

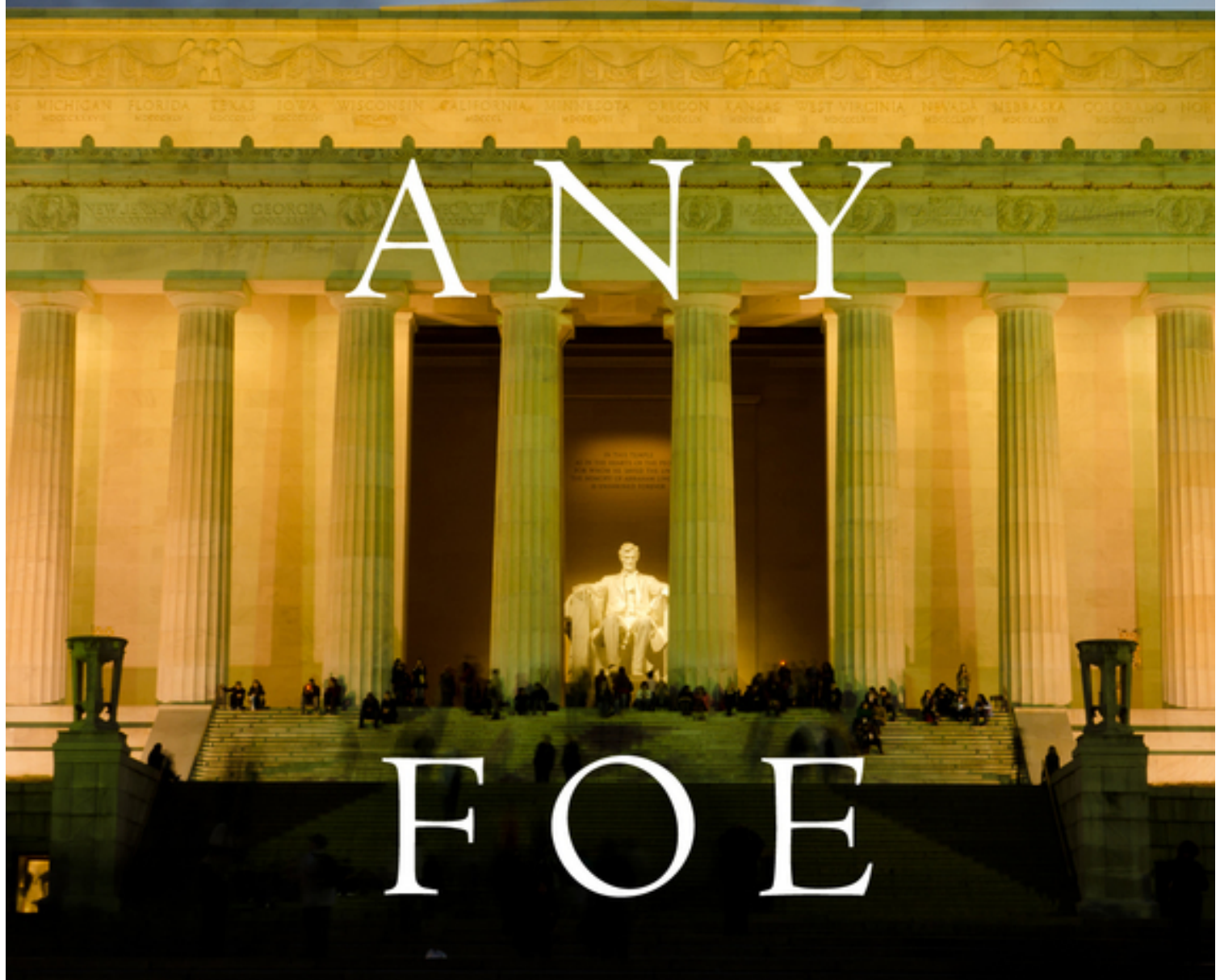
A LUKE STONE THRILLER--BOOK #4

JACK MARS

OPPOSE

ANY

FOE



A Luke Stone Thriller

Джек Марс

Oppose Any Foe

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Марс Д.

Oppose Any Foe / Д. Марс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», — (A Luke Stone Thriller)

ISBN 978-1-63-291850-5

A small arsenal of U.S. nuclear weapons are stolen from a NATO base in Europe. The world scrambles to figure out who the culprits are and what their target is—and to stop them before they unleash hell on humanity. With only hours left before it is too late, the President has no choice but to call in Luke Stone, the former head of an elite FBI para-military team. Finally getting his life back in order, and with devastating news on his own family front, Luke does not want the job. But with the newly elected female President desperate for his help, he realizes he cannot turn his back on her. In the action-packed, international cat-and-mouse chase that follows, Luke, Ed and his former team will have to be more daring, and break more rules, than ever before. With the fate of the world at stake, Luke heads into the murky fog of war and espionage, and discovers the culprit is not who he thinks it is after all. A political thriller with non-stop action, dramatic international settings and heart-pounding suspense, OPPOSE ANY FOE is book #4 in the bestselling and critically-acclaimed Luke Stone series, an explosive new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

ISBN 978-1-63-291850-5

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Mars Jack

Oppose Any Foe

Jack Mars

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

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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)

CHAPTER ONE

October 16

5:25 a.m. Mountain Daylight Time

Marble Canyon

Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona

“They’re coming through on all sides!”

Luke was trying to live until daybreak, but the sun refused to rise. It was cold, and his shirt was off. He had ripped it off in the heat of combat. There was no ammo left.

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

Luke tossed his empty rifle away and pulled his handgun. He fired down the trench on his own position – it was overrun with enemies. A line of them were running this way. More came sliding, falling, jumping over the wall.

Where were his guys? Was anyone still alive?

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

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

Then he was out of bullets. Again.

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

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

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

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

He hit the deck.

BOOOM.

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

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

“Come on, you bastards!” he screamed. “Come on!”

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

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

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

Luke’s chest was painted red. He was soaked in the blood of dead men. His body trembled from hunger, and from exhaustion. He stared out at the surrounding mountains, just coming into view.

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

Martinez was sprawled on his back nearby, low in the trench. He was crying. He couldn't move his legs. He'd had enough. He wanted to die. "Stone," he said. "Hey, Stone. Hey! Kill me, man. Just kill me. Hey, Stone! Listen to me, man!"

Luke was numb. He had no thoughts about Martinez's legs, or about Martinez's future. He was just tired of listening to Martinez's complaints.

"I'd gladly kill you, Martinez, just for whining like that. But I'm out of ammo. So man up... okay?"

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

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

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

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

As he watched, a line of black insects appeared in the sky far away. He knew what they were in an instant. Helicopters. United States military helicopters, probably Black Hawks. The cavalry was coming. Luke didn't feel good about that, or bad. He felt nothing. Emptiness was an occupational hazard. He felt nothing at all...

Luke was awakened by his ringing phone. He lay there and blinked.

He tried to orient himself. He was in a tent, he realized, at the bottom of the Grand Canyon.

It was just before first light, and he was in the tent he shared with his son, Gunner. He stared into the black night, listening to the sound of his son's deep breathing nearby.

His phone kept ringing.

It vibrated against his leg, and made the annoying buzzing sound that phones set to vibrate make. He didn't want to wake Gunner, but this was probably a call he needed to take. Very few people had this number, and they were people who wouldn't just call to shoot the breeze.

He glanced at his watch: five thirty a.m.

Luke unzipped the tent, slid out, then zipped it up again. Nearby, in the first pale light of the gathering day, Luke saw the other two tents – Ed Newsam in one, Mark Swann in the other. The remains of last night's fire were in the circle of stones at the center of the camp – there were still a few coals glowing red.

The air was cool and crisp – Luke wore only boxer shorts and a T-shirt. Goosebumps popped up along his arms and on his legs. He kicked his feet into a pair of sandals and walked down to the river, past where the raft was tied up. He wanted to get far enough away from the campsite so that he didn't wake anyone.

He sat on a boulder and gazed at the rising walls of the canyon. Just below him, although he could barely see it, was the sound of trickling water. Downriver, maybe half a mile away, he could hear the rushing of the next set of rapids.

He looked at the phone. He knew the number by heart. It was Becca. Probably the last person he wanted to hear from right now. He'd had Gunner for five days, which was perfectly legal, according to their agreement. Yes, Gunner had been out of school during that time, but the kid was some kind of genius – there was talk of him skipping grades, not falling behind.

To Luke's mind, getting him out into the wild, enjoying nature and testing himself both physically and mentally, was good for him – and probably more important than anything he might get up to at home. Kids nowadays – they spent a lot of time staring into video screens. It had its place – those screens were powerful tools, but let's limit it to that. Let's not allow them to take the place

of family, physicality, fun, or imagination. Let's not pretend that real adventure, or even experience, took place inside of a computer.

He called her back, his mind alert, but open. Whatever game she tried to play, he would stay calm and be as reasonable as he could.

The phone rang once.

"Luke?"

"Hi, Becca," he said, his voice low and friendly, acting like it was the most normal thing in the world to call someone back before sunrise. "How are you?"

"I'm okay," she said. Her speech with him was always abrupt, tense. His life with her was over – he recognized that. But his life with his son was just beginning, and he was firm that he would navigate any roadblocks she might try to put in his way.

He waited.

"What is Gunner doing?" she said.

"He's sleeping. It's still pretty early here. The sun's not even quite up yet."

"Right," she said. "I forgot about the time difference."

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I was awake anyway." He paused for a few seconds. The first glint of real sun was appearing in the east, a ray of light which peeked over the rim of the canyon and played on the cliff wall to the west, turning it pink and orange.

"So what can I do for you?"

She didn't hesitate. "I need Gunner to come home right away."

"Becca –"

"Don't fight me on this, Luke. You know it won't hold any water with the judge. A special operations agent with diagnosed post traumatic stress disorder and a history of violence wants to take his young son on outdoor adventures, which, by the way, causes his son to miss entire weeks of school. I can't believe I even agreed to this in the first place. I've been so distracted that I –"

He interrupted her. "Becca, we're in the Grand Canyon. We're rafting. You do realize that, don't you? Unless a helicopter lands down here to pick us up, we are probably three days from reaching the South Rim. Then a night in the lodge there, and a full day's drive down to Phoenix. Which sounds about right, because as I recall it, our plane tickets back are scheduled for the twenty-second. And by the way, this whole PTSD diagnosis isn't real. It never happened. No doctor has ever even suggested it. It's just something that you've manufactured in your –"

"Luke, I have cancer."

That stopped him in his tracks. In recent days, she had been more agitated than he'd ever seen her before. Of course he had noticed this, but mostly ignored it. It was typical of her, and the amount of pressure she put on herself. Becca was a Grade A stress case. But this was different.

Luke's eyes watered, and a thick lump formed in his throat. Could it be true? Whatever had happened between them, this was the woman he had fallen in love with. This was the woman who had carried his child. At one time, he had loved her more than anything in this world, certainly more than he loved himself.

"Jesus, Becca. I'm so sorry. When did that happen?"

"I was feeling sick all summer. I lost some weight. At first, it was no big deal, but then it became a surprising amount of weight. I thought it was from all the anxiety, everything that's happened in the past year – the kidnapping, the train crash, all the time you've been away. But things have calmed down a lot, and the sickness didn't stop. I went for tests starting a couple weeks ago. I had been vomiting. I didn't want to tell you until I knew more. Now I know more. I saw my doctor yesterday, and she told me everything."

"What is it?" he said, though he was not sure he wanted to hear the answer.

“It’s pancreatic,” she said, dropping perhaps the worst bomb he could have imagined. “Stage Four. Luke, it’s already metastasized. It’s in my colon, in my brain. It’s in my bones...” Her voice trailed off, and he could hear her sob two thousand miles away.

“I’ve been crying all night,” she said, her voice breaking. “I can’t seem to stop.”

As bad as he felt, Luke found that his thoughts suddenly weren’t with her – they were with Gunner. “How long?” he said. “Did they give you a timeframe?”

“Three months,” Becca said. “Maybe six. She told me not to hang my hat on that. A lot of people die very quickly. Sometimes there’s a miracle and the patient lives on and on indefinitely. Either way, she told me I need to get my affairs in order.”

She paused. “Luke, I’m so afraid.”

He nodded. “I know you are. We’ll be there as soon as we can. I’m not going to tell Gunner.”

“Good. I don’t want you to. We can tell him together.”

“Okay,” Luke said. “I’ll see you soon. I’m very sorry.”

The hang-up was awkward. If only they hadn’t been fighting all these months. If only she hadn’t been so hostile to him. If these things hadn’t happened, maybe he could have found a way to comfort her, even from this distance. He had become hardened against her, and he didn’t know if there was any softness left.

He sat on the boulder for several minutes. Light began to fill the sky. He didn’t reminisce about the good memories with her. He didn’t go over all the battles they’d fought this past year, and how vicious and dug in she’d been. His mind was a blank. That was for the best. He needed a way out of this canyon, and he needed to break the news to Ed and Swann that he and Gunner were leaving.

He pushed off the rock and walked back to camp. Ed was awake and crouched by the fire. He had started it up again and had put the coffee pot on. He was shirtless, wearing nothing but a pair of red boxer briefs and flip-flops. His body was thick rippling muscle and ropey veins, hardly an ounce of fat on him – he looked like a martial arts fighter about to enter the cage. He watched Luke approach, then gestured to the west.

Over there, the sky was still cobalt blue, the night retreating, being chased away by the light coming from the east. At the very top, the towering walls of the canyon were lit by a sliver of sun now, setting their striations aflame in red, pink, yellow, and orange.

“Damn, that’s pretty,” Ed said.

“Ed,” Luke said. “I’ve got bad news.”

CHAPTER TWO

9:15 p.m. Greenwich Mean Time (4:15 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time)

Molenbeek Suburb

Brussels, Belgium

The thin man could speak Dutch.

“*Ga weg*,” he said under his breath. Go away.

His name was not Jamal. But that was the name he sometimes gave to people, and the name that many, many people had come to know him by. Most people called him Jamal. Some called him the Phantom.

He stood in the shadows near an overflowing garbage can, just inside a narrow cobblestone street, smoking a cigarette and watching a police car parked on the main avenue. The street he was on was little more than an alleyway, and as he stood back in the shadows, he felt certain no one could see him there. The empty boulevards and sidewalks and alleys of the infamous Muslim slum were wet from a hard, chilly rain that had stopped maybe ten minutes before.

The place was a ghost town tonight.

On the boulevard, the police car pulled out from the curb and rolled quietly down the street. There was no other traffic.

A tickle of excitement – it was almost fear – went through Jamal’s body as he watched the police. They had no reason to harass him. He wasn’t breaking any laws. He was a well-dressed man in a dark suit and Italian leather shoes, with a clean-shaven face. He could be a businessman, or the owner of these low-rise tenement buildings all around him. He wasn’t the type for the police to randomly stop and search. Even so, Jamal had fallen into the hands of the authorities before – not here in Belgium, but in other places. His experiences were unpleasant, to put it mildly. He had once spent twelve hours listening to himself scream in agony.

He shook his head to clear the dark thoughts, finished his cigarette in three deep inhales, ignored the garbage can, and pitched the butt on the ground. He turned back down the alley. He passed a round red sign with a horizontal white stripe – DO NOT ENTER. The street was too narrow for car traffic. If the police suddenly decided they wanted to pursue him, they’d be forced to do so on foot. Either that, or circle around several blocks. By the time they returned, he’d be gone.

After fifty meters, he turned quickly and unlocked the entrance to a particularly dilapidated building. He climbed a narrow stairwell three stories until it dead-ended at a thick, steel-reinforced door. The stairs were old, made of wood and crazily warped. The whole stairwell seemed to twist this way and that like taffy, giving it the feeling of a carnival funhouse.

Jamal made a fist and hammered on the heavy door, his knocks coming in a careful sequence: BANG-BANG. BANG-BANG.

He paused a few seconds.

BANG.

A gun-hole slid open and an eye appeared there. The man on the other side grunted as he verified who it was. Jamal listened to the guard turn keys in locks, then remove the steel t-bar wedged into the floor at the bottom of the door. The police would have a very hard time entering this apartment, if their suspicion ever fell upon it.

“*As salaam alaikum*,” Jamal said as he entered.

“*Wa alaikum salaam*,” the man who opened the door said. He was a tall, burly man. He wore a grimy sleeveless T-shirt, work pants, and boots. A thick unkempt beard covered his face, meeting the mass of curly black hair on his scalp. His eyes were dull. He was everything the thin man was not.

“How do they seem?” Jamal said in French.

The big man shrugged. “Good, I think.”

Jamal passed through a beaded curtain, down a short hallway, and entered a small room – what would have been the living room if a family were occupying this place. The dingy room was crowded with young men, most wearing T-shirts, jerseys from their favorite European football teams, track pants, and sneakers. It was hot and humid in the room, perhaps from the proximity of all the bodies in a small space. It smelled like wet socks mingled with body odor in there.

In the center of the room, on a wide wooden table, sat a bullet-shaped device made of silver metal. It was about a meter long and less than half a meter wide. Jamal had spent time in Germany and Austria, and the device reminded him of a small beer keg. In fact, except for its weight – it was quite light – it was a very close replica of an American W80 nuclear warhead.

Two young men were at the table while the others circled around and watched. One stood in front of a small laptop computer mounted inside a steel suitcase. The suitcase had a panel which ran alongside the laptop – there were two switches, two LED lights (one red and one green), and a dial built into the panel. A wire ran from the case to another panel along the side of the warhead. The entire device – the suitcase and the laptop inside it – were known as a UC 1583 controller. It was a device designed for one task only – to communicate with a nuclear weapon.

The second man was bent over a white envelope on the table. He wore an expensive digital microscope affixed to his eye, and slowly scanned the envelope, looking for what he knew must be there – a tiny dot, no larger than the period at the end of a sentence, in which there was embedded the code that would arm and activate the warhead.

Jamal moved closer to watch.

The young man with the microscope slowly scanned the envelope. Every few seconds, he covered the microscope with his hand and took a larger scale view with his uncovered eye, looking for ink spots, blemishes, any dots that were likely suspects. Then he dove back in with the microscope.

“Wait,” he whispered under his breath. “Wait...”

“Come on,” his partner said, an air of impatience in his voice. They were being judged not just for accuracy, but for time. When their moment came, they would be forced to act very quickly.

“Got it.”

Now it was the partner who was on the spot. From memory, the young man typed in a sequence that enabled the laptop to accept an arming code. His hands shook as he did so. He was nervous enough that he botched the sequence on the first attempt, canceled, and started over.

“Okay,” he said. “Give it to me.”

Very slowly and clearly, the man with the microscope read a sequence of twelve numbers. The other man typed each number as it was spoken. After twelve, the first man said “Done.”

Now the man at the laptop went through another short sequence, flipped the two switches, and turned the dial. The green LED light on the panel popped on.

The young man smiled and turned to his instructor.

“Armed and ready to launch,” he said. “God willing.”

Jamal also smiled. He was an observer here – he had come to see how the recruits were progressing. They were true believers, preparing for what was likely a suicide mission. If the codes were entered incorrectly, the warheads might simply shut themselves down – they might also self-destruct, dispersing a deadly cloud of radiation and killing everyone in the vicinity.

No one was sure what would happen in the event of an incorrect code. It was all hearsay and speculation. The Americans kept those secrets closely held. But it didn't matter. These young men were willing to die, and that's probably what they would do. Regardless of the codes, when the USA discovered that their precious nuclear weapons had been stolen, they weren't going to respond kindly. No. The giant beast would lash out, its tentacles flying, destroying everything in its path.

Jamal nodded and recited a silent prayer of thanks. It had been quite a task pulling together this project. They had the mujahideen necessary – but then, young men willing to die for their faith were easy to acquire.

The other elements were more challenging. They would soon have the launch platforms and the missiles – Jamal would see to that himself. The codes had been promised, and he was certain they would receive them as described. Then all they would need were the warheads themselves.

And soon, if it was Allah's will, they would have those as well.

CHAPTER THREE

October 19

1:15 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time

Fairfax County, Virginia – Suburbs of Washington, DC

Luke had hired a chopper to take himself and Gunner out of the canyon. He had finagled a new flight for them, and driven like the devil to make it to Phoenix in time to catch the plane. All the while, he had fended off Gunner's questions about why they had left so abruptly.

"Your mom just wants you home, Monster. She misses you, and she doesn't like you skipping all this school."

In the passenger seat, the highway zooming by his window, Luke could see Gunner's antennae twitching like crazy. He was a smart kid. He was already learning to catch people lying. Luke hated —*hated!*— that he had to be one of the first people Gunner would catch.

"I thought you worked all that out with Mom before we left."

"I did," Luke said with a shrug. "But it got unworked out. Listen, we'll all talk about it when we get there, okay?"

"Okay, Dad."

But Luke could see that it was not okay. Soon, it would be a lot less okay.

Now, two days later, here he sat, on the big plush sofa in the living room of his former house. Gunner was at school.

Luke glanced around the place. Once upon a time, he and Becca had had a great life here. It was a beautiful home, modern, like something out of an architectural magazine. The living room, with its floor to ceiling windows, was like a glass box. He pictured Christmas time – just sitting in this stunning sunken living room, the tree in the corner, the fireplace lit, the snow coming down all around as if they were outside, but they were inside, warm and cozy.

God, it was nice. But those days were gone.

Becca bustled around, cleaning up, dusting, putting various things away. At one point in the conversation, she took the vacuum cleaner out of the closet and let it rip. She was in a very bad place psychologically. He had tried to hug her when he first arrived, but she had gone wooden, her arms at her sides.

"I was over you, did you know that?" she said now. "I was ready to move on with my life. I even went on a few coffee dates when you had Gunner with you this summer. Why not? I'm still young, right?"

She shook her head bitterly. Luke said nothing. What was there to say?

"Do you want to know something about yourself, Luke? The first one I met, he was a teacher on his summer vacation, nice guy, and he asked me what you do for a living. I told him the truth. Oh, my ex-husband's some kind of secret assassin for the government. He used to be in Delta Force. You know what happened after that? I'll tell you. Nothing happened. It was the last I ever heard from him. He heard Delta Force and he disappeared. You frighten people, Luke. That's my point."

Luke shrugged. "Why don't you just tell them I do something else? It's not like I'm going to –"

"I did. Once I caught on, I started telling people you're a lawyer."

.For a second, Luke wondered what the plural "people" meant. Was she going on dates every day? Two a day? He shook his head. It was none of his business anymore, as long as she was safe. And even that... she was dying. She would never be safe again, and there was nothing he could do about it.

A long paused passed between them.

"Do you want to get a second opinion?"

She nodded. She looked numb, in shock, like the survivors of disasters and atrocities Luke had seen so many times. The amazing thing was that she also looked perfectly healthy. A little thinner

than usual, but no one would ever guess that she had cancer. They would probably think she'd been on a diet.

It's the chemo that makes them look sick. Half the time, it's also what kills them.

"I've already gotten a second opinion from an old colleague of mine. I'm going for a third opinion early next week. If it's consistent with what I've already heard, then by Thursday, I'll begin the protocols."

"Is surgery an option?" Luke said.

She shook her head. "It's too late for that. The cancer is everywhere..." Her voice trailed off. "Everywhere. Chemotherapy is the only option. If I exhaust the approved chemo drugs, then maybe clinical trials, if I'm even still alive."

She started crying again. She stood in the middle of the living room, abjectly, her face buried in her hands, her body shaking with the sobs. To Luke, she looked just like a little girl. It stung him to see her reduced to this. He had been around death a lot in his life, seen too much of it, but this? It couldn't be true. He stood, and went to her then. He would comfort her if he could.

She pushed him away, violently, like a child in a playground fight.

"Don't touch me! Get away from me!" She pointed at him, her face a raging mask of anger. "It's you!" she shrieked. "You make people sick, don't you realize that? You steal all the oxygen in the room. You and your superhero garbage."

She bobbed her head from side to side, mocking him. "Oh, I'm sorry, honey," she said in a caricature of a low masculine voice. "I've got to run off and save the world. No telling if I'll be alive or dead three days from now. Raise the boy for me, won't you? Just doing my patriotic duty."

She was seething. Her voice went back to normal. "You do it because it's fun, Luke. You do it because you're irresponsible. You enjoy it. For you, there are no consequences. You don't care if you live or die anyway, and everybody else has to deal with the fallout and the stress."

She burst into tears. "I'm done with you. I'm just done." She waved her hand at him. "I'm sure you can find your own way out of here. So just go. Okay? Go away. Let me die in peace."

With that, she left the room. A moment of silence passed, and then he heard her down the hall in the master bedroom, sobbing.

He stood there for a long moment, not sure what to do. Gunner would be home in a couple of hours. It wasn't a good idea to leave him here with Becca, but he didn't know if he had much choice. She had custody. He had visitation rights. If he took Gunner with him now, without her permission, it was technically kidnapping.

He sighed. When had the legalities of a situation stopped him before?

Luke was at a loss. He felt his energy draining away. And they still hadn't explained anything about this to the child yet. Maybe he should call Becca's parents and talk to them. The truth was Becca had handled nearly all the domestic details during their relationship. Maybe she was right about him – he was a lot more comfortable out in the world, playing cops and robbers with very dangerous people. Other people worried about him, he knew, but he didn't worry. What kind of person lived like that? Maybe one who had never grown up.

On the glass table near the sofa, his telephone began to ring. He glanced at it. As it often did, it seemed almost like it was alive, a viper, dangerous to touch.

He picked it up. "Stone."

A male voice was on the line.

"Hold for the President of the United States."

He glanced up, and Becca hovered in the doorway now. Apparently, she had heard his phone ring. She was back again, ready to listen to his conversation and confirm all of her worst feelings about him. For a split second, he felt real hatred for her – she was going to be right about him, no matter what. All the way into her grave, she was going to have him nailed.

Now the voice of Susan Hopkins came on.

“Luke, are you there?”

“Hi, Susan.”

“Long time, no see, Agent Stone. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine,” he said. “You?”

“Good,” she said, but the tone of her voice said something else. “Everything is okay. Listen, I need your help.”

“Susan...” he started.

“It’s a one-day thing, but it’s very important. I need someone who can put it to bed quickly, and with complete discretion.”

“What is it?”

“I can’t talk about this over the telephone,” she said. “Can you come in?”

His shoulders sagged. *Ah, man.*

“All right.”

“How soon can you be here?”

He glanced at his watch. Gunner would be home in an hour and a half. If he wanted to spend time with his son, the meeting would have to wait. If he went to the meeting...

He sighed.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Good. I’ll make sure they bring you straight to me.”

He hung up. He looked at Becca. There was something cruel and mocking inside her eyes. There was a demon in there, dancing on a lake of fire.

“Where are you going, Luke?”

“You know where I’m going.”

“Oh, you’re not going to stay and have a nice time with your son? You’re not going to be a good daddy? That’s a surprise. Gee, I would have thought – ”

“Becca, stop it. Okay? I’m sorry that you’re – ”

“You’re going to lose custody of Gunner, Luke. You go off on missions all the time, right? Well, guess what. I’m going to make you *my* mission. You’re not even going to see that boy. With my dying breath, I’m going to make it happen. My parents are going to raise him, and you’re not even going to have access to him. You know why?”

Luke headed to the door.

“Good-bye, Becca. Have a nice day.”

“I’ll tell you why, Luke. Because my parents are rich! They love Gunner. And they don’t like you. You think you can outlast my parents in a legal battle, Luke? I don’t think so.”

He was halfway outside, but he stopped and turned around.

“Is this what you want to do with the time you have left?” he said. “Is this who you want to be?”

She stared at him.

“Yes.”

He shook his head.

He didn’t know her anymore, if he ever did.

And with that, he left.

CHAPTER FOUR

11:50 p.m. Eastern European Time (5:50 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time)

Alexandroupoli, Greece

They were thirty miles from the Turkish border. The man checked his watch. Almost midnight. *Soon, soon.*

The man's name was Brown. It was a name that was not a name, for someone who had disappeared a long time ago. Brown was a ghost. He had a thick scar across his left cheek – a bullet that had just missed. He wore a flattop haircut. He was big and strong, and had the sharp features of someone who had spent his entire adult life in special operations.

Once, Brown was known by a different name – his real name. As time passed, his name had changed. At this point, he'd gone by so many names he couldn't remember them all. This latest one was his favorite: Brown. No first name, no last name. Just Brown. Brown was good enough. It was an evocative name. It reminded him of dead things. Dead leaves in late fall. Dead trees after a nuclear test. Wide open and staring dead brown eyes of the many, many people he'd killed.

Technically, Brown was on the run. He had ended up on the wrong side of history about six months ago, on a job that hadn't even been explained to him. He'd had to leave his home country in a hurry and go underground. But after a period of uncertainty, he was back on his feet again. And as always, there was plenty of business to do, especially for a man with the kind of bounce-back ability he had.

Now, just before midnight, he stood outside a warehouse in a rundown section of this seafaring town's port district. The warehouse was surrounded by a high fence topped with razor wire, but the gate was open. A chilly fog rolled in off the Mediterranean Sea.

Two men stood with him, both wearing leather jackets, and both with Uzi submachine guns strapped over their shoulders, and stocks extended. The guys would be nearly identical, except one of them had shaved his head completely bald.

Out on the street, headlights approached.

"Eyes open," Brown said. "Here come the holy warriors now."

A small box truck drove up along the deserted boulevard. There was a giant image of oranges along the side of it, with one sliced in half and showing the bright reddish-orange meat of the fruit. There were words on the side of the truck in Greek, probably a company name, but Brown didn't read Greek.

The truck reached the gate and pulled straight into the yard. One of Brown's men walked over and slid the gate shut along its track, then locked it with a heavy padlock.

As soon as the truck stopped, two men climbed out of the cab of the truck. The rear door opened, and three more clambered out. The men were dark-skinned, probably Arab, but clean-shaven. Their uniform consisted of blue jeans, light windbreaker jackets, and sneakers.

One man carried a large canvas bag, like a hockey equipment bag, over either shoulder. The weight of the satchels pulled the man's shoulders down. Three of the men carried Uzis.

We have Uzis, they have Uzis. It's an Uzi party.

The fourth man, the driver of the truck, was empty-handed. He approached Brown. His eyes were blue, and his skin was very dark. His hair was jet black. The combination of blue eyes and dark skin gave his face an odd effect, as if he wasn't quite real.

The two men shook hands.

"Jamal," Brown said. "I thought I told you to come with only three men."

Jamal shrugged. "I needed one to carry the money. And I don't count toward the total, right? So I did bring three. Three gunmen."

Brown shook his head and smiled. It hardly mattered how many people Jamal brought. The two men with Brown could kill a busload of gunmen.

“Okay, let’s go,” Brown said. “The trucks are inside.”

One of Brown’s men – he called himself Mr. Jones – pulled an automatic opener from his pocket, and the garage door of the warehouse slowly rattled open. The eight men walked into the cavernous space. The warehouse was mostly empty, except for heavy green tarps thrown over two giant vehicles. Brown walked to the closest one and yanked the tarp halfway off.

“Voila!” he said. What he revealed was the front half of a large tractor-trailer, painted in green, brown, and tan camouflage colors. Jones yanked the tarp off near the rear of the truck, revealing a flat, four-cylinder missile launch platform. The two parts of the truck were separate and independent of each other, but were attached by hydraulics in the middle.

The trucks were called transporter-erector-launchers, or TELs, relics of the Cold War, mobile attack stations that NATO had used to target the old Soviet Union. The launchers fired smaller variants of the Tomahawk cruise missile, and the missiles could be outfitted with small thermonuclear warheads. These weapons were for a limited tactical nuclear strike – the kind that would take out a medium-sized city, or totally destroy a military base and its surrounding countryside, but maybe not bring about the apocalypse. Of course, once you started launching nukes at people, all bets were off.

In the old days, they called this missile system the “Gryphon,” after the ancient mythical creature with the legs and body of a lion, and the wings, head, and talons of an eagle – the protector of the divine. Brown got a kick out of that.

The system was decommissioned in 1991, and all of these units were supposed to have been destroyed. But there were still a few of them in existence. There were *always* weapons floating around somewhere. Brown had never heard of a missile class or a weapons system that had been entirely dismantled – there was too much money to be made misplacing them and having them turn up later. Retail stores called it “shrinkage.” Walmart and Home Depot experienced it. So did the military.

In fact, here were two of the mobile platforms, just parked in a warehouse in a Greek port city all this time, very close to Turkey, and less than a mile from the docks. Sitting snug inside each of the launch cylinders was a Tomahawk missile, each one operational, or likely to become operational with a little tender loving care.

Why, it was almost as if you could drive these trucks out of here and right onto a freighter or a ferry, then sail away for parts unknown. They were conventional weapons, certainly, but surely there were still nuclear warheads somewhere that would fit these missiles.

Then again, obtaining warheads wasn’t Brown’s department. That was Jamal’s problem. He was a capable guy, and Brown imagined he already knew where he might find some loose nukes. Brown wasn’t sure how he felt about that. Jamal was playing a dangerous game.

“It’s beautiful,” Jamal said.

“God is great,” said one of his men.

Brown winced. As a rule, he frowned on religious talk. And beautiful was a relative term. These trucks were two of the ugliest war machines Brown had ever seen. But they would pack a wallop – that much was certain.

“You like?” Brown said to Jamal.

Jamal nodded. “Very much.

“Then let’s see the money.”

The man with the heavy satchels came forward. He dropped them from his shoulders and onto the stone floor of the warehouse. He knelt and unzipped them, each in turn.

“A million dollars in cash in each bag,” Jamal said.

Brown gestured with his head to his other man, the bald one.

“Mr. Clean, check it.”

Clean knelt by the bags. He pulled random rubber-banded stacks of money from various sections of each bag. He took a small, flat digital scanner from his pocket and began to remove bills from each stack. He turned on the scanner's UV LED light and placed the bills on the scanner window one at a time, revealing the UV security strip on each bill. Then he ran a light pen over each bill, revealing the hidden watermarks. It was a cumbersome process.

As Clean worked, Brown slipped a hand inside his jacket, touching his gun there. He made eye contact his man Jones, who nodded. If something funny was coming, it would happen now. The body language of the Arabs didn't change – they just looked on impassively. Brown took that as a good sign. They were really here to *buy* the trucks.

Mr. Clean dropped a stack of money on the floor. "Good." He picked up another stack, began riffling through it, checking bills with the device. Time crawled by.

"Good." He dropped that stack and picked up another one. More time passed.

"Good." He kept going.

After a while, it started to grow boring. The money was real. In ten minutes or so, Brown turned to Jamal.

"Okay, I believe you. That's two million."

Jamal shrugged. He opened his jacket and pulled out a large velvet purse. "Two million in cash, two million in diamonds, as we agreed."

"Clean," Brown said.

Mr. Clean stood and took the purse from Jamal. Clean was the money and valuables expert on this little team. He pulled a different electronic device from his pocket – a small black square with a needle tip. The device had lights on the side, and Brown knew it tested the heat dispersal and electrical conductivity of the stones.

Clean began to take stones one at a time from the bag and gently press the needle tip to them. Each time he did one, a warm tone would sound. He had done about a dozen before Brown said another word to him.

"Clean?"

Clean looked at Brown. He grinned.

"They're good so far," he said. "All diamonds."

He tested another one. Then another.

Another.

Brown turned to Jamal, who was already gesturing to his men to pull the tarps and board the trucks.

"It was a pleasure doing business with you, Jamal."

Jamal barely glanced at him. "Likewise." He was preoccupied with his men, and the trucks. The next part of their journey had already begun. Getting two mobile nuclear missile launch platforms with missiles included to the Middle East was probably not an easy proposition.

Brown raised a finger. "Hey, Jamal!"

The thin man turned back to him. He made an impatient hand gesture, as if to say, "What?"

"If you get caught with those things..."

Now Jamal did smile. "I know. You and I never met." He backed away toward the nearest of the two trucks.

Brown turned to Mr. Jones and Mr. Clean. Jones was on one knee, stuffing the money back into the heavy bag. Clean was still testing diamonds from the velvet bag, handling them one at a time, the needle device still in his hand.

They had made one whale of a score. Things were looking up finally, after the fiasco that had run Brown out of his own country. He smiled.

All in a day's work.

And yet, something about the scene here disturbed Brown. His guys were not paying attention to their environment – they were distracted by all the money. They had let their guard down, badly. And so had he. On a different operation, that could come back to bite them. Not everyone was as trustworthy as Jamal.

He turned to look at the Arabs again.

Jamal was there, near the truck, holding one of the Uzis. Two of his guys were with him. They stood in a line, pointing their guns at Brown and his men.

Jamal smiled.

“Clean!” Brown shouted.

Jamal fired, and his men did the same. There came the ugly blat of automatic gunfire. To Brown, it seemed like they were almost spraying him with a fire hose. He felt the bullets piercing him, biting into him like stinging bees. His body did an involuntary dance, and he struggled against it, to no avail. It was almost as if the bullets were holding him up, pinning him in an upright position, making him jitter and jive.

For a moment, he lost consciousness. Everything went black. Then he was lying on his back, on the concrete floor of the warehouse. He could feel the blood flowing from him. He could feel that the floor was wet where he lay. A puddle was spreading around him. He was in a lot of pain.

He glanced over at Mr. Clean and Mr. Jones. They were both dead, their bodies riddled, their heads half gone. Only Brown was still alive.

It occurred to him that he had always been a survivor. Hell, he had always been a winner. There was no way, after more than two decades of combat, madcap adventures, and narrow escapes, that he was going to die now, like this. It was impossible. He was too good at his job. So many men had tried to kill him before now, and failed. His life wouldn't end like this. It couldn't.

He tried to reach inside his jacket for his gun, but his arm didn't seem work right. Then he noticed something else. Despite all the pain, he couldn't feel his legs.

He could feel the burning in his gut where he had been shot. He could feel the ringing pain in his head where he had smacked it on the stone floor when he fell down. He swallowed, then lifted his head and stared down at his feet. Everything was still down there and still attached – he just couldn't feel any of it.

The bullets severed my spine.

No thought had ever caused him such horror. Valuable seconds passed as he saw his future – rolling in a wheelchair, trying to climb from the chair to the driver's seat of his handicapped accessible car, emptying the colostomy bag that drained the shit from his useless digestive system.

No. He shook his head. There was no time for that. There was only time for action. Clean's gun was above his head and behind him somewhere. He reached back there – it hurt just to raise his arms like that – but he couldn't find it. He started crawling backwards, dragging his legs after him.

Something caught his eye. He looked up and here came Jamal, swaggering toward him. The bastard was grinning.

As he approached he raised his gun. He pointed it at Brown. Now Brown noticed Jamal's two men were with him.

“Don't try to do anything, Brown. Just lay still.”

Jamal's men took the big heavy bag with the money, and the small purse with the diamonds. Then they turned and headed back to the trucks. They climbed into the cab of the lead truck. The headlights came on. The engine farted and belched, black smoke pouring from a stack on the driver's side.

“I like you,” Jamal said. “But business is business, you know? We're not leaving any loose ends on this one. Sorry about that. I really am.”

Brown tried to say something, but he didn't seem to have his voice. All he could do was gurgle in response.

Jamal raised the gun again.

“Do you want a moment to pray?”

Brown nearly laughed. He shook his head. “You know something, Jamal? You crack me up. You and your religion are a joke. Do I want to pray? Pray to what? There is no God, and you’ll find that out as soon as you – ”

Brown saw fire lick the end of the gun’s barrel. Then he was flat on his back, staring up at the ceiling of the warehouse high above his head.

CHAPTER FIVE

9:45 p.m. Mountain Daylight Time (11:45 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time) Florence ADX Federal Penitentiary (Supermax) – Florence, Colorado

“This is it,” the guard said. “Home sweet home.”

Luke walked the white cinderblock hallways of the most secure prison in the United States. The two tall, heavysset guards in brown uniforms flanked him. They were nearly identical, these guards, with military recruit-style crew cuts, big shoulders and arms, and even bigger midsections. They moved along, their bodies stiff and top-heavy, like offensive linemen from a football team who had been out of the sport for a while.

They were not fit in any traditional sense of that word, but Luke mused that they were the perfect size and shape for their jobs. In close quarters, they could put a lot of weight on a resistant prisoner.

Footfalls echoed on the stone floor as the three men passed the closed, windowless steel doors of dozens of cells. Each cell door had a narrow opening near the bottom, like a mail slot, through which the guards could shove meals to the prisoners. Each also had two small windows with steel-reinforced glass facing the walkway. Luke didn't glance into any of the windows they passed.

Somewhere on this hallway, a man was screaming. It sounded like agony. It went on and on, no sign of ending. It was night, soon it would be lights out, and a man was shrieking. Luke thought he could almost make out words embedded in the sound.

He glanced at one of the guards.

“He's okay,” the guard said. “Really. He's not in any pain. He just howls like that.”

The other guard chimed in. “The solitude drives some of them insane.”

“Solitude?” Luke said. “You mean isolation?”

The guard shrugged. “Yeah.” It was semantics to him. He went home at the end of his shift. Ate at Denny's, by the looks of him, and chatted the people up. He wore a wedding band on the ring finger of his thick left hand. He had a wife, probably kids. The man had a life outside these walls. The prisoners? Not so much.

A who's who of rogues and baddies had stayed here, Luke knew. The Unabomber Ted Kaczynski was a current resident, as was Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the surviving brother of the two Boston Marathon bombers. The mob boss John Gotti had lived here for years, as had his violent enforcer, Sammy “The Bull” Gravano.

It was a breach of facility rules to allow Luke past the visiting room, but it wasn't exactly visiting hours, and this was a special case. A prisoner here had intelligence to offer, but he insisted on seeing Luke personally – not on a telephone with a thick glass partition between them, but face to face, and man to man, in the cell. The President of the United States herself had asked Luke to take this meeting.

They came to a stop in front of a white door, one among many. Luke felt his heart skip a beat. He was nervous, just a little bit. He didn't try to catch a glimpse of the man through the tiny windows. He didn't want to see him that way, like a mouse living in a shoebox. He wanted the man to be legendary, larger than life.

“It's my duty to inform you,” one of the guards began, “that the prisoners here are considered among the most violent and dangerous currently in the United States federal corrections system. If you choose to enter this cell and you decline personal...”

Luke raised a hand. “Save it. I know the risks.”

The guard shrugged again. “Suit yourself.”

“For the record, I don't want this conversation recorded,” Luke said.

“All cells are filmed by surveillance cameras twenty-four hours a day,” the guard said now. “But there is no audio.”

Luke nodded. He didn’t believe a word of it. “Good. I’ll scream if I need any help.”

The guard smiled. “We won’t hear it.”

“Then I’ll wave frantically.”

Both guards laughed. “I’ll be down the end of the hall,” one of them said. “Bang on the door when you want to come out again.”

The door clanged as it unlocked, then slid open of its own accord. Somewhere, someone was indeed watching them.

As the door slid away, it revealed a tiny, dismal cell. The first thing Luke noticed was the metal toilet. It had a water faucet at the top of it, an odd combination, but one which made logical sense, he supposed. Everything else was made of stone, and in a fixed location. A narrow stone desk extended from the cinderblock wall, with a rounded stone stool like a small peg coming out of the floor in front of it.

The desk was piled with papers, a few books, and four or five stubby pencils like the ones golfers use to keep score. Like the desk, the bed was narrow and made of stone. A thin mattress covered it and there was one green blanket that looked to be made of wool serge, or some equally itchy material. There was a narrow window in the far wall, framed in green, perhaps two feet tall and six inches wide. It was dark outside that window, except for a sickly yellow light that streamed into the cell from a nearby sodium arc lamp mounted on the outside wall. There was no way to cover the window.

The prisoner stood in an orange jumpsuit, his broad back to them.

“Morris,” the guard said. “Here’s your visitor. Do me a favor and don’t kill him.”

Don Morris, former United States Army colonel and Delta Force commander, founder and former director of the FBI Special Response Team, turned around slowly. His face seemed more lined than before and his salt and pepper hair had gone entirely white. But his eyes were deep-set, sharp, and alert, and his chest, arms, legs, and shoulders looked as strong as they ever had.

His mouth made something almost like a smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“Luke,” he said. “Thanks for coming. Welcome to my home. Eighty-seven square feet, approximately seven and a half by twelve.”

“Hi, Don,” Luke said. “I love what you’ve done with the place.”

“Last chance to change your mind,” one of the guards said behind him.

Luke shook his head. “I think I’ll be okay.”

Don’s eyes fell upon the guards. “You know who this man is, don’t you?”

“We do. Yes.”

“Then I guess,” Don said, “you can imagine how little danger I present to him.”

The door clanged shut. Luke had a moment, as they stared at each other across the cell – he might call it nostalgia. Don had been his commanding officer and his mentor in Delta. When Don started the Special Response Team, he had hired Luke as his first agent. In a lot of ways, and for more than ten years, Don had been like a father to him.

But not anymore. Don had been one of the plotters in the conspiracy to kill the President of the United States and take over the government. He’d been complicit in the kidnapping of Luke’s own wife and child. He’d had foreknowledge of the bombing that killed more than three hundred people at Mount Weather. Don was facing the death penalty, and Luke couldn’t think of anyone more worthy of that fate.

The two men shook hands, and Don placed a hand on Luke’s shoulder, just for a second. It was an awkward gesture by a man no longer accustomed to human contact. Luke knew that Supermax prisoners rarely touched another human being.

“Thanks for all the visits you’ve made and the letters you’ve sent,” Don said. “It’s been a comfort to know my welfare is such a priority for you.”

Luke shook his head. He almost smiled. “Don, until yesterday afternoon, I didn’t even know where they were holding you. And I didn’t care. It could have been a hole in the ground. It could have been at the bottom of Mount Weather.”

Don nodded. “When you lose, they can do whatever they want with you.”

“Richly deserved, in this case.”

Don gestured at the stone peg sprouting like a mushroom out of the ground. “Won’t you have a seat?”

“I’ll stand. Thanks.”

Don stared at Luke, his head leaning quizzically to the side. “I don’t have much hospitality to offer, Luke. This is it.”

“Why would I accept your hospitality, Don?”

Don’s eyes did not look away. “Are you joking? For old times’ sake. As a gesture of thanks for mentoring you through Delta, and giving you your current job. Think of a reason, son.”

“Exactly my point, Don. When I think of you, I think of my own son, and my wife, who you had kidnapped.”

Don raised his hands. “I had nothing to do with that. I promise you. If it were up to me, I would never allow harm to come to Gunner or Becca. They’re like my blood, like my own family. I warned you because I wanted to *protect* them, Luke. I found out after it had already happened. I’m sorry that happened. There’s nothing in my long career that I regret more.”

Luke scanned Don’s eyes, his body language, looking for... something. Was he lying? Was he telling the truth? What did Don even believe? Who was this man, whom Luke once thought he loved?

Luke sighed. He would take the man’s meager hospitality. He would give him that much, and lie awake tonight wondering why he had.

He squatted on the low stone.

Don sat on the bed. A pause stretched out between them. There was nothing comfortable about it.

“How’s the SRT?” Don said finally. “I suppose they made you director?”

“They offered, but I declined. The SRT is gone, scattered to the winds. Most of the agents were absorbed back into the Bureau proper. Ed Newsam is on the Hostage Rescue Team. Mark Swann went to NSA. I keep in pretty close touch with those guys – I borrow them for an operation from time to time.”

Luke saw something flash in Don’s eyes, and disappear almost before it was there. His baby, the FBI Special Response Team, the culmination of his life’s work, had been dismantled. Had he not known that? Luke supposed he hadn’t.

“Trudy Wellington has disappeared,” Luke said.

Something else appeared in Don’s eyes, and this time it stayed there. If it lingered, it meant Don wanted him to see it. Luke couldn’t tell if it was an emotion, a memory, or some piece of knowledge. He was good at reading people, but Don was an old spy. His mind and his heart were closed books.

“You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you, Don?”

Don shrugged, offered half a smile. “The Trudy I knew was very smart. She had her ear to the ground. If I had to guess, she heard a distant rumble that disturbed her, and she ran away before it could come closer.”

“Did you speak to her?”

Don didn’t answer.

“Don, there’s no sense thinking you’re going to stonewall me about anything. I can make a phone call and find out who you’ve talked to, who’s written to you, and what was in the letter. You have no privacy. Did you talk to Trudy or didn’t you?”

“I did, yes.”

“And what did you tell her?” Luke said.

“I told her that her life was in danger.”

“Based on what?”

Don looked at the ceiling for a moment. “Luke, you know what you know, and that’s good. You also don’t know what you don’t know. If you have any limitations, that’s certainly one of them. What you don’t know in this case, because you don’t involve yourself in politics, is there’s been a quiet war going on behind the scenes for the past six months. The attack at Mount Weather? A lot of high-profile people died that night. And a lot of low-profile people have died since then. I’d say at least as many who died in the original attack. Trudy wasn’t involved in the plot against Thomas Hayes, but not everyone believes that. There are people out there seeking retribution.”

“So she ran on your say-so?”

“I think so, yes.”

“Do you know where she is?”

Don shrugged. “I wouldn’t tell you if I did. One day, if she wants you to know where she is, I’m sure she’ll be the first to tell you.”

Luke had the urge to ask if she was okay, but he controlled himself. He wasn’t going to give Don that kind of power – it would be just what the old man wanted. Instead, another pause stretched out between them. The two men sat in the tiny space, staring into each other’s eyes. Eventually Don broke the silence.

“So who are you working for, if not the SRT? I have trouble picturing Luke Stone out of work for very long.”

Luke shrugged. “I guess you’d say I’m a freelancer, but I only have one client. I work directly for the President, on the rare occasions she calls me. Like she did earlier today, asking me to come out here and see you.”

Don raised an eyebrow. “A freelancer? Do they still pay you your salary and benefits?”

“They gave me a raise,” Luke said. “As a matter of fact, I think they gave me your old salary.”

“Government waste,” Don said, taking on his agency administrator persona and shaking his head. “But it suits you. You never were the Monday to Friday type.”

Luke didn’t answer. From this angle, he could see the view that the window afforded. Nothing – the cinderblock wall of another wing of the building, with a sliver of dark sky visible above.

It was an insidious design. The facility was located in the Rocky Mountains – when Luke arrived tonight, beyond the guard towers and the concrete and the razor wire, he was struck by the vista of the tall peaks that surrounded this place. The air was cold and the mountains were lightly salted with early snow. Even at night, you might say the location was beautiful.

The prisoners would never see it. Luke would bet five dollars that every cell in this prison enjoyed the same vista as every other – a blank wall.

“So what do you want, Don? Susan told me you’ve got a piece of intelligence you’re eager to share, but only with me. I’ve got a lot going on in my life at this moment, but I came out here because that’s my duty. I’m not sure how you obtained this intel, given your current circumstances...”

Don smiled. His eyes were completely divorced from whatever emotion his mouth tried to convey. They seemed like the eyes of an alien, lizard-like, with no empathy, no concern, not even any interest. The eyes of something that might eat you or run from you, but feel nothing while doing so.

“There are some very clever men in here,” he said. “You wouldn’t believe how intricate the communication system is among the prisoners. I’d love to describe it to you – I think you’d be fascinated – but I also don’t want to jeopardize it or put myself at risk. I will give you an example of what I’m talking about, though. Did you hear the man screaming before?”

“Yeah,” Luke said. “I didn’t catch what it was all about. The guards told me he had gone insane...” His voice trailed off.

Of course. The man had been saying something, if you had the ears to hear it.

“Right,” Don said. “The town crier. That’s what I call him. He’s not the only one, and that’s not the only method. Not even close.”

“So what do you have?” Luke said.

“There’s a plot,” Don said, his voice dropping to just above a whisper. “As you know, many of the men in here are affiliated with terrorist networks. They have their own ways of communicating. What I’ve heard is there’s a group in Belgium targeting the old Cold War nukes stored there. The warheads are lightly guarded on a Belgian NATO base. The security is a joke. The terrorists, I’m not sure who, are going to try to steal a warhead, or perhaps a missile, or more than one.”

Luke thought about it for a moment. “What good would that do? Without the nuclear codes the warheads aren’t even operational. They must be aware of that. It’s like risking your life to steal a giant paperweight.”

“I’d assume they have the codes,” Don said. “They either have access to the codes themselves, or they’ve discovered a way to generate them.”

Luke stared at him. “They have no way to launch a warhead. Without the delivery system, they’ll never generate the energy to detonate. This isn’t Bugs Bunny. It’s not like you can hit the thing with a hammer.”

Don shrugged. “Believe what you want to believe, Luke. All I’m telling you is what I heard.”

“Is that everything?” Luke said.

“It is.”

“So why are you choosing to share it? If someone found out you were passing secrets you picked up in here... well, my guess is that communicating isn’t the only thing these guys can do.”

Anger flashed across Don’s face now, like a brief summer squall on the high seas. Everything became dark for a moment, the storm appeared, then passed. He took a deep breath, apparently to calm himself.

“Why wouldn’t I share intelligence that I have? I’m concerned you’ve got me all wrong, Luke. I’m a patriot, as much as you are, if not more. I was risking my life for the United States before you were even born. I did what I did because I love my country, and not for any other reason. Not everyone agrees it was the right thing to do, and that’s why I’m in here. But please don’t question my loyalty, and don’t question my courage, either. There isn’t a man in this facility who frightens me, and that includes you.”

Luke was still skeptical. “And you don’t want anything in return for this?”

Don didn’t say anything for a long moment. He gestured at the messy desk. Then he smiled. There was no humor in it.

“I do want something. It’s not a lot to ask.” He paused, and looked around the tiny cell. “I don’t mind it in here, Luke. Some men really do go crazy – they’re the uneducated ones. They have no access to the life of the mind. But I do. To you, it seems like I’m locked away behind cinderblock walls, but to me, it’s almost like I’m on sabbatical. I was running for forty years straight, without a chance to take a break. These walls don’t imprison me. I’ve lived enough life for a dozen men, and all of it is still up here.”

He tapped himself on the forehead.

“I’m thinking a lot about the old times, the old missions. I’ve started working on my memoirs. I think it will make for fascinating reading one day.”

He stopped. A faraway look entered his eyes. He stared at the wall, but he was seeing something else. “Remember the time in Delta, when they sent us into the Congo to go after the warlord calling himself Prince Joseph? The one with all the child soldiers? Heaven’s Army.”

Luke nodded. “I remember. The brass at JSOC didn’t want you to go. They thought – ”

“I was too old. That’s right. But I went anyway. And we dropped in there at night, you, me, who else? Simpson – ”

“Montgomery,” Luke said. “A couple others.”

Don's eyes were very alive. "Right. The pilot screwed the pooch and dropped us into the river, one of the tributaries. We all hit the water with forty-pound rucks on."

"I don't like to think about it," Luke said. "I shot that rhinoceros."

Don pointed at him. "That's right. I forgot about that. The rhino charged us. I can still see it in the moonlight. But we crawled up there, soaking wet, and slit that murderous bastard's throat – decapitated his whole team in one swift and decisive strike. And we didn't split a hair on one child's head. I was proud of my men that night. I was proud to be an American."

Luke nodded again, almost smiled. "That was a long time ago."

"For me, it was yesterday," Don said. "I just started writing that one. Tomorrow I'll add the rhino."

Luke didn't say anything. It was a mission, one of many. Don's memoir was going to be one long book.

"So that's my whole point," Don said. "It's not bad in here. The food isn't even bad – well, not as bad as you might expect. I have my memories. I have a life. I've put together a workout routine, most of which I can do right here in the cell. Squats, pushups, chins, even yoga and tai chi moves. I have a sequence, and I move through it for hours each day, change it up, reverse it. It has a mindfulness component to it as well. I believe it would start a fitness craze if people knew about it. I'd like to trademark it – Prison Power. It's put me in much better shape than when I was out in the world and free to do whatever I pleased."

"Okay, Don," Luke said. "This is your retirement villa. That's nice."

Don raised a hand. "I want to live, that's what I'm telling you. They're going to give me the needle. You know it and I know it. I don't want the needle. Listen, I'm realistic. I know I'm not going to get a pardon, not in the current political environment. But if the intelligence I've given you pans out, I want the President to commute my sentence to life in prison without possibility of parole."

Luke was frustrated by their meeting. Don Morris was sitting in what amounted to a stone bathroom, writing his memoirs and developing what he hoped would become an exercise fad. It was pathetic. Luke had once thought of Don as a great American.

The control knob on Luke's blood turned from simmer to boil. He had his own problems, and his own life, but of course Don didn't care much about that. Don had become the center of his own universe in here.

"Why'd you do it, Don?" He gestured at the cell. "I mean..." He shook his head. "Look at this place."

Don didn't hesitate. "I did it to save my country, and I'd do it again. Thomas Hayes was the worst President since Herbert Hoover. Of that, I have no doubt. He was running us into the ground. He had no idea how to project American power in the world, and no inclination to do so. He thought the world took care of itself. He was wrong. The world does NOT take care of itself. We have dark forces arrayed against us – they run amok if for one second we're not watching them. They step into any power vacuum we leave them. They victimize the weak and defenseless. Our friends lose faith. I could no longer stand by and let these things happen."

"And what did you get?" Luke said. "Hayes's vice president is running the country."

Don nodded. "Right. And she has a bigger pair of cojones than he ever did. People surprise you sometimes. I'm not unhappy with Susan Hopkins as President."

"Great," Luke said. "I'll tell her that. I'm sure she'll be delighted to hear it. Don Morris is not unhappy with your presidency." He stood. He was ready to go. This little encounter was going to be a lot to chew on.

Don jumped off the bed. He put his hand on Luke's shoulder again. For a second, Luke thought Don was going to blurt out something emotional, something Luke would find embarrassing, like, "Don't go!"

But Don didn't do that.

“Don’t discount what I told you,” he said. “If it’s real, then we’ve got trouble. Just one nuclear weapon in the hands of the terrorists would be the worst thing you could dream of. They won’t hesitate to use it. One successful launch and the genie is out of the bottle. Who gets hit? Israel? Who do they hit back with their own nukes? Iran? How do you put the brakes on that? Call a time-out? I doubt it. What if we get hit? Or the Russians? Or both? What if automatic retaliatory strikes get triggered? Fear. Confusion. Zero trust. Men in silos, their fingers getting itchy, lingering over that button. There are *a lot* of nuclear weapons left on Earth, Luke. Once they start launching, there’s no good reason for them to stop.”

CHAPTER SIX

October 20

3:30 a.m.

Georgetown, Washington, DC

A black pickup truck was following him.

Luke had taken a late flight back. Now he was tired – exhausted – and yet still wired and awake. He didn't know when he would sleep again.

The taxi had dropped him off in front of a row of handsome brownstones. The tree-lined streets were quiet and empty. They seemed to shimmer in the light from the ornate overhead lamps. As the cab pulled away, he stood in the street and soaked up the cool night. The trees were losing their leaves – they were all over the ground. As he watched, a few more drifted down.

He had come straight from the airport to Trudy's place. The shades were drawn but at least one light was on in the street level apartment. No one was home – the lights were clearly on a timer, and probably a cheap one from a department store. The pattern was always the same. Trudy must have set it before she left.

She still owned the place – Luke knew that much. Swann had hacked her bank account. There were automatic payments in place for her mortgage, her association fees, and her electricity. She had paid two years of estimated real estate taxes upfront.

She had disappeared, but the apartment was here, going right along by itself as if nothing had happened.

Why did he keep coming here? Did he think she would suddenly be home one night? Did he think these past months would have erased themselves?

He paused for just a few seconds, facing away from the pickup truck, picturing it back there, remembering it from when he had walked passed it just a moment ago.

It was large, heavy duty, the kind of truck you saw on construction sites. The windows in its cab were smoked, making it impossible to see much inside. Even so, he had the sense that there were two silhouettes behind those windows. The truck's headlights had been off when he walked past, and they were still off – there had been no approaching lights to tip him off. What had given the truck away was sound. He could hear its engine rumbling.

There was a gas station and convenience store at the bottom of the hill. It was lit up on the outside above the pumps, but the store itself looked to be closed. Luke walked down the middle of the street, toward the beckoning light.

He glanced to his left and his right without turning his head. On either side, expensive cars were parked nose to tail against the curb in unbroken lines. This was a crowded neighborhood, and there wasn't much parking. There was no obvious way to get off the street and onto the sidewalk.

He broke into a sprint.

He did it without warning. He didn't accelerate gradually from a walk to a run. One moment he was walking, and a heartbeat later he was running as fast as he could. Behind him, the pickup roared into life. Its tires burned rubber on the pavement, the shriek of the wheels tearing open the quiet night.

Luke dove to his right, sliding head first over the hood of a white Lexus. He slid off the car and tumbled onto the sidewalk, landing on his back, rolling into a sitting position while pulling his Glock from the shoulder holster inside his jacket, all in one move.

The Lexus started to disintegrate behind him. The truck had stopped, and its passenger side window was down. A man in a ski mask was there, firing a submachine gun with a giant sound suppressor. The gun had a drum magazine attached to the bottom, probably twelve dozen rounds. Luke absorbed all of this information in an instant, before his conscious mind was even aware of it.

The windows of the Lexus shattered, the tires popped and the car sank to the ground. THUNK, THUNK, THUNK – bullets punched through its side panels. Steam rose from under its hood. The man in the truck was spraying it with machine gun fire.

Luke ran forward, ducking low. The bullets followed him, shattering the next car as it had the Lexus. Glass sprayed all over him.

A car alarm went off, rang for five seconds, then stopped as the bullets pierced the vehicle and destroyed the alarm system.

Luke kept running, his breath hot in his lungs. He reached the gas station and bolted across its wide open yard. The overhead lights cast eerie shadows – the gas pumps seemed like looming monsters. The pickup truck skidded into the lot behind him. Luke glanced back and saw it bounce over the curb and take the corner hard.

He raced down another side street, then darted left into an alley. It was an old cobblestone street. He stumbled over the rough and pitted surface. The truck's engine squealed, very close. Luke didn't look. A grinding, crunching sound came as the truck bounced over the cobblestones.

Luke felt it there – the truck was one second behind him.

His heart pounded in his chest. It was no use. He turned his head and there was the truck, right behind him. Its massive grille barreled forward, growing bigger and bigger as it came. It looked like a huge, grinning mouth. The hood of the truck was nearly as high as his head.

To Luke's left there was a dumpster. He sensed it more than saw it. He dove behind it, falling to the cobblestones, landing hard in a tiny alcove. The impact rattled his bones, and he pressed himself against the wall, as tight as his body would go.

An instant later, the pickup rammed the dumpster, crushing it against the wall of the alley. The truck passed, just missing Luke, dragging the dumpster with it. It skidded to a halt in the alleyway fifty feet past the alcove. Its brake lights shone red. The dumpster was crushed between the driver's side door and the wall.

Luke could retake the initiative, but to do so, he had *to move*.

"Get up," he said.

He hauled himself to his feet, gun in hand, and wedged his body into the alcove. Two-handed, he aimed at the back window of the truck.

BLAM, BLAM, BLAM, BLAM.

The window shattered. The noise of his gun was deafening. It echoed down the alleyway and out into the silent city streets. If he wanted attention, and he did, this would bring it.

The truck's tires screamed and shredded on the cobblestones, the driver trying to get free of that dumpster.

The passenger – the shooter – used the butt of his gun to smash out the remains of the back window. He was going to try for a shot.

Perfect.

BLAM.

Luke shot him, dead center in the forehead.

The man slumped, his head hanging out the back window, his gun clattering uselessly into the pickup's bed.

The truck skidded sideways, its grille sliding along the wall, the driver's side facing Luke now. Luke would take the driver too, if he could, but not with a kill shot. He would keep him alive to answer questions.

The driver was good – better than his friend. His window had been shattered by the collision, but he had ducked way down below it. Luke couldn't see him.

BLAM, BLAM, BLAM.

Luke put three shots into the driver's side door. The sound was hollow, metallic, as the bullets punched through. The driver screamed. He was hit.

Suddenly, the truck skidded sideways to the right, like a joyrider doing donuts in the snow. The pickup bed swung around and rammed the wall. But the truck had broken loose from the dumpster. If the driver was still able, he was free to make a run for it.

Luke aimed at the rear left tire. BLAM.

The tire popped, but the truck squealed out and peeled off down the alley. It bounced out onto the street, skidded, and went left. Gone.

Nearby, sirens were already approaching. Luke could hear them coming from several different directions. He holstered his gun and limped out of the alley, his knee already stiffening. He had scraped it falling to the cobblestones.

A DC police interceptor roared up, lights flashing, throwing crazy blue shadows against the surrounding buildings. Luke already had the badge out for them, the old badge from the defunct FBI Special Response Team. It still had a year left before it expired. He raised his arms high in the air, the badge in his right hand.

“Federal agent!” he shouted at the cops who burst from the car, guns drawn and trained on him.

“On the ground!” they told him.

He did exactly as they said, moving slow and deliberately, no threat to anyone.

“What’s going on here?” one of the cops said as he snatched the badge from Luke’s outstretched hand.

Luke shrugged.

“Somebody’s trying to kill me.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

10:20 a.m.

The White House, Washington, DC

It was like a state funeral, the grand opening of a used car lot, and an amateur comedy show rolled into one.

Susan Hopkins, the President of the United States, and wearing a blue dress and shawl made especially for this occasion by the designer Etta Chang, looked out across the South Lawn at the gathered dignitaries and journalists. It was a select group, and the hardest invitation to score in town for the past month. On a bright sunny autumn day, under blue skies, the White House – one of the most enduring symbols of America – was rebuilt and ready to go.

Secret Service men towered behind and just in front of Susan, taking any shooting angles away – she felt almost like she was lost in a forest of tall men. Washington, DC, Virginia, and Maryland were restricted flight zones this morning. If you hadn't flown in by 7 a.m., you were out of luck.

The ceremony was running long. It had started just after 9 a.m., and already it was pushing toward 10:30. Between the opening military procession with the bugler playing Taps and the riderless horse in honor of Thomas Hayes, the release of a flock of white doves to symbolize the many others who had died that day and that night, the fighter jet flyover, the children's choir, and the various speeches and blessings...

Oh yes, the blessings.

The rebuilt house had been blessed, in turn, by an Orthodox rabbi from Philadelphia, a Muslim imam, the Catholic Archbishop of Washington, DC, the minister of the North Capitol Street AME Zion Church, and the famous Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh.

The wrangling that had gone into picking the religious dignitaries – that alone had soured Susan's taste for this event. An Orthodox rabbi? The Women of Reform Judaism were vocal with their annoyance – they had pushed for a female rabbi. Sunni or Shiite for the imam – there was no pleasing both. In fact, Kat Lopez had stuck a finger in both their eyes and gone with a Sufi.

Catholic groups were not thrilled about Pierre. The First Gentleman of the USA was gay? And married to a woman? Cats and dogs were lying down together. That question was resolved when Pierre decided to take a miss and watch the event from the apartment in San Francisco.

Pierre and the girls had largely disappeared from public life since the scandal. It was right to keep the girls away from the spotlight after everything that had happened, but this was an important event and Pierre hadn't even wanted to come. That worried Susan a little. Really, more than a little. And of course, now the gay rights activists were furious with him for what they saw as his bowing to pressure from the Catholic Church.

At the podium, Karen White, the new Speaker of the House, was just finishing her speech. Karen was eccentric, to say the least – she wore a hat with a large paper sunflower on it. The hat was more appropriate for a children's Easter egg hunt than for today's event. If Etta Chang saw that hat, it would be time for a fashion makeover.

Karen's remarks had been short on jabs at the liberals in government – thank God, because the special elections to re-constitute the decimated Congress were two weeks away. The campaigns had turned into a mindless hate-filled scramble – historians enjoyed going on CNN and FOX News to claim that the civil discourse in the country had reached its lowest ebb since the Civil War.

What Karen White lacked in offensive rhetoric on the domestic front, she more than made up for on the world stage. Her speech seemed to suggest – to the gasps of many in the audience – that the White House had been destroyed not by rogue elements of the conservative movement and the military here in the USA, but by foreign operatives, possibly from Iran or Russia. During one

string of tortured logic, the special envoy from Iran had stood up and stormed away, two of his senior diplomats in tow.

“It’s fine,” Kurt Kimball, the National Security Advisor, said in Susan’s ear. “They all know Karen’s a little nutty. I mean, look at her hat. We’ll have someone from the State Department make it up to them.”

“How?” Susan said.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. We’ll figure something out.”

On the stage, Kat had given Susan the nod. They were ready for her. She stepped onto the stage as Secret Service agents moved into position around her. The podium was surrounded on three sides by clear bulletproof glass. She stood for a moment and surveyed the assembled crowd. She wasn’t nervous at all. Talking to the people had always been one of her strong points.

“Good morning,” she said. Her voice echoed out over the lawn.

“Good morning,” a few wisecrackers shouted back.

She launched comfortably into her prepared speech. It was a good one. She spoke to them about shared sacrifice, and about loss, and about resilience. She told them about the greatness of the American experiment – something they already knew. She told them about the valor of the men who had saved her life that night, and she recognized Chuck Berg – who was now the head of her home security detail, and was standing on stage with her – and Walter Brenna, who was an honored guest in the front row. Both men raised their hands and received thunderous applause.

She told them she was moving into the White House this very day – which brought a standing ovation – and she welcomed them inside after her remarks, to take a tour and see what she’d done with the old place.

She finished with a flourish, echoing that great hero of hers, and of everyone, John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

“Nearly sixty years ago, John Fitzgerald Kennedy was elected President. His inaugural address is one of the greatest and most quoted speeches ever delivered. All of you know that he told us in that speech to ask not what our country could do for us, but what we could do for our country. But you know? There’s another part of that speech, less well known, that I enjoy just as much. It seems particularly appropriate for today’s events, and I want to leave you with it. What Kennedy said was this.”

She took a deep breath, hearing in her mind the pauses that Kennedy had taken. She wanted to get his phrasing exactly right.

“Let every nation know,” she said, “whether it wishes us well or ill... that we shall pay any price... bear any burden...”

In the crowd, the cheering had already begun. She waved a hand, but it was no use. They were just going to do it, and her job now was to meet the rising swell of their outburst, somehow get ahead of it and above it, and race it to the finish line.

“Meet any hardship...” she shouted.

“Yes!” someone screamed, somehow cutting through the noise.

“Support any friend,” Susan said, and raised her fist in the air. “And oppose any foe... to assure the survival and the success of liberty!”

The crowd had come to its feet. The ovation went on and on.

“This much we pledge,” Susan said. “And more.” She paused again. “Thank you, my friends. Thank you.”

* * *

The inside of the building gave her chills.

Susan moved through the hallways with her Secret Service contingent, Kat Lopez, and two assistants trailing close behind. The group passed through the doors to the Oval Office. Just being in here had a strange effect on her. She'd felt it before, just a week ago, when they'd first given her a tour of the renovated White House. There was something surreal about it.

Almost nothing had changed. That was part of it. The Oval Office seemed just the same as the last time she had seen it – the day it was attacked and destroyed, the day Thomas Hayes and more than three hundred people died. Three tall windows, with drapes pulled back, still looked out on the Rose Garden. Near the center of the office, a comfortable sitting area was situated on top of a lush carpet adorned with the Seal of the President. Even the Resolute Desk – a long-ago gift from the British people – was still there in its customary spot.

Of course, it wasn't the same desk. It had been re-crafted from the original drawings sometime in the past three months in a woodworking shop in the Welsh countryside. But that was her point – everything looked exactly the same. It was almost as if President Thomas Hayes – taller than everyone around him by at least four or five inches – would walk in any minute and give her his customary frown.

Was she traumatized? Was this building a trigger for her?

She knew that she would prefer to live at the Naval Observatory. That grand old house had been her home for the past five years. It was light, open, and airy. She was comfortable there. In comparison, the White House – especially the residence – was creaky, cranky, dreary, and drafty in the winter, with bad light.

It was a big place, but the rooms felt cramped. And there was... something... about the place. You felt like you might turn any corner and run into a ghost. She used to think it would be the ghost of Lincoln or McKinley or even Kennedy. But now she knew it would be Thomas Hayes.

She would move back to the Naval Observatory house in a heartbeat – if only she hadn't given it away. Her new Vice President, Marybeth Horning, was due to move in there during the next few days. She smiled when she thought of Marybeth – the ultra-liberal senator from Rhode Island – who had been on a fact-finding tour of human rights violations at egg farms in Iowa on the day of the Mount Weather attack. Marybeth was a firebrand for workers' rights, for women's rights, for the environment, for everything Susan cared about.

Elevating her to Vice President had actually been Kat Lopez's idea. It was perfect – Marybeth was such an outspoken leftist that no one on the right would ever want to see Susan killed. They'd just wind up with their worst nightmare as President. And under the new Secret Service rules, Susan and Marybeth would never be in the same place at the same time for the rest of Susan's term – hence Marybeth's absence from the festivities today. That was kind of a shame because Susan liked Marybeth.

Susan sighed and glanced around the office again. Her mind wandered. She remembered the day of the attack. She and Thomas had been estranged for a couple of years. Susan didn't really mind. She was having fun being Vice President, and David Halstram – Thomas's chief-of-staff – made sure her schedule was kept busy with events far away from the President.

But that day, David had asked her to fly in and be by the President's side. Thomas's approval ratings had cratered, and the Speaker of the House had just called for his impeachment. He was under siege, all because he didn't want to go to war with Iran. Of course, the Speaker was Bill Ryan, one of the leaders of the coup, who at this moment was in a federal prison, preparing to be transferred to death row.

She remembered how she and Thomas were poring over a map of the Middle East right in this office. They weren't talking about anything, just bantering about this or that. It was a photo op, not an actual strategy meeting.

Suddenly, two men burst in.

"FBI!" one of them screamed. "I have an important message for the President."

One of those men was Agent Luke Stone.

Her life had changed in that instant, and had not returned to normal since then. Her previous life might never come back, she realized. Her marriage had nearly been destroyed by scandal. Her daughter had been kidnapped. Susan had aged ten years in six months, as she weathered one terrorist or political attack after another.

Now she was faced with sleeping in this drafty old house, alone. They had spent a billion dollars renovating the place, and she did not want to live here. Hmm. She would have to talk to Kat, or someone, about this.

“Susan?”

She looked up. It was Kurt Kimball. His sudden appearance snapped her back to reality. Kurt was tall and broad, with a head as round and smooth as a cue ball. His eyes were bright and alert. He was the picture of vitality and health at fifty-three. He was one of the people who thought fifty was the new thirty. Until she became President, Susan would have agreed with him. Now she wasn't so sure. She was two years shy of half a century herself. If things kept up the way they had been going, by the time she got there, fifty was going to be the new sixty.

“Hello again, Kurt.”

“Susan, Agent Stone is here. He interviewed Don Morris in Colorado last night. He thinks he may have intelligence we want to hear. I haven't spoken with him yet, but my people tell me he was involved in an incident when he arrived back in Washington early this morning.”

“An incident? What does that mean?” It didn't sound good. But then again, when *wasn't* Agent Stone involved in an incident?

“There was a shootout in Georgetown. Two men in a truck apparently tried to murder him. Luke killed one. The other escaped.”

Susan stared at Kurt. “Was it related to Don Morris?”

Kurt shook his head. “We don't know. But it happened about two blocks from the apartment of Trudy Wellington. Wellington has disappeared, as you know, but it seems that Stone went to her apartment as soon as he landed from interviewing Morris. The whole thing is very... unusual.”

Susan took a deep breath. Stone had saved her life more than once. He had rescued her daughter from the kidnapers. He had saved countless lives during the Ebola crisis, and during the North Korean crisis. He had even done the world a favor and assassinated the dictator of North Korea while he was there. He was an invaluable asset to Susan's administration. More than that, he was Susan's secret weapon. But he was also unstable, he was violent, and he appeared to involve himself in things that he shouldn't.

“Anyway,” Kurt said. “We have him here, and he has a report to give. I think we should break in the new Situation Room right away and debrief him.”

Susan nodded. It was almost a relief to have something to sink her teeth into. The Situation Room here at the White House was a dedicated space, nothing like the converted conference room they had been using at the Naval Observatory. It was a totally renovated and updated command center, with the latest in high-tech wizardry. It would expand their strategic capabilities tremendously – or so she was told.

The only problem? It was underground, and Susan liked windows.

“Give me a few moments to get changed, okay?” Susan indicated the fancy, one-of-a-kind designer dress she wore. “I don't know if this thing works for an intelligence meeting.”

Kurt smiled. He made a show of looking her up and down.

“Nah. Come on. You look great. People will be impressed – you came right in from the dedication and went to work.”

* * *

Luke rode the elevator with a crowd of people in suits, down to the Situation Room. He was tired – he had spent two hours being interviewed by the DC cops, then caught a few hours of fitful sleep. He had missed the dedication ceremony entirely.

Things like the rebuilt White House and its reopening just weren't on his mind. He barely noticed the place, or the crowds oohing and ahhhhing over it. He was lost in a forest of dark thoughts – about himself and his life, about Becca and Gunner, and about Don Morris, his choices and the end to which he had come. Luke had also killed a man last night, and he still had no idea why.

The elevator opened into the egg-shaped Situation Room. It was smaller and more cramped than the former conference room they'd been using over at the Naval Observatory. It was also less ad hoc, less tossed together. The place looked like the command module on a Hollywood spaceship. It was set up for maximum use of the space, with large screens embedded in the walls every couple of feet, and a giant projection screen on the far wall at the end of the table. Tablet computers and slim microphones rose from slots out of the conference table – they could be dropped back into the table if the attendee wanted to use their own device.

Every plush leather seat at the table was occupied – mostly with middle-aged, overweight decision makers. The seats along the walls were filled with young aides and even younger assistants, most of them tapping messages into tablets, or speaking into telephones.

Susan Hopkins sat in a chair at the closest end of the oblong table. At the far end stood Kurt Kimball, Susan's National Security Advisor. A sprawl of usual suspects took up the seats in between them.

Kurt noticed Luke enter and clapped his big hands. It made a sound like a heavy book dropping to a stone floor. "Order, everybody! Come to order, please."

The place quieted down. A few aides continued to talk along the wall.

Kurt clapped his hands again.

CLAP. CLAP.

The room went dead quiet.

"Hi, Kurt," Luke said. "I like your new command center."

Kurt nodded. "Agent Stone."

Susan turned to Luke and they shook hands. Luke's big hand swallowed her tiny one. "Madam President," he said. "Good to see you again."

"Welcome, Luke," she said. "What do you have for us?"

He looked at Kurt. "Are you ready for my report?"

Kurt shrugged. "That's why we're here. If it weren't for you, we'd all be upstairs enjoying the festivities."

Luke nodded. It had been a long day, and it was still early. He wanted to finish this up and go out to the country house he had once shared with Becca. Everything was too much right now, and what he most wanted to do was take a nap. Just nap on the couch, and maybe later, in the late afternoon, sit outside with a coffee and watch the sun set over the water. He had a lot to think about, and a lot of planning to do. An image of Gunner appeared in his mind.

All eyes were on him. He took a deep breath. He repeated what Don had told him. Islamic terrorists were going to steal nuclear weapons from an air base in Belgium.

A tall heavyset man with blond hair raised a hand. "Agent Stone?"

"Yes."

"Haley Lawrence. Secretary of Defense."

Luke had known that. But until this moment, he had forgotten it.

"Mr. Secretary," he said. "What can I do for you?"

The man gave a slight smile, almost a smirk. “Please share with us how you think Don Morris obtained this intelligence. He’s in a federal high-security facility, the highest security we currently have, held in isolation in his cell twenty-three hours a day, and has no direct contact with anyone except the guards.”

Luke smiled. “I think that’s a question for the guards to answer.”

A ripple of laughter went around the room.

“I’ve known Don Morris a long time,” Luke said. “He’s probably one of the most resourceful people alive in the United States at this moment. I have no doubt that he receives intelligence, even in his current location. Is it accurate intelligence? I have no idea, nor does he. He doesn’t have any way to confirm it or discredit it. I guess that’s our job.”

He gave Kurt a sidelong glance. “Those are all the details I have. Any thoughts?”

Kurt paused for a moment, then nodded. “Sure. This will be a little bit on the fly, but mostly accurate. Belgium has been much on my mind in recent years, for obvious reasons.” He turned to an aide standing behind him. “Amy, can you bring us up a map of Belgium? Key in on Molenbeek and Kleine Brogel, if you don’t mind.”

The young woman fiddled with her tablet, while another aide turned on the main display monitor behind Kurt. A few seconds passed. The monitor ran through a few internal tests, then showed a blue desktop. A quiet buzz of conversation started again.

Kurt watched his aide. She nodded to him, and then he looked at the President.

“Susan, are you ready?”

“Ready when you are.”

A map of Europe appeared on the screen behind him. It quickly zoomed in to focus on Western Europe, and then Belgium.

“Okay. Behind me, you see a map of Belgium. There are two locations in that country I want to call your attention to. The first is the capital city, Brussels.”

Behind him, the map zoomed again. Now it showed the dense grid of a city, with a ring highway circling it. The map moved to the upper left-hand corner, and several photographs of cobblestone streets, a government building from the nineteenth century, and a stately and ornate bridge over a canal.

He turned to his aide. “Bring up Molenbeek, please.”

The map zoomed again, and more photos of streets appeared. In one, a group of bearded men marched carrying a white banner, fists pumping the air. The top of the banner had Arabic characters written in black. Below that was the apparent English translation:

No to Democracy!

“Molenbeek is a suburb of about ninety-five thousand people. It is the most densely populated section of Brussels, and parts of it run as high as eighty percent Muslim, mostly of Turkish and Moroccan descent. It’s a hotbed of extremism. The weapons used in the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine attack were cached beforehand in Molenbeek. The 2015 Paris terror attacks were planned there, and the perpetrators of that crime are all men who grew up and lived in Molenbeek.”

Kurt looked around the room. “In short, if there are terror attacks being planned in Europe, and we can safely assume there are, there’s a pretty good chance that the planning is taking place in Molenbeek. Are we clear on this?”

A ripple of agreement went through the room.

“Okay, let’s see Kleine Brogel.”

On the screen, the map zoomed out, scrolled to the right a short distance, then zoomed in again. Luke could make out runways and buildings at a rural airfield not far from a small town.

“Kleine Brogel Air Base,” Kurt said. “It’s a Belgian military airfield located about sixty miles east of Brussels. The village you see there is the municipality of Kleine Brogel, hence the name of

the base. The base is home to the Belgian Tenth Tactical Wing. They fly F-16 Falcons, supersonic jet fighters, which among other capabilities, can deliver B61 nuclear bombs.”

On the screen, the map disappeared and an image materialized. It was of a missile-shaped bomb, mounted on a wheeled trundle and parked beneath the fuselage of a fighter jet. The bomb was long and sleek, gray with a black tip.

“Here you see the B61,” Kurt said. “Not quite twelve feet long, about thirty inches in diameter, and weighing in at about seven hundred pounds. It’s a variable yield weapon that can put as many as three hundred forty kilotons on a target – roughly twenty times the magnitude of the Hiroshima explosion. Compare that yield to the megatons of the large ballistic missiles, and you can see that the B61 is a small tactical nuke. It’s designed to be carried by fast airplanes, like the F-16. You’ll note its streamlined shape – that’s so it can withstand the speeds its delivery craft are likely to reach. These are American-made bombs, and we share them with Belgium as part of our NATO agreements.”

“So the bombs are onsite there?” Susan said.

Kurt nodded. “Yes. I’d say about thirty of them. I can get you the exact figure, if we need it.”

Another ripple went through the gathered crowd.

Kurt raised his hand. “It gets better. Kleine Brogel is a political football in Belgium. Many Belgians hate the fact that the bombs are there, and want them out of the country. In 2009, a group of Belgian peace activists decided to show everyone how unsafe the bombs were. They breached the security of the base.”

The map reappeared on the screen. Kurt indicated an area along the bottom edge of the base. “To the south of the airfield there are some dairy farms. The activists walked across the farmland, then climbed the fence. They wandered around the base for at least forty-five minutes before anyone noticed they were there. When they were finally intercepted – by a Belgian airman with an unloaded rifle, by the way – they were standing right outside a bunker where some of the bombs were stored. They had already spray-painted slogans on the bunker and put up some of their stickers.”

Chatter erupted in the room again, louder and more pronounced this time.

“Okay, okay. It was a serious lapse in security. But before we get carried away, let’s recognize a few things. For one, the bunkers were locked – there was no danger the activists were going to get inside. Also, the bombs are stacked in chambers underground – even if the activists did somehow make it inside, they wouldn’t have been able to operate the hydraulic lifts to bring the bombs to the surface. The activists were on foot, so even if they managed to operate the lifts, they wouldn’t have gotten very far carrying a weapon that weighs seven hundred pounds.”

“So, with all that in mind, what is your assessment of the risk level?” Haley Lawrence said.

Kurt took a long pause. He seemed to stare at something very far away for a moment. To Luke, it was if Kurt’s mind was a calculator, currently attaching numbers to the various elements he had just described, then adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing them.

“High,” he said.

“High?”

Kurt nodded. “Yes, of course. It’s a high-level threat. Could a group be planning to steal a bomb from Kleine Brogel? Sure. This isn’t the first time we’ve heard this idea – it arises from time to time in terrorist network chatter that NSA and the Pentagon pick up. A terror cell in Brussels might have a contact or contacts at the airbase who can help them – in fact, this is a very likely scenario. Yes, the bombs aren’t operational without the nuclear codes, and yes, they’re meant to be delivered by supersonic aircraft. But what if the Iranians want the bombs simply to reverse engineer them, or even just to mine them for the nuclear material? The militants in Molenbeek tend to be Sunnis, and they hate Iran. Our militants could be mercenaries, willing to hire themselves out to the highest bidder.

“Or consider this,” Kurt continued. “The Somali air force has a handful of obsolete supersonic jets. Most are in disrepair, but I bet one or two could still get airborne. The Somali government is weak, under constant attack from radical Islam, and teetering on the verge of collapse. What if

militant Islamists commandeer one of these aircraft, mount a bomb on it, and crash the entire plane in a nuclear suicide attack?”

“Didn’t you just say the bombs won’t work without the codes?” Susan said.

Kurt shrugged. “Nuclear codes are among the most advanced encryption on the planet. To our knowledge, they’ve never been broken, leaked, or stolen. But that doesn’t mean they won’t be. In worst-case-scenario planning, I’d say the safest assumption is that one day the codes will be broken, if they aren’t already.”

“So what do you suggest we do?”

Kurt didn’t hesitate. “Beef up security at Kleine Brogel Airbase. Do it immediately. We have troops there, but they’re in a constant state of tension with the Belgians. To get any meaningful increase in security, we’re going to have to step on some toes. I’d also reexamine security measures at the other NATO bases where American nuclear weapons are stored. I think we’ll find that these are in pretty good shape. For lax security, the Belgians really take the cake.

“Finally, I’d do something that I’ve wanted to do for a while – put a few special operatives on the ground in Brussels, specifically Molenbeek. Have them poke around and ask some questions. This is the kind of thing the Belgians should be doing on a regular basis, but don’t. It wouldn’t necessarily have to be a secret operation – it might even be better if it isn’t. Just have the right agents go in there, ones who don’t normally take no for an answer, and lean hard on a few people.”

Nearly exhausted, Luke was only half-listening. He was mostly trying to hang on until the meeting ended. Slowly, he became aware that many of the people in the room were staring at him.

He raised his palms and leaned back.

“Thanks,” he said, “but no.”

* * *

“So who’s trying to kill you?” Susan said.

Luke sat in a high-backed leather chair in the sitting area of the Oval Office. Beneath his feet was the Seal of the President of the United States. The last time he was here, the Secret Service had him face-down against that seal. But of course, that was a different carpet – although it looked identical, this was an entirely new room. The other one had been destroyed. For a moment, he had forgotten that.

Man, he was tired.

An aide had brought Luke a cup of coffee in a Styrofoam cup. Maybe that would help him wake up. He sipped it – the President’s coffee was always good.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Last I heard, they were running some DNA and fingerprint tests on the dead guy.”

Luke studied Susan’s face. She had aged. The lines in her skin had deepened and become creases. The skin itself was not as firm and buoyant. Somehow, she had kept her adolescent beauty well into middle age, but in six months as President, time had caught up with her.

Luke thought of the youthful, middle-aged Abraham Lincoln becoming President, a man so energetic and physically powerful he was renowned for his parlor trick feats of strength. Four years later, just before he was assassinated, the stress of the Civil War had turned him into a frail and wizened old man.

Susan was still beautiful, but it was different now. She looked almost *weathered*. He wondered what she thought about it, or if she had even noticed it yet. Then he answered his own question – of course she had noticed it. She was a former supermodel. She probably noticed the smallest changes to her appearance. For the first time, he noticed the dress she was wearing. It was deep blue, very fancy, and clung perfectly to her shape. The neckline was ruffles – there, but understated.

“Hey, nice dress,” he said.

She gestured at it with mock disdain. “This old thing? It’s just something I threw on. You did know we were having a ceremony today, didn’t you?”

Luke nodded. He knew. “It’s amazing,” he said. “The way they put this place back together exactly the way it was before.”

“It’s a little creepy if you ask me,” Susan said. She glanced around at the high-ceilinged room. “I lived at the Naval Observatory for five years. I love that house. I wouldn’t mind living there the rest of my life. This place is going to take some getting used to.”

They lapsed into silence. Luke was here simply to pay his respects. In another minute, he was going to ask her for a car, or preferably a helicopter, to take him out to the Eastern Shore.

“So what do you think?” she said.

“What do I think? About what?”

“About the meeting we just had.”

Luke yawned. He was tired. “I don’t know what to think. Do we have nuclear weapons in Europe? Yes. Are they vulnerable? It sounds like they could be more secure than they are. Beyond that...”

He trailed off.

“Will you go?” she said.

Luke almost laughed. “You don’t need me in Belgium, Susan. Just put an extra security detail at the base there, preferably Americans, and preferably carrying loaded weapons. That should do the trick.”

Susan shook her head. “If it’s a credible threat, we should get to the source of it. Listen, we’ve been playing footsie with the Belgians far too long. There have been too many attacks coming out of Brussels, and I’d like to break those networks. It’s beyond the pale that after the Paris attacks they didn’t put all of Molenbeek on lockdown. Sometimes I wonder whose side they’re on.”

Luke raised his hands. “Susan...”

“Luke,” she said. “I need you to do this. There’s something that didn’t get covered in the meeting. It makes all of this a lot more urgent than you might think. Kurt knows about it, I know about it, but no one else who was there knows.”

“What is it?”

She hesitated. “Luke...”

“Susan, you called me yesterday and had me fly out to Colorado on two hours’ notice. I did as you asked. Now you want me to go to Belgium. You say it’s important, but you don’t want to tell me why. You know my wife has cancer? I only mention that so you know exactly what you’re asking me to do.”

For a second, he thought he was going to tell her more, maybe tell her everything. He and his wife had split up. She was from a wealthy family, but Luke didn’t want any money from her. He just wanted to see his son on a regular basis, and Becca was threatening that. She had been gearing up for a custody battle, but now, suddenly, she had cancer. She was probably going to die. And still she wanted to fight. The whole thing had knocked Luke off his feet. He had no idea what to do or where to turn. He felt completely lost.

“Luke, I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you. It’s hard. We’ve been having a lot of problems, and now this.”

She was staring directly into his eyes. “If it helps any, I understand. My parents died when I was young. My husband seems to have checked out of our marriage, and become a recluse. I don’t even blame him. Who would want more of what they’ve been putting him through? But he’s taken my girls with him. I know what it’s like to feel alone – I guess that’s what I’m saying.”

Luke was surprised that she would open up to him like that. It made him realize how much she trusted him, and made him want to help her even more.

“Okay,” Luke said. “Then tell me why this so important.”

“There’s been a data breach at the Department of Energy. No one knows the extent of it yet, whether it was accident or was planned. No one knows anything. A lot of information is just gone, including thousands of legacy nuclear codes. No one can even say whether that matters – would they even still work? It’s going to take some time to get this sorted out, but in the meantime, the last thing we can afford is to lose a nuclear weapon.”

He sat back. He would go. With any luck, he would get over there, knock a couple of heads together, tighten up the security protocols and be back in a couple of days. In his mind’s eye, he saw Gunner in the backyard shooting baskets.

By himself.

“Okay,” Luke said. “I’ll need my team. Ed Newsam, Mark Swann. And I’m down a member. I need an intel officer to replace Trudy Wellington. Somebody good.”

Susan nodded and flashed a smile of gratitude.

“Whatever you need.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

5:15 p.m. (Eastern Daylight Time) The Skies Above the Atlantic Ocean

“Are we ready for this, kids?”

The six-seat Learjet screamed north and east across the afternoon sky. The jet was dark blue with the Secret Service seal on the side. Behind it, the sun began to set. Luke gazed out his window to the east. It was already dark ahead of them – it was late fall, and the days were getting shorter. Far below, the ocean was vast, endless, and deep green.

Luke used his typical psych-up lingo, but it was rote. He didn’t feel it. He’d been awake too long. He had too much weighing on him. And he had taken on a job that he probably didn’t need to take.

He and his team used the front four passenger seats as their meeting area. They stowed their luggage, and their gear, in the seats at the back.

In the seat across the aisle from him sat big Ed Newsam, in khaki cargo pants, a long-sleeved T-shirt, and a light jacket. He dropped his sunglasses over his eyes, against the sun streaming in his window. When he was relaxed, as he seemed right now, all of the muscle tension would go out of Ed’s brawny, hyper-athletic body. He was like a flat tire draped across the seat. Ed was weapons and tactics, and Luke had rarely met a man more qualified – Ed himself was about as devastating a weapon as you could ask for.

Across from Luke and to the left, facing him, was Mark Swann. He was tall and thin, with long sandy hair pulled into a ponytail and fancy black-framed rectangular glasses – Calvin Klein. He stretched his long legs out into the aisle. He wore an old pair of faded jeans and a pair of big black Doc Marten combat boots. The boots made Luke smile – the man had never seen a minute of actual combat in his life, not that Luke would want him to. Swann was information systems – a wisecracking former hacker who got busted and joined the government to avoid a long prison sentence.

Swann and Newsam had come back from the Grand Canyon a couple days early – they said it wasn’t the same without Luke and Gunner.

“Babysitting some out-of-date nukes?” Swann said now. “I suppose I’m ready.”

“Worse,” Luke said. “We’re going to babysit some Belgians while they babysit some out-of-date nukes.”

“You really think that’s all there is to this, man?” Ed said.

Luke shook his head. “No. I think it’s deceptive. I think we need to keep our eyes wide open and our heads – ”

“On a swivel,” Swann said.

They were playing their roles, and that was good. Swann and Newsam were tiptoeing around the news of Becca’s cancer. Other than offering their condolences when they first climbed on board, they hadn’t said anything about it, and he didn’t blame them. It was a hard thing to talk about.

Directly across from Luke sat the newest member of the team – in fact, she wasn’t even really a member yet. This was her first time with them. The Secret Service had borrowed her from the FBI on the recommendation of her superiors. She had barely said a word since they’d boarded the plane. Luke turned his attention to her now.

He had seen her dossier. Her name was Mika Dolan. She had been born in China, but given up for adoption by her parents, who had wanted a boy. She was adopted by a couple of aging hippies who realized late in life that they wanted a child. She grew up first on the coast in far northern California, then in Marin County, just outside San Francisco. She was young – probably too young. Twenty-one years old and already a year out of MIT; 4.0 grade point average, graduated magna cum laude. Tested IQ of 169 – genius level, Albert Einstein territory.

Hobbies? She liked to surf. That part blew Luke's mind a little – she was a tiny little person, with big round glasses, and looked like she had barely been out of the house, never mind out on the water. But apparently, her dad loved to surf the big waves along the Pacific coast, and had his daughter on a board starting at the age of three.

Mika was the science and intel officer, starting her second year at the FBI, and now on loan to Luke. Whatever Mika's natural gifts were, she had big shoes to fill. Trudy Wellington was a lot of things – emotional, secretive, and quietly dangerous came to mind – but she had developed extensive networks in less than ten years, could access data no one else seemed to have, and was the best scenario spinner that Luke had ever worked with. Trudy was MIT, just like Mika. They had probably given him Mika for that reason.

“Well, Mika?” Luke said. “Would you like to start?”

“Okay,” she said, struggling to maintain eye contact with him. She lifted her tablet computer from the seat beside her. “I'm a little nervous. You guys might not know this, but you're kind of legendary in my office.”

“Oh yeah?” Ed Newsam said, apparently pleased. “What do they say about us?”

Mika suppressed a smile. “They say you're a bunch of cowboys. And they told me to try not to get killed while I'm with you.”

Ed shook his head. “They're teasing you. Not everybody who comes with us gets killed.”

“Only about four in ten,” Swann said. “The rest live, although a high percentage of those are maimed for life. You'll probably be okay. The Bureau has a pretty good disability package, as I recall.”

Luke smiled, but didn't join in. Mika was very pretty, and the guys were flirting with her. He would let it go for another minute. It was a good way to break the ice, and maybe set her at ease a bit. This could be a hard-nosed group.

Luke himself felt wistful, not great. He doubted he could join in the banter if he wanted to. He had called Becca before they left. The conversation hadn't gone well. It had barely gone at all. He had told her he was leaving.

“Where are you going?” she said.

“Belgium. Outside Brussels. There's some concern about nuclear weapons stored on a NATO air base there. A terrorist cell is apparently going to – ”

“So you're just going to leave?” she said.

“I'll be gone two or three days. I'm just going to inspect the security measures in place, implement some upgrades if necessary, then go into Brussels and question a few people of interest.”

“Torture them?”

“Becca, I don't – ”

“I have a Secret Service agent standing here in my living room, Luke. He just appeared on my doorstep this afternoon. Another one picked Gunner up at school today. Apparently, he walked right into the classroom before the children were even dismissed.”

“Someone tried to kill me last night,” Luke said. “The Secret Service are there for your – ”

“Protection, yes, I know. Luke, I have cancer. We were going to break this news to Gunner together. You agreed to that. Now you're fleeing the country.”

“Someone tried to kill me last night,” Luke said again.

“Yes, I heard that part. Did it surprise you? Par for the course, I'd say. Meanwhile, my life is in actual danger, you made a commitment to me and more importantly to your son, and now you're running away. Again.”

Luke took a deep breath. “Becca, I want to help you. I want to... do everything I can. But you kicked me out of the house the last time I saw you. And the time before that, come to think of it. When I picked up Gunner last time, I met you in a supermarket parking lot because you didn't want me to come to the house. And I'm not fleeing the country. I'm going to be gone a few days. I assume you'll still be alive when I – ”

She hung up on that line, and he didn't blame her. It was a horrible thing to say. But she had gone out of her way to make his life a living hell the past several months. Now she was probably dying. Luke was sorry about that. He felt terrible about it, and about their relationship. He felt like a failure in every way – as a father, as a husband, as a person. But the way she was acting wasn't helping.

Now, aboard the plane, he shook his head to clear it. He had to compartmentalize. He was having problems, yes. He could recognize that he was in deep, deep trouble. He didn't know how to help his wife. He did not know how to fix any of this. But he also couldn't bring it with him to Europe. It would distract him from what he was doing, and then he'd become a danger to himself and the people with him. His focus on the job had to be total.

He glanced out the window. Far away, three F-18 fighter jets streaked across the sky, moving fast. Below Luke, white clouds skidded by in the last of the day's light. He took a deep breath. He looked at Mika again.

“How do you want to do this?” she said.

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