.

He steered the small Navy riverine boat through the storm. The boat was not built for Arctic waters, but it would do for one mad kamikaze run.

It was powered by two big 440 brake horsepower twin diesel engines. The hull was aluminum with plate armor. The collars were high-strength solid cell foam. The icy swells here were huge, crashing over the bow. He rammed the boat through chunks of ice, making vicious ripping sounds every time he did. The wind screamed in his ears.

He was in the cockpit, behind an armored wall. A smoke grenade launcher and a big .50 caliber chain gun were mounted up in the bow, ten feet in front of him. The chain gun would rip an armored vehicle to shreds, but he had no idea if it was going to work—it was freezing out here, and salty, frozen water was spraying all over the place. Moreover, this was not a one-man boat—he'd have to ditch the cockpit to get to the gun.

The boat's running lights were off, and he raced through absolute darkness. He wore night-vision goggles, but the green world they showed gave him nothing. Monster waves, icy black water, and white foam against black sky. He was running blind into the fury of the storm.

He slid down the face of a swell, the boat crashing into the water at the bottom as if he was on a log flume ride. Boats sometimes came down steep swells and dove straight underwater, never seen again. He knew that. He didn't want to think about it.

"Swann!" he screamed into the darkness. "Where am I?"

This thing was outfitted with radar, depth sounder, GPS, VHF tactical radio, and a host of other sensors and processing systems, but Murphy could barely steer the boat, never mind make sense of all the data coming in. Swann was supposedly tracking him and his relationship to the oil rig.

A voice crackled in his headset.

"Swann!"

"Go north!" he heard the voice shout. "North by northeast. You're being pushed to the south."

Murphy checked the compass. He could barely see it. He turned the boat's wheel to the left a bit, aligning himself more to the north. He had no idea where he was going. Something could loom up right in front of him, he could crash into it, and never see it.

He had no plan. No one knew he was coming, not even his own guys. Swann and Trudy were the only ones who knew he had taken this boat. They were the only ones who knew he had quickly shrugged into body armor, and loaded the boat with weapons and ammo. They were the only ones who knew where he was at all. He didn't even know where he was.

And he almost didn't care.

He didn't care whose side he was on.

He was empty, hollowed out.

He was the Dexedrine speaking, and the adrenaline.

There were terrorists out there, bad guys, and he was the good guy. He was the cowboy and they were the Indians. He was the cop, and they were the robbers. They were the FBI, and he was John Dillinger. They were Batman and he was the Joker. He was Superman and they were... whoever.

It didn't matter who was who and what was what.

They were the other team, and he was going to ram this boat right down their throats. If he lived, he lived. If he died, he died. This is how he had always gone into combat, and he had always come out the other side. Total confidence.

He didn't care about life very much, his or anyone else's.

He was dead inside.

This. These moments. This was when he was alive.

"East!" Swann shouted. "Straight east!"

Murphy gently steered to the right.

"How far?" he shouted.

"One minute!"

A strange shiver ran through Murphy. He was freezing. Hell, he was practically frozen solid. Even in coveralls, a big parka, thick gloves, a hat, and his face covered, he was frozen. His clothes were drenched. He was shivering, maybe from the cold, maybe from the newest surge of adrenaline.

This was the game. This was it.

Right here. It was coming.

He gave the boat even more throttle. He peered into the gloom. The storm surged around him. He steadied his legs and gripped the wheel as the boat got knocked from side to side.

Now, he could just see some lights out there. And he could hear something.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

It was shooting.

"Slow down!" Swann screamed. "You're about to hit land!"

In front of Murphy, bright lights suddenly appeared.

He was moving fast. Too fast. Swann was right. The shoreline was RIGHT THERE.

But the boat was designed for beach landings.

There was no way to stop anyway. Murphy gave the throttle everything and braced for impact.

* * *

A dead man floated in the water above Luke's head.

Luke stared at the man. He was a Navy SEAL in full gear, shot as he tried to climb out of the water. He drifted this way and that, turning over like seaweed in the surging currents. His arms and legs waved randomly, like overcooked spaghetti.

He sank toward Luke.

Blood drifted out from multiple holes in the man's body and stained the water near him red. Luke knew the bleeding wouldn't last long—now that the man's dry suit was cut open and he was exposed to the cold, he was going to freeze very quickly.

Blinding white light shone down from above. A moment ago, land-based klieg lights had come on, illuminating the water. The SEALs were exposed, and it didn't look like anyone had made it up out of the water yet.

Forget about getting the dry suits off. Forget about getting the weapons out of their weather-proof bags. Forget about getting oriented and taking the initiative. Forget about a surprise attack.

The enemy wasn't surprised at all. They were positioned up there, firing down into the water.

They knew the SEALs were coming. They had anticipated an underwater assault. The image flashed through Luke's mind again—that robot, with an embedded camera, glowing green in the dark water.

It was an ambush. It was going to be like shooting fish in a barrel.

Luke, twenty meters below the surface, saw bullets penetrate the icy water above his head, then lose momentum as they approached.

Inside Luke's headset, someone shrieked.

Ed was still beside him. He pushed Ed hard. Ed turned to look, and Luke pointed backwards and down. Deeper. They needed to retreat and go deeper. In a moment, those guys up top were going to notice the bullets weren't reaching their targets, and they were going to start firing heavier, more powerful guns.

"Abort!" someone else shouted in Luke's helmet. It was the first time a message came through clearly. "Abort!"

* * *

The boat slid up onto the island and across the icy ground.

The deceleration was instant. The sound of metal scraping rock was awful. Murphy was thrown like a rag doll. He flew over the control console and out of the cockpit. His legs caught on the console and flipped him upside down.

He went head over heels and landed on his back in the bow of the boat. His head banged off the aluminum flooring. BONG. His ears started ringing instantly. Tubular bells. His night-vision goggles were gone.

He gasped for air. The impact had knocked the wind out of him.

No time for that.

He groaned, pushed himself up and lurched like Frankenstein for the chain gun.

He stood, taking in a view of the battlefield.

At least twenty men were across from him, dressed in dark clothes and wearing black headgear and masks against the cold. Giant spotlights were shining down from ten-foot-high mounts. The men in black stood and kneeled in the freezing rain, firing guns into the water—the water where the Navy SEALs probably were.

That's what the big spotlights were for—to give them targets in the water. The lights probably also served to blind the swimmers and deny them targets, if any of them could even get their guns out.

The men in black began to turn toward Murphy. They almost seemed to be moving in slow motion. In another second, they were going to start shooting him full of holes.

Murphy gripped the heavy gun in front of him with both hands.

His finger found the trigger mechanism.

Please work.

He opened up. DUH-DUH-DUH-DUH-DUH-DUH came the metallic sound of bullets firing. He easily rode the recoil of the mounted gun. Spent shells fell to the bottom of the boat, tinkling like jingle bells.

Murphy hosed the men down. He hit four or five with his first burst.

They didn't fall as they were shot. They came apart like rag dolls, the bullets ripping through them. Now the others were running, seeking cover.

"Run, you monkeys," he said.

A sound came.

WHOOOOOOOSSSHH.

A rocket flew past him. His entire body jerked in response.

Just missed. He hadn't even seen it coming. It hit somewhere in the water behind him. He didn't hear an explosion, but he saw an orange and yellow flash go up.

How did he see that out of the corner of his eye?

No. He must have eyes in the back of his head.

His ammunition belt was already running down. He didn't have a backup.

Running out of ammo was a problem. That RPG was also a problem—there were going to be more. Already, the men were regrouping out there and taking up firing positions facing Murphy. He reached with his left hand and fired a smoke grenade.

Then he dropped to the floor of the boat.

A second later, rounds started hitting the armored plating of the boat. Thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk...

Bullets whistled overhead.

He looked up at the trigger of the chain gun. He still had some rounds left, but if he tried to reach his hand up...

WHOOOSSSHHH.

Another rocket went by. Whoever had the rocket launcher was a lousy shot.

Thank God.

Murphy had a pistol on him. He pulled it from the holster. He crouched below the lip of the bow. The first man who appeared there was going to take a bullet in the head. After that...

But they weren't that dumb. A grenade suddenly appeared, bouncing around inside the front of the boat like a rubber ball. It made solid metallic BONKS as it bounced. Murphy picked it up, waited half a beat, and threw it back.

An instant later: BOOOOM.

Someone out there screamed. Dirt and ice and blood and meat rained down.

They were *right there*, creeping up.

Murphy's breaths came in harsh rasps. He wasn't gonna last. He was outmanned. He was outgunned. He couldn't seem them—if he peeked over the side, they would take his head off. He couldn't throw back every single grenade that came. The guy with the rocket launcher wasn't gonna miss all night.

Murphy was gonna die right here in this boat.

His mind raced, looking for options.

"Oh God," he said.

This might have been a mistake.

* * *

Something had changed.

At one moment, they had seemed like they were all doomed, trapped in the water, the enemy above them and firing down, machine gunning them. Now they were on the offensive again, moving forward.

Luke came bursting out of the water.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.