

The background of the cover is a textured, aged American flag. The stars are a light tan color, and the stripes are a mix of light tan and dark red. The overall appearance is that of a well-used, vintage flag.

JACK MARS

A LUKE STONE THRILLER--BOOK #3

SITUATION  
ROOM

A Luke Stone Thriller

Джек Марс

**Situation Room**

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

**Марс Д.**

Situation Room / Д. Марс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,  
— (A Luke Stone Thriller)

ISBN 978-1-63-291606-8

A cyberattack on an obscure U.S. dam leaves thousands dead and the government wondering who attacked it, and why. When they realize it is just the tip of the iceberg—and that the safety of all of America is at stake—the President has no choice but to call in Luke Stone. Head of an elite, disbanded FBI team, Luke does not want the job. But with new enemies—foreign and domestic—closing in on her from all sides, the President can only trust him. What follows is an action-packed international roller-coaster, as Luke learns that the terrorists are more sophisticated than anyone realizes, that the target is more extensive than anyone could image—and that there is very little time left to save America. A political thriller with non-stop action, dramatic international settings, unexpected twists and heart-pounding suspense, SITUATION ROOM is book #3 in the Luke Stone series, an explosive new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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# **Mars Jack Situation Room (A Luke Stone Thriller – Book 3)**

**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) and SITUATION ROOM (book #3).

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

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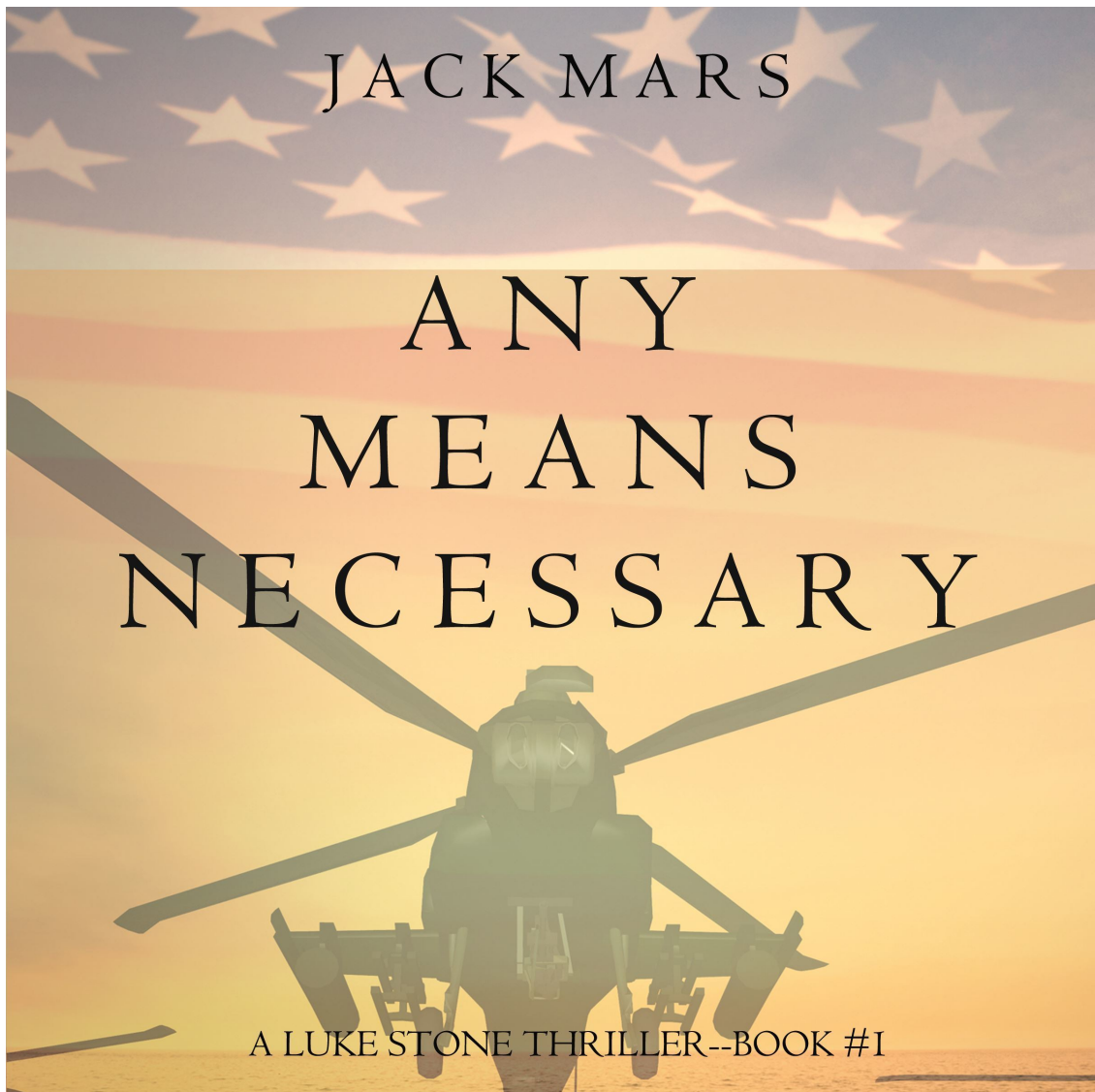
## **BOOKS BY JACK MARS**

### **LUKE STONE THRILLER SERIES**

**ANY MEANS NECESSARY (Book #1)**

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**SITUATION ROOM (Book #3)**



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## CHAPTER ONE

**August 15th**

**7:07 a.m.**

**Black Rock Dam, Great Smoky Mountains, North Carolina**

The dam sat there, immutable, gigantic, the one constant in Wes Yardley's life. The others who worked there called it "Mother." Built to generate hydroelectric power in 1943 during the height of World War Two, the dam was as tall as a fifty-story building. The power station that operated the dam was six stories high, and Mother loomed behind it like a fortress from some medieval nightmare.

Wes started his shift in the control room the same way he had for the last thirty-three years: he sat at the long half-circle desk, plunked his coffee mug down, and logged into the computer in front of him. He did this automatically, without thinking, still half-asleep. He was the only person in the control room, a place so antiquated it resembled a set from the old TV show *Space 1999*. It had last been remodeled sometime in the 1960s, and it was a 1960s version of what the future might look like. The walls were covered with dials and switches, many of which hadn't been touched in years. There were thick video screens which no one ever turned on. There were no windows at all.

Early morning was normally Wes's favorite part of the day. He had some time to himself to sip his coffee, go over the log from the night before, check the electricity generation figures, and then read the newspaper. Often enough, he would pour himself a second cup of coffee about halfway through the sports pages. He had no reason to do otherwise; after all, *nothing* ever happened here.

In the past couple of years, he had taken to reading the want ads as part of his morning ritual. For seventeen years, since computers had come in and the control room had gone automated, the big brains at the Tennessee Valley Authority had talked about controlling this dam from a remote location. Nothing had come of it so far, and maybe nothing ever would. Nothing had come of Wes's want ad perusals, either. This was a good job. He'd be happy to go out of here on a slab one day, hopefully in the distant future. He absently reached for his coffee mug as he leafed through last night's reports.

Then he looked up – and everything changed.

Along the wall across from him, six red lights were blinking. It had been so long since they blinked, it took him a full minute to remember what those lights even meant. Each light was an indicator for one of the floodgates. Eleven years ago, during a week of torrential rains up north, they had opened one of the floodgates for the better part of three hours each day so the water up top didn't breach the walls. One of those lights blinked the entire time the gate was open.

But six lights blinking? All at the same time? That could only mean...

Wes squinted at the lights, as if that might help him see them better. "What the..?" he said in a quiet voice.

He picked up the phone on the desk and dialed three digits.

"Wes," a sleepy voice said. "How's your day going? Catch the Braves game last night?"

"Vince?" Wes said, ignoring the man's banter. "I'm down in the box, and I'm looking at the big board. I've got lights telling me that Floodgates One through Six are all open. I mean, right now, all six gates. It's an equipment malfunction, right? Some kind of gauge error, or a computer glitch. Right?"

"The floodgates are open?" Vince said. "That can't be. Nobody told me anything."

Wes stood and drifted slowly toward the board. The phone cord trailed behind him. He stared at the lights in awe. There was no readout. There was no data to explain anything. There was no view of anything. It was just those lights, blinking out of unison, some fast, some slow, like a Christmas tree gone a little bit insane.

"Well, that's what I'm looking at. Six lights, all at once. Tell me that we don't have six floodgates open, Vince."

Wes realized he didn't need Vince to tell him. Vince was in the middle of speaking, but Wes wasn't listening. He put the phone down and moved along a short narrow hallway to the observation room. It felt as if his feet were not attached to his body.

In the observation room, the entire south wall was rounded, reinforced glass. Normally, it looked out on a view of calm stream, flowing away from the building, turning right a few hundred yards away, and disappearing into the woods.

Not today.

Now, before him, was a raging torrent.

Wes stood there, mouth agape, frozen, numb, a cold tingle spreading across his arms. It was impossible to see what was happening. The foam sprayed a hundred feet into the air. Wes couldn't see the woods at all. He could hear a sound through the thick glass, too. It was the roar of water – more water than he could possibly imagine.

Ten million gallons of water per minute.

The sound, more than anything, made his heart thump in his chest.

Wes ran back to the telephone. He heard his own voice on the phone, breathless.

"Vince, listen to me. The gates are open! All of them! We've got a wall of water thirty feet high and two hundred feet wide coming through there! I can't see what the hell is going on. I don't know how it happened, but we need to shut it down again. NOW! You know the sequence?"

Vince sounded eerily calm; but then again, he hadn't seen all that water.

"I'll get my book out," he said.

Wes went to the control panel with the phone wedged in his ear.

"Come on, Vince. Come on!"

"Okay, I got it," Vince said.

Vince gave him a six-digit sequence of numbers, which Wes punched into the keypad.

He looked at the lights, expecting them to be off; but they were still blinking.

"No good. You got any other numbers?"

"Those are the numbers. Did you punch them in right?"

"I punched them in just like you said them." Wes's hands started to shake. Even so, he was starting to feel calm himself. In fact, more than calm. He felt *removed* from all this. He had once been in a car crash at night on a snowy mountain road, and as the car spun around and around, banging off the guardrails, Wes had felt a lot like he did at this moment. He felt asleep, like he was dreaming.

He had no idea how long those floodgates had been open, but six gates at once was a lot of water to release. Way too much water. That much water would overrun the river's banks. It would cause massive flooding downriver. Wes thought of that giant lake above their heads.

Then he thought of something else, something he didn't want to think of.

"Press cancel and we'll start over," Vince said.

"Vince, we got the resort three miles downstream from here. It's August, Vince. You know what I'm saying? It's the busy season, and they have no idea what's coming their way. We need to get these gates shut right this second, or we need to call somebody down there. They have to get their people out."

"Press cancel and we'll start over," Vince said again.

"Vince!"

"Wes, did you hear what I just said? We'll get the gates shut. If not, I'll call the resort in two minutes. Now press cancel and let's start over."

Dutifully, Wes did as he was told, fearing deep down that it would never work.

\*

The telephone at the front desk rang incessantly.

Montgomery Jones sat in the cafeteria at the Black Rock Resort, trying to enjoy his breakfast. It was the same breakfast they served every day – scrambled eggs, sausages, pancakes, waffles – anything you wanted. But today, because the place was so busy, he was sitting in a corner of the cafeteria closest to the lobby. There were a hundred early-risers in here, taking up all the tables, gumming up the works at all the food stations. And that phone was starting to ruin Monty's morning.

He turned and glanced into the lobby. It was a rustic place, with wood paneling, a stone fireplace, and a battered front desk that hundreds of people had carved into over the long years. The desk was a mad intaglio of initials with hearts drawn around them, long-forgotten well wishes, and half-hearted attempts at line drawings.

No one was at the desk to answer the phone, and whoever was on the other end of the line was not getting the memo. Every time the phone stopped ringing, it paused just a few seconds, then started right up again. To Monty, this meant that every time the caller reached voice mail, he or she hung up and tried again. It was annoying. Someone must be desperate to make last-minute reservations.

“Call back, you idiot.”

Monty was sixty-nine years old, and he'd been coming to Black Rock for at least twenty years, often two or three times a year. He loved it here. What he loved most of all was to get up early, have a nice hot breakfast, and get out on the scenic mountain roads on his Harley Davidson. He had his girlfriend Lena with him on this visit. She was almost thirty years his junior, but she was still up in the room. She was a late sleeper, that Lena. Which meant they would get a late start today. That was okay. Lena was worth it. Lena was proof that success had its rewards. He imagined her in the bed, her long brunette hair spread out across the pillows.

The phone stopped ringing. Five seconds passed before it started again.

*All right. That's enough.* Monty would answer the damn phone. He stood and creaked on stiff legs over to the desk. He hesitated just for a second before picking it up. The index finger of his right hand traced the carving of a heart with an arrow through the middle. Yes, he came here a lot. But he wasn't so familiar with the place that it was like he worked here. It wasn't like he could take a reservation, or even a message. So he would just tell the caller to try back later.

He picked up the receiver. “Hello?”

“This is Vincent Moore of the Tennessee Valley Authority. I'm at the control station of the Black Rock Dam, three miles north of you. This is an emergency. We have a problem with the floodgates, and request an immediate evacuation of your resort. Repeat, an immediate evacuation. There's a flood coming your way.”

“What?” Monty said. Somebody must be putting him on. “I don't understand you.”

Just then, a commotion started in the cafeteria. A strange hubbub of voices began, rising in pitch. Suddenly a woman screamed.

The man on the phone started again. “This is Vincent Moore of the Tennessee Valley...”

Someone else screamed, a male voice.

Monty held the phone to his ear but he was no longer listening. Just through the doorway, people in the cafeteria were getting up from their seats. Some were moving toward the doors. Then, in an instant, panic set in.

People were running, pushing, falling over each other. Monty watched it happen. A surge of people came toward him, eyes wide, mouths open in round O's of terror.

As Monty watched through the window, a wall of water three or four feet high swept over the grounds. A maintenance man in a golf cart driving by up a small hill from the main house was caught in the tide. The cart upended, flipping the man into the water and landing on top of him. The cart got caught for a moment, then slid down the hill on its side, pushed by all the water and gathering speed.

It slid right toward the windows, moving impossibly fast.

CRASH!

The cart slammed sideways into the window, shattering it – and a torrent of water followed.

It poured into the cafeteria through the smashed window. The golf cart came through the window, then slid across the room. A man tried to stop it, fell down in three feet of water, and didn't come back up again.

Everywhere, people were falling down into the rising water, unable to stand up again. Tables and chairs were sliding across the room and piling up against the far wall.

Monty got behind the desk. He looked down at his feet. The water was already up to his calves. Suddenly, across the way, the entire thirty-foot window of the cafeteria caved in, spraying great shards of glass.

It sounded like an explosion.

Monty prepared to run. But before his feet could take hold, before he could even scramble over the desk, all he could do was raise his arms and scream as the wall of water consumed him.

## CHAPTER TWO

**7:35 a.m.**

**United States Naval Observatory – Washington, DC**

To Susan Hopkins, first female President of the United States, life couldn't be better. It was summer, so Michaela and Lauren were out of school. Pierre had brought them here once things had settled down, and finally, the whole family was staying here in the New White House. Michaela had bounced back from her kidnapping as if it had been a madcap adventure she chose to go on. She had even done a round of talk shows about her experience, and co-authored an article for a national magazine with Lauren.

Indeed, Susan and Pierre found themselves bending over backward so that Lauren didn't feel left out of the publicity. After the first TV interview, they insisted that the girls do the shows together. It was only right – while Michaela was trapped on top of a fifty-story tower guarded by terrorists, Lauren was home alone, her twin sister and lifelong companion ripped away from her.

Sometimes, Susan found her breath taken away at the thought of losing her daughter. She woke in the middle of the night from time to time, gasping for air, like a demon was sitting on her chest.

She had Luke Stone to thank for Michaela's return. Luke Stone had brought her back. He and his team had killed every single one of the kidnappers. He was a hard man to reconcile. Ruthless killer on the one hand, loving father on the other. Susan was convinced he had gone to that rooftop not because it was his job, but because he loved his own son so much he couldn't bear the thought of Susan losing her daughter.

In ten days, the whole family, minus Susan, would be heading back to California to get ready for the school year. She would lose them again, but it was only a temporary loss, and it had been great having them here. So great that she was almost afraid to ponder it.

"What are you thinking about?" Pierre said.

They were lying on the king-sized bed in the master bedroom. Morning light streamed in through the southeast-facing windows. Susan lay with her head resting on his bare chest and her arm around his waist. So what if he was gay? He was her husband, and the father of her two daughters. She loved him. They had shared so much together. And this, Sunday morning, was their quiet time.

The girls, being tweens, were moving into their sleeping late years. They would stay in bed until noon if Pierre and Susan let them. Heck, Susan might stay in bed too, if duty didn't call. President of the United States was a seven-day-a-week job, with a few hours of laziness on Sunday mornings.

"I'm thinking that I'm happy," she said. "For the first time since June sixth, I'm happy. It's been amazing having you guys here. Just like old times. And I feel like, with everything that's happened, I'm finally getting a handle on this President thing. I didn't think I would be able to, but I have."

"You've gotten tougher," Pierre said. "Meaner."

"Is it bad?" she said.

He shook his head. "No, not bad at all. You've matured a lot. You were still very much a girl when you were Vice President."

Susan nodded at the truth of that. "I was pretty girly."

"Sure," he said. "Remember how *Mademoiselle* had you out jogging in bright orange yoga pants? Very sexy. But you were Vice President of the United States at the time. It seemed a little... informal, shall we say?"

"It was fun being Vice President. I really loved it."

He nodded and laughed. "I know. I saw."

"But then things changed."

"Yes."

"And we can't go back," she said.

He looked down at her. “Would you want to, if you could?”

She thought about it, but only for a second. “If all those people could still be alive, the ones who lost their lives at Mount Weather, I would give this job back to Thomas Hayes in a heartbeat. But failing that, no. I wouldn’t go back. I’ve got a couple more years to go before I need to decide about running for reelection. I feel like the people are starting to get behind me, and if I get another term, I think we’ll do some great, great things.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Another term?”

She laughed. “A conversation for another time.”

Just then, the bedside telephone rang. Susan reached for it, hoping it was something insignificant.

It never was.

It was her new chief-of-staff, Kat Lopez. Susan could tell her voice right away. And already, she didn’t like her tone.

“Susan?”

“Hi, Kat. You know it’s not even eight a.m. on Sunday, right? Even God rested one day a week. You’re allowed to do the same.”

Kat’s tone was serious. In general, Kat was nothing if not serious. She was a woman, she was Hispanic, and she had fought her way up the ladder from humble beginnings. She didn’t get where she was by smiling. Susan thought that was too bad. Kat was super competent. But she also had a very pretty face. It wouldn’t hurt her to smile once in a while.

“Susan, a large dam just broke in a remote area of far western North Carolina. Our analysts are saying it might be a terror attack.”

Susan felt that familiar stab of dread. It was one thing about this job that she would never get used to. It was one thing about this new life of hers that she wouldn’t wish on her worst enemy.

“Casualties?” she said.

She saw the look in Pierre’s eyes. This was the job. This was the nightmare. Just a minute ago, she had breezily considered a run for another term in office.

“Yes,” Kat said.

“How many?”

“No one knows yet. Possibly hundreds.”

Susan felt the air go out of her as if she were a tire that had just been slashed.

“Susan, a group is gathering right now in the Situation Room.”

Susan nodded. “I’ll be down in fifteen minutes.”

She hung up. Pierre was staring at her.

“Is it bad?” he said.

“When isn’t it bad?”

“Okay,” he said. “Do your thing. I’ll handle the girls.”

Susan was up and moving toward the shower almost before he finished speaking.

## CHAPTER THREE

**10:23 a.m.**

**Perpendicular Trail, Southwest Harbor, Acadia National Park, Maine**

“How you holding up, Monster?”

“Fine, Dad.”

Luke Stone and his son, Gunner, moved slowly up the steep, rough-hewn steps of the trail. It was a humid morning, hot and getting hotter, and Luke was mindful that Gunner was only ten years old. They took the mountain slowly, and Luke made sure they stopped for frequent rests and water breaks.

They moved higher and higher through the enormous boulder field. The massive stones were intricately laid to create a winding, almost Byzantine stairway, as if some Norse thunder god had come down from the skies and carved them with his own giant hands. Luke knew the stones had been placed by out-of-work young men plucked from East Coast cities by the Civilian Conservation Corps some eighty years before, during the depths of the Great Depression.

A little higher, and they came upon some iron rungs bolted into the stone face. They climbed the ladder, then meandered up a carved boulder switchback. Soon, the trail leveled off and they walked through some dense forest, before one final climb to the summit outlook. They climbed out onto the rocks.

Just in front of them was a steep drop-off, probably fifty stories down a sheer cliff to the large lake where they had parked. Further out, the spot offered a commanding view of the Atlantic Ocean, perhaps five miles away.

“What do you think, Monster?”

Gunner was sweaty from the heat of the day. He sat on a rock, unslung his backpack, and pulled out a water bottle. His black *Dawn of the Dead* T-shirt was drenched in sweat. His blond hair was matted. He took a swig from his bottle and handed it up to Luke. He was a self-assured kid.

“It’s awesome, Dad. I really like it.”

“I want to give you something,” Luke said. “I decided to wait until we climbed the mountain. I’m not sure why. I just thought it would be a fun place to do it.”

Gunner looked just slightly alarmed. He liked getting gifts, but generally speaking, he preferred ones that he had asked for.

Luke took the device out of his pocket. It was just a small piece of black plastic, about the size of a key fob. It didn’t look like much. It could have been the clicker for an automatic garage.

“What is it?” Gunner said.

“It’s a GPS unit. That means Global Positioning System.” Luke pointed at the sky. “Up there in space, there are all these satellites...”

Gunner half-smiled. He shook his head. “I know what GPS is, Dad. Mom has one in her car. It’s a good thing, too. She would get lost going around the corner without it. Why are you giving one to me?”

“See this clip it has in the back? I want you to clip it to your backpack and carry it with you wherever you go. I have an app on my cell phone that is set to track this unit. That way, even when we’re separated, I’ll always know where you are.”

“Are you worried about me?”

Luke shook his head. “No. I’m not worried. I know you can handle yourself. It’s just that we haven’t been seeing much of each other recently, and if I can just look at my phone and see where you are, it’s almost like being there with you.”

“But I can’t see where you are,” Gunner said. “So how am I supposed to feel close?”

Luke reached into his pocket and came out with another GPS unit, this one bright blue. “See this? I’m going to put it on my key ring. When we get back to the hotel, I’ll load the app into your phone, and then you can always know where I am.”

Gunner smiled. “I like that idea, Dad. But you know we could always just text each other. Do you even text? I know that a lot of people your age don’t.”

Now Luke smiled. “Yeah. We can text. We can do both.”

For Luke, it was a bittersweet feeling to be with Gunner up here. Luke had grown up without a father, and now Gunner was doing much the same. The divorce with Becca wasn’t finalized, but that was coming. Luke hadn’t worked for the government in two months, but Becca was adamant: she was going through with it anyway.

In the meantime, Luke had Gunner two weekends a month. He did everything in his power to make sure those weekends were chock-full of fun and adventure. He also did everything he could to answer Gunner’s questions in an even-handed, yet optimistic way. Questions like this one:

“Do you think we can do something like this with Mom one day?”

Luke stared out at the sea. Questions like that made him want to jump off this cliff. “I hope so.”

Gunner perked up at the slightest hint of possibility. “When?”

“Well, you have to understand that your mom and I are having a little disagreement right now.”

“I don’t understand,” Gunner said. “You love each other, right? And you promised you were going to quit your job, right? Did you really quit?”

Luke nodded. “I did quit.”

“See, Mom doesn’t believe that.”

“I know it.”

“But if you can make her believe it, then...”

Luke had quit, all right. He had quit and gone completely off radar. Susan Hopkins had promised to leave him alone, and she had honored that promise. He had also been out of touch with his old group at the Special Response Team.

The truth was, he was enjoying his time away. He had gone back to basics. He rented a cabin in the Adirondack Mountains for two weeks and spent nearly the entire time bow hunting and fishing. He bathed by jumping off the cabin’s back dock each morning. He grew a beard.

After that, he spent ten days in the Caribbean, solo sailing through St. Vincent and the Grenadines, snorkeling with sea turtles, giant stingrays, and reef sharks, and diving a couple of shipwrecks from more than a hundred years ago.

At the end of each little trip, he would give himself a day to make it back to Washington, DC, and pick up Gunner for the next dad and son adventure. Luke had to admit, being retired agreed with him. A year from now, when he ran out of money, it wasn’t going to be all that agreeable, but for now, he couldn’t think of a bad word to say about it.

“Are you and Mom going to split up for good?”

Luke detected the slightest tremble in Gunner’s voice when he asked that question. He got it, he really did. Gunner was afraid. Luke sat down on the rocks with him.

“Gunner, I love both you and your mom very much. The situation is complicated, and we’re working through it the best we can.”

That wasn’t necessarily true. Becca was cold to Luke. She wanted a divorce. She wanted full custody of Gunner. She thought that Luke was a danger to Gunner and to her. She had practically threatened to get an order of protection against him. She was being unreasonable, and she came from a family with a lot of money. She could pay for a long and bitter custody battle, if need be.

“Do you want to be with her?”

“Yes, I do. Of course I do.” It was the first lie Luke had told Gunner in this conversation. The truth was harder to ascertain. At first, he had. But as time passed, and Becca’s position hardened, he became less sure.

“Then why don’t you just come to the house and tell her? Send her roses or something, like every day?”

It was a good question. It didn’t have a simple answer.

Inside Luke’s backpack, a telephone started ringing. It was probably Becca, wanting to talk to Gunner. Luke reached inside the pack for the satellite phone he kept with him at all times. It was the only nod toward remaining on grid that he had made. Becca could always reach him. But she wasn’t the only one. There was one other person on Earth who had access to this number.

He looked at who was calling. It was a number he didn’t recognize, from the 202 area code. Washington, DC.

His heart dropped.

It was her. The other person.

“Is it Mom?” Gunner said.

“No.”

“Is it the President?”

Luke nodded. “I think so.”

“Don’t you think you better answer it?” Gunner said.

“I don’t work for her anymore,” Luke said. “Remember?”

This morning, before they had left to come on this hike, they had watched TV news footage of the dam failure in North Carolina. More than a hundred confirmed dead, hundreds more missing. An entire mountain resort had been washed away by a wall of water. Towns downstream from there were being evacuated and sandbagged as fast as possible, but there were likely to be more casualties.

The incredible thing was a dam built in 1943 had simply malfunctioned after more than seventy years of nearly perfect operations. To Luke, that smelled like sabotage. But he couldn’t imagine who would want to target a dam in such a remote area. Who would even know it was there? If it was sabotage, then it was likely a local issue, some group of militia members, or maybe environmentalists, or maybe even a disgruntled former employee, pulling a stunt that went horribly wrong, and with tragic consequences. The state police or North Carolina Bureau of Investigation would probably have the bad guys in custody by the end of the day.

But now the phone was ringing. So maybe there was more to it.

“Dad, it’s okay. I don’t want you to quit your job, even if Mom does.”

“Is that so? What if I want to quit? Don’t I get any say in the matter?”

Gunner shook his head. “I don’t think so. I mean, a lot of people died in that flood, right? What if I was one of them? What if Mom and me both died? Wouldn’t you want someone to figure out why it happened?”

The phone went on and on, ringing. When voice mail picked up, the phone stopped ringing for a few seconds, paused, and then started ringing again. They wanted to speak to Luke, and they weren’t going to leave a message.

Luke, thinking of Gunner’s words, pressed the green button on the phone. “Stone.”

“Hold for the President of the United States,” a male voice said.

There was a moment of silence, and then her voice came on the line. She sounded harder than before, someone older. The events of the past few months would age anyone.

“Luke?”

“Hi, Susan.”

“Luke, I need you to come in for a meeting.”

“Is this about the dam failure?”

“Yes.”

“Susan, I’m retired, remember?”

Her voice lowered.

“Luke, the dam was hacked. Hundreds of people are dead, and all signs point to the Chinese. We are on the verge of World War Three.”

Luke didn't know how to respond to that.

“What time will you be here?” she asked.

And he knew it was not a question.

## CHAPTER FOUR

**6:15 p.m.**

**United States Naval Observatory – Washington, DC**

Luke rode in the back of the black SUV as it pulled into the circle in front of the stately, white-gabled 1850s Queen Anne–style residence that for many years had been the Vice President’s official residence. Since the White House was destroyed two months before, this place had served as the New White House, which was fitting because the President had lived here for five years before taking on her new role.

The two months Luke had been away, he almost never thought about this place, or the people inside. He kept the satellite phone with him at the President’s request, but for the first few weeks, he lived in dread of receiving a call. After that, he almost forgot he even had the phone.

A young woman met him on the walkway in front of the house. She was brunette, tall, very pretty. She wore a no-nonsense black skirt and jacket. Her hair was tied back in a tight bun. She carried a tablet computer in her left hand. She offered Luke the other hand. Her grip was firm, all business.

“Agent Stone? I’m Kathryn Lopez, Susan’s chief-of-staff.”

Luke was a little taken aback. “Are they recruiting chiefs-of-staff right out of high school these days?”

“Very kind of you,” she said. Her voice was perfunctory. It told him she got that all the time, and most of the time it wasn’t intended to be kind. “I’m thirty-seven years old. I’ve lived in Washington thirteen years, since right after I finished my master’s degree. I’ve worked for a Representative, two Senators, and the former Director of Health and Human Services. I’ve been around the block a couple times.”

“Okay,” Luke said. “I’m not worried about you.”

They moved through the front doors. Inside the doors, they were confronted by a checkpoint with three armed guards and a metal detector. Luke removed the Glock nine-millimeter from his shoulder holster and placed it on the conveyor belt. He reached down and unstrapped the small pocket pistol and the hunting knife taped to his calves and placed those on the belt as well. Finally, he took his keys from his pocket and dropped them on there with the weapons.

“Sorry,” he said. “I don’t remember there being a security checkpoint here.”

“There wasn’t,” Kat Lopez said. “It’s only been in for a few weeks. We’ve got more and more people coming here as Susan gets a grip on her duties, and security has formalized.”

Luke remembered. When the attacks came, and Thomas Hayes died, Susan was suddenly elevated to the Presidency. The White House had been mostly destroyed, and everything – all arrangements, all logistics – had an ad hoc, almost desperate quality to them. Those had been crazy days. He was glad for the time off since then. It was a little amazing that Susan hadn’t had any at all.

After the guards took Luke aside and gave him an extra pat-down and a quick skim with a metal-detecting wand, he and the chief-of-staff moved on.

The place was bustling. The foyer was crowded with people in suits, people in military uniforms, people with their sleeves rolled up, people walking fast through the hallways, trailing gaggles of assistants. One thing was obvious right away – there were a lot more women here than before.

“What happened to the last guy?” Luke said. “He used to be Susan’s chief-of-staff. Richard...”

Kat Lopez nodded. “Yes, Richard Monk. Well, after the Ebola incident, both he and Susan agreed that it was a good time for him to move on. But even though he’s out of here, he landed on his feet. He’s working as chief-of-staff for the new United States Representative from Delaware, Paul Chipman.”

Luke knew there were new Representatives and Senators coming in from thirty-nine states to replace the ones lost in the Mount Weather attack. It was a blizzard of people moving up from the minor leagues, or coming back from retirement. More than a few were the appointees of state governors with questionable ethics and long-established patronage systems. There were greasy palms all over the place.

He smiled. “Richard went from working directly with the President to working with a freshman rep from the second smallest state in the union? And you call that landing on his feet? It sounds like he landed on his head.”

“No comment,” Kat said, and almost smiled. It was the closest thing to humanity she had given him so far. She led him through the crowds to a double doorway at the end of the hall. Luke already knew the place. When Susan was Vice President, the large sunlit chamber had been her conference room. In the days after she took the oath of office, it rapidly transformed into an on-the-fly Situation Room.

It had been formalized, too. Modular walls ran the length of the room, covering the old windows. Giant flat-panel video screens had been mounted at five-foot intervals. A larger oak conference table had been brought in, and on the wall behind the head of it was the Seal of the President. There were about two dozen people inside when Luke and Kat walked in, a dozen at the conference table, and more in chairs lining the walls.

The gender change was evident here as well. Luke remembered sitting in here being briefed about the missing Ebola sample two months ago. Of the thirty people in the room at that time, Susan might have been the only woman. Twenty-nine men, half of them big and burly, and one small woman.

Now maybe half the people were women.

Susan rose from the head of the table when Luke walked in. She was different, too. Harder, perhaps. Thinner than before. She had been a fashion model in her earlier life, and she had carried baby fat on her cheeks right into middle age. That was gone now, and she seemed to have developed crow’s feet around her eyes almost overnight. The bright eyes themselves seemed more focused, like laser beams. She had spent her entire life as the most beautiful woman in the room – by the time this presidency was over, that might no longer be the case.

“Agent Stone,” she said. “I’m glad you could join us.”

He smiled. “Madam President. Please. Call me Luke.”

She didn’t return the smile. “Thank you for coming.”

Standing at one of the large screens was Kurt Kimball, Susan’s National Security Advisor. Luke had met him once before. He was tall with broad shoulders. His head was perfectly bald.

Kimball offered him a handshake. If Kat Lopez’s shake was firm, Kurt Kimball’s was granite. “Luke, good to see you.”

“Kurt, likewise.”

The atmosphere was tense. These people hadn’t spent the past two months camping and sailing. Even so, Luke had flown down here from Maine at a moment’s notice, and dropped his son off with his angry, soon to be ex-wife, who saw all of this as reinforcement of the reasons she was divorcing him. You might think they’d offer him a little more warmth.

He decided to go with the flow. Hundreds of people had died this morning, and the people in this room, at least, thought it was a terrorist attack.

“Shall we get down to it?” he said.

“Please have a seat,” Kimball said.

A seat at Susan’s right flank had miraculously appeared, and Luke took it.

On the screen, a photo of a large dam appeared. Large wasn’t quite the word. Massive was more to the point. A six-story building sat in front of the dam, the control center, with six partially open floodgates below it. The building was dwarfed by the dam rising behind it. Along the edge was a hydroelectric power generating station with row after row after row of transformers.

“Luke, this is Black Rock Dam,” Kurt Kimball said. “It is approximately fifty stories tall and impounds Black Rock Lake, which is sixteen miles long, four hundred feet deep, and at any given time holds about ten billion cubic feet of water. As you probably saw on the news, just after seven a.m. this morning, the six floodgates you see along the bottom opened fully, and remained locked open for three and a half hours, until technicians could de-couple them from the computer system that operates them, and finally close them manually.”

Kimball used a laser pointer to indicate the floodgates.

“If you look at the gates in relation to the building, you will see that they are quite large. Each one is ten meters tall, which means that six three-story-high jets of water were released all at once. The water pressure of Black Rock Lake sent the flood downstream at approximately twenty miles per hour, which doesn’t sound all that fast until you’re standing in front of it. Until this morning, the Black Rock Resort stood three miles south of the dam. The resort was made almost entirely of wood. The initial wall of water completely destroyed the resort, and as far as we know, the only survivors were a handful of people who left early to hike to the top of the dam, or to take drives on nearby scenic roads.”

“How many people were staying at the resort?” Luke said.

“There were two hundred and eighty-one guests listed in their online reservations system. Perhaps twenty of them either left the resort before the flood, or never arrived there for one reason or another. All of the others were swept away and are assumed dead. Combined with other disasters downstream, it will be several days before we have any kind of accurate body count.”

Luke got that odd familiar feeling. It returned like an old friend, one that you hadn’t seen in a while and were hoping not to see anymore. It came as a sickness in the pit of his stomach. It was death, the deaths of innocent people, minding their own business. Luke had dealt with it for far too long.

“Did anyone try to warn them?” he said.

Kimball nodded. “Workers in the dam’s control center called the resort on the phone as soon as they realized the floodgates were open, but apparently the flood had already reached there by the time they got in touch with anyone. Someone did pick up, but the conversation ended almost immediately.”

“Jesus. And what were the disasters downstream you mentioned?”

A map appeared on the screen. It showed the lake, the dam, the resort, and additional towns nearby. Kimball indicated a town. “The town of Sargent lies another sixteen miles south of the resort. It’s a town of twenty-three hundred people, and a gateway for visitors to the National Park. Most of Sargent is situated on a small hill, and the town received slightly more warning than the resort. They got enough warning, in fact, that the town emergency sirens sounded before the flood came. With an added sixteen miles to travel, the floodwaters hit with somewhat less force in Sargent, and many of the houses and buildings in town withstood the initial force of the flood and were not washed away. Many of the low-lying houses were, however, quickly inundated. More than four hundred people from Sargent are currently missing and presumed dead.”

Luke stared at the screen as Kimball’s laser pointer fell on the towns of Sapphire, Greenwood, and Kent, each one somewhat farther from the dam than the one before, and each one the site of a disaster in its own right. The scale of it was devastating, and although the floodgates were closed, the flood itself was going to continue traveling south and downhill for the next several days. Two dozen towns had been evacuated, but more fatalities were practically guaranteed. Some people in remote areas wouldn’t leave, or couldn’t.

“And you think hackers did this? How is that possible?”

Kimball glanced around the room. “Does everyone here have clearance to hear this next part? Can we please sweep anyone out who doesn’t have clearance?”

Low murmuring went around the room, but no one moved. “Okay, I’m going to assume that anyone here belongs here. If not, it’s your ass. Remember that.”

He turned back to Luke.

“The dam was built in 1943 to generate much-needed electricity during the war. It was built and is operated to this day by the Tennessee Valley Authority. For most of the dam’s life, the floodgates were operated by controls less sophisticated than your garage door opener. About twenty years ago, TVA started looking at ways to save money by automating their dams. Control centers in old hydroelectric dams are incredibly inefficient by modern standards. You’ve basically got people there around the clock, and their jobs include reading and writing logbooks, and opening and closing the spillways from time to time. The floodgates are almost never opened.

“TVA was thinking they could aggregate ten or twenty dam control centers into one centrally located control center. So they retro-fitted several dams with computer software that can be operated remotely. Black Rock was one of them. We’re talking about very simple software – yes means open the gates, no means close them. For one reason or another, they never did create the central control center, but they did make the software internet-based, in case they ever decided to do so. The final nail, so to speak, is that the science of encryption barely existed at that time, and the software has never been updated since it was first installed.”

Luke stared, stunned.

“You’re kidding.”

He shook his head.

“It was easy to hijack this system. It’s just that no one ever thought to do it before. What terrorist would even know this dam exists? It’s in a remote corner of a rural state. You don’t get a lot of style points for attacking Sargent, North Carolina. But as we’ve discovered, the results are as devastating as if they had attacked Chicago.”

Susan spoke for the first time during Kimball’s presentation. “And the worst thing about it is there are hundreds of dams like this across the United States. The truth is we don’t even know how many there are, and how many are vulnerable.”

“And why do we think the Chinese did it?” Luke said.

“Our own hackers at NSA traced the infiltration to a series of IP addresses in northern China. And we traced communication with those addresses to an internet account at a motel in Asheville, North Carolina, sixty miles east of the Black Rock Dam. The communications took place in the forty-eight hours before the attack. A SWAT team from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms operates in that region, raiding unlicensed distilleries and breweries. That team was diverted to the motel, did a takedown of the room in question, and arrested a thirty-two-year-old Chinese national named Li Quianguo.”

An image of a Chinese man being led from a small nondescript motel by a group of tall and broad ATF officers appeared on the screen. Another image appeared of the same man standing on a narrow roadway across from a lake. He stood in front of a historic plaque that read *Black Rock Dam – 1943*, with a couple of paragraphs of description below.

“Although he has travel documents including a passport under this name, we don’t believe this is the man’s real name. As you know, the sequence of names in China is reversed – the surname comes first, followed by the given name. Li is one of the most common surnames in China, practically a generic name, similar to Smith in the United States. And Quianguo, in Mandarin Chinese, means *Strong Nation*. This was a name with militaristic connotations that was very common after the Chinese Revolution, but fell into disfavor probably forty years ago. Further, Li was found with a handgun in his possession, as well as a small vial of cyanide pills. We believe he is a Chinese government agent, operating under an alias, who was supposed to kill himself if he was about to get caught.”

“So he got cold feet,” Luke said.

“Either that, or he just didn’t get to the pills in time.”

Luke shook his head. “After an operation like this one, an agent willing to kill himself would be holding the pill bottle in his hand, or have it in his pocket, twenty-four hours a day. What were the communications?”

“They were a series of encrypted emails. We haven’t broken the encryption yet, and it may be weeks before we do. It’s one they haven’t seen at NSA. Very complex, very tough to take down. So at this moment, we have no idea what the content of the emails is.”

“Is the man talking?” Luke said.

Kimball shook his head. “He’s being held in a cabin at a FEMA detention center in northern Georgia, about ninety miles southeast of the attack site. He insists he’s simply a tourist who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“That’s why we called you,” Susan said. “We’d like you to go have a chat with him. We thought he might speak to you.”

“Have a chat,” Luke said.

Susan shrugged. “Yes.”

“Get him to talk?”

“Yes.”

“For that, I’ll probably need my team with me,” Luke said.

A look passed between Susan, Kurt Kimball, and Kat Lopez.

“Perhaps we’d better discuss that in private,” Kimball said.

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“Okay, Susan, so this is the part where you tell me again that the Special Response Team has been disbanded, right?”

“Luke...” she began.

They were sitting upstairs in Susan’s study. The study was just as Luke remembered it. A large rectangular room with hardwood floors and a white carpet in the middle. The carpet served as the focal point for a sitting area with big comfortable upright chairs and a coffee table.

One entire wall of the study was a floor-to-ceiling bookcase. The bookcase reminded Luke of *The Great Gatsby*.

And then there were the windows. Giant, gracious, floor to ceiling windows which gave expansive views of the Naval Observatory’s rolling grounds. The windows faced southwest and let in the afternoon light. The light was like something a master artist would try to capture.

The days were clearly getting shorter. Although it wasn’t yet 7 p.m., early evening sunlight streamed through her windows. The day was already ending. Luke thought again briefly of his interaction with Becca when he dropped Gunner off. He shook the image away. It was too much to think about.

He sat on the opposite side of the coffee table from the President. Kurt Kimball sat at an angle to both of them. Kat Lopez stood behind Susan and to her right.

“Yes,” Susan said. “There is no more Special Response Team. Most of the former staff have been absorbed into other roles within the FBI. At this point, it would be rather difficult to rebuild what you think of as your team.”

“Susan,” Luke said. “I’d like to remind you that you’re asking me to come out of retirement again. You know what I’ve been doing for the past two months? I’ll tell you. Camping, fishing, hiking, sailing. A little bit of hunting. A little bit of diving.” He rubbed his beard. “Sleeping late.”

“So you’re fit for duty,” Kurt Kimball said.

Luke shook his head. “I’m caked in rust. I need my team. I trust them. I can’t really function without them.”

“Luke, if you’d stuck around instead of disappearing, we might have been able to carve out a little agency for you...”

“I was trying to save my marriage,” he said.

Susan stared right at him. “How did it go?”

He gave her a tiny head shake. “Not too well, so far.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“So am I.”

Susan glanced behind her. “Kat, can we have the status on Luke’s former team members?”

Kat Lopez glanced down at the tablet in her hand. “Sure. That’s easy enough. Mark Swann left the FBI for a job with the National Security Agency. He works at their headquarters here in suburban DC. He’s been there three and a half weeks. He’s moving through their classification system, and should begin work on the PRISM data mining project within another month.

“Edward Newsam is still with the FBI. He was out on medical leave for most of June and July. His hip rehabilitation is complete, and he’s been reassigned to the Hostage Rescue Team. He is currently in training at Quantico for possible overseas intelligence work to begin later in the year. There’s a note in his file that his employment status is likely to become classified in the coming weeks, at which point a Top Secret security clearance will be required to discuss his status or his whereabouts.”

Luke nodded. Neither of these were much of a surprise. Swann and Newsam were among the best at what they did. “Can we get them on loan?” he said.

Kat Lopez nodded. “In all likelihood, if we request them, the agencies will honor our request.”

“And Trudy?” Luke said. “I need her, too.”

“Luke, Trudy Wellington is in jail,” Susan said.

Luke felt his stomach drop at the words. He stared for a full five seconds, trying to process the words.

“What?” he finally said.

Susan shook her head.

“I can’t believe you don’t know. What have you been doing, hiding under a rock? Don’t you look at the newspapers?”

He shrugged. “I told you what I was doing. I’ve been off the grid. They don’t sell newspapers where I’ve been, and I’ve been leaving the computer at home.”

Kat Lopez read from her tablet. Her voice was automatic, almost robotic. She had detached herself from what she was saying.

“Trudy Wellington, age thirty, was Don Morris’s mistress for at least a year during the planning of the June sixth attacks. Email, telephone, text, and computer records suggest that as early as last March, she became aware of a plan to assassinate both the President and Vice President of the United States, and she was aware of who at least some of the conspirators were. She has been indicted on charges of treason, conspiracy to commit treason, more than three hundred counts of conspiracy to commit murder, and a host of other charges. She’s being held without bail at the Federal women’s prison facility in Randal, Maryland. If convicted of the charges against her, she faces penalties starting with multiple life sentences, up to and including the death penalty.”

Luke ran a hand through his hair. The news hit him like a punch in the head. He thought of Trudy, pictured her with her funny red glasses on, her eyes peeking over the top of her tablet computer. He thought of her on the night he went to her apartment at 3 a.m., opening the door with nothing on but a long, flimsy T-shirt, a gun in her hand. He thought of the two of them, and their bodies, together that night.

She was in prison? It couldn’t be real.

“Trudy Wellington is facing the death penalty?” he said.

“In a word, yes.”

“Basically, because she didn’t turn Don in?”

Susan shook her head. “It’s treason, no matter how you want to spin it. A lot of people died, including Thomas Hayes, who was both the President of the United States and a personal friend of

mine. Wellington could possibly have prevented it, and chose not to. She chose to not even try. About the only way she can save herself at this point is to testify against the conspirators.”

“I have trouble believing that she knew,” Luke said. “Has she confessed?”

“She denies everything,” Kat Lopez said.

“I would tend to believe her,” Luke said.

Kat held out her tablet. “There’s about two hundred pages of evidence. We have access to most of it, which you can review. You might feel differently after you do.”

Luke shook his head. He looked at Susan. “So where does this leave us?”

She shrugged. “You can have Mark Swann and Ed Newsam for a couple days if you feel you need them. But you can’t have Trudy Wellington.”

She looked at him.

“And your chopper leaves in under an hour.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

**August 16th**

**7:15 a.m.**

**Black Rock Dam, Great Smoky Mountains, North Carolina**

From Luke's window, nothing seemed out of the ordinary as their sleek black helicopter flew low over the dam. They came in over Black Rock Lake, which was long, undulating, and picturesque, bordered on all sides by dense green wilderness and steep hillsides. A narrow roadway crossed the top of the dam. They flew past it, and the dam itself fell away, fifty stories down to the power house and the floodgates. The floodgates appeared to be operating normally, a small trickle of water flowing out from beneath them. About a quarter mile of electricity transformers, a spider web of steel towers and high tension wires, stretched away from the dam. They seemed to be intact.

"Not much to see," he said into his headset.

To his left sat big Ed Newsam, staring out the window on the opposite side. Ed's broken hip was mended, and it looked like he had been hitting the weight room. His python-like arms were more swollen than Luke remembered, his chest and shoulders were even broader, his legs even more like oak trees. He wore jeans, work boots, and a simple blue T-shirt.

In the row behind them sat Mark Swann. He was long and lean, his blue-jeaned legs jutting out in the aisle, his checkerboard Chuck Taylor sneakers crossed at the ankles in front of Luke. His sandy hair was longer than before, tied in a ponytail now, and he had swapped out his aviator-type glasses for the round John Lennon style at some point in the past two months. He wore a black T-shirt with the logo from the punk rock band The Ramones. The NSA offices must be quite the fashion show.

"The water went out the floodgates just like it's supposed to do," the chopper pilot said. He was a middle-aged man wearing a black nylon jacket with the capital letters FEMA in white on the back. "There was no damage to the dam or the dam facilities, and there were no casualties among dam personnel. The only thing that happened here was the access road got washed away. About three miles south is where the real action starts."

They had flown on a Secret Service jet from DC to a small municipal airport at the edge of the National Park. They had arrived just before sunrise, and this chopper was waiting for them. They didn't talk much on the flight down. The mood was somber, given the circumstances, and Trudy Wellington, as the intel officer, would normally have done most of the talking. Susan had offered Luke a different intel person, but Luke declined. They were coming down to brace a prisoner anyway. He could give them all the intel they needed.

Luke sensed they were all feeling the loss of Trudy, and a certain amount of shock at her situation. He also sensed, or thought he did, that both of these guys had moved on in their lives. New assignments, new training, new team members and co-workers, new challenges to look forward to. A lot could change in two months.

The Special Response Team was gone. Luke could have chosen to save it in some form – after the coup attempt and Ebola attacks he could write his own ticket and take them all with him – but instead he chose not to. Now the SRT was old news, and so was Luke Stone. He had retired, and that was one thing. But he had also disappeared, and he hadn't made much effort to keep in touch. Team cohesion was a big part of intelligence and special operations work. With no contact, there was no cohesion.

Which meant that right now, there was no team.

The chopper banked and headed south. Almost immediately, the devastation became clear. The entire area below the dam was flooded. Large trees were ripped out everywhere and tossed around like matchsticks. In a few minutes, they reached the site of the former Black Rock Resort. Parts of the upper floor of the main building were still intact, rising up out of the floodwaters. Cars were

stacked up against the wrecked hotel, along with more trees, a few of which reached out of the water with arms to the sky, like religious converts imploring God for a miracle.

The effect of the cars and the trees and the various piles of flotsam was to build a mini-dam, behind which a wide lake had formed. About a dozen Zodiacs were parked on the lake, with teams of divers in full scuba gear either preparing to drop in, or climbing out, depending on the boat.

“They find any survivors here?” Luke said.

The pilot shook his head. “Not a one. At least that was the word as of this morning. They found about a hundred bodies in the resort cafeteria, though. They’re bringing them up one by one. I don’t think they’ve started the room to room search yet. They might even let the waters subside before they do that. Moving through corridors underwater is dangerous work, and probably unnecessary. Ain’t nobody alive down there.”

Ed Newsam, who had been sprawled out in his normal laid-back style, shifted in his seat and sat up just a touch. “How do you know that, man? Could be air pockets under that water. Could be people down there hanging on for a rescue.”

“They’ve got underwater listening equipment on those boats,” the pilot said. “If anybody’s alive under that water, they didn’t make a peep all day yesterday or last night.”

“Even so, if I’m in charge, I’ve got my best divers going room to room right now. We already know the people in the cafeteria are dead. And the divers signed on for danger. The civilians didn’t.”

The pilot shrugged. “Well, son, they’re working as fast as they can.”

The chopper moved further south. The flood had cut a swath through the valley, ripping a path across the forest. It looked like a giant had blundered his way through here. There was water everywhere. Wherever the original riverbed had been was lost under all the water.

They passed over the town of Sargent, still four feet deep in water. The devastation here was not as complete. There were a lot of empty lots where Luke assumed houses must have stood, but other houses, buildings, and fast food signs stuck up out of the water like fingers. The chopper flew over a cinderblock building with a stack of cars and SUVs piled up against it. HONEST ABE’S PRE-OWNED CARS, said a sign sticking halfway out of the water. One of its support beams had caved in.

“How many dead here?” Luke said.

“Five hundred,” the pilot said. “Give or take some spare change. Still a hundred or more missing. It was early morning, and there wasn’t much warning. A lot of people got swept away in their homes. You’re asleep in bed and the old Cold War air raid signal goes off, what do you do? Some folks apparently went downstairs to their basements. That’s nowhere to be when a flood comes.”

“No one expected the dam to break?” Swann said. It was the first thing he had said since they boarded the chopper.

The pilot was busy with his controls. “Why would they? The dam didn’t break. That dam was built to last a thousand years.”

“Okay,” Luke said. “I’ve seen enough. Let’s go talk to the prisoner.”

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**8:30 a.m.**

**Chattahoochee National Forest, Georgia**

The camp appeared out of the deep forest like some weird mirage.

“Pretty, it ain’t,” Ed Newsam said.

It sat in a perfect clear cut, one mile by one mile, a brown and gray square amidst all the dark green. As the chopper came closer, Luke could make out dozens of barracks, row upon row of them, and a large, square reservoir of water in the center of the camp. Outbuildings surrounded the reservoir, and a steel catwalk traversed it.

The chopper began to drop down, and Luke could see the helipad approaching. It was in an area in the far west corner of the camp, with a few large administration buildings, a swimming pool, and a couple of parking lots. He could now clearly make out concrete yards, an access road, streets inside the encampment, and a wall topped with barbed wire and guard towers around the perimeter. The place was an open wound in the midst of the surrounding forest.

“What is this place?” Luke said into his headset.

The chopper pilot was busy working his controls, but not too busy to talk. “I’ve heard it called Camp Enduring Freedom,” he said. “People around here tend to call it Camp Nowhere. It’s one of ours. Federal Emergency Management Agency. You won’t find it on any maps. I’d guess it doesn’t officially have a name.”

“Does it exist?” Luke said.

The chopper was low now, the grim gray buildings of the camp rising up all around them. Luke noticed glass reinforced by steel wires on the closest buildings.

The pilot shook his head. “Does what exist? This is uninhabited wilderness. There’s nothing out here as far as I know.”

A signalman in a yellow vest and holding bright orange wands stood to the side of the helipad and guided the chopper in. The pilot set the bird down perfectly in the middle of the pad. He killed the engine and the rotors immediately began to slow. There was a whine as they powered down.

“When you see that Chinaman,” the pilot said, “give him a couple of knocks for me.”

“We don’t do that kind of thing,” Luke said.

The pilot turned around and smiled. “Sure you don’t. Son, I fly people in and out of places like this all the time. I know who does what just by looking, believe me. One glance at you guys and I know they’ve decided to turn up the heat a few notches.”

He, Swann, and Ed exited the chopper, heads ducked low. A man was already waiting on the pad to greet them. He wore a gray business suit and a blue tie. His hair was blown about by the slowing blades of the helicopter. The fabric of his suit rippled from it. His black shoes were polished to a bright sheen. He looked as if he had just stepped off a commuter train in Manhattan. He was about as out of place as a man could possibly be.

As Luke came closer, the man’s face took form. He appeared ageless – not old, not young, some indeterminate place in between. He extended a hand. Luke shook it.

“Agent Stone? I’m Pete Winn. They told me the President sent you. Thanks for coming down to see us.”

“Thanks, Pete. Please call me Luke.”

Luke, Ed, and Swann followed Pete Winn away from the chopper and toward a corrugated aluminum hut at the far side of the pad. Even the chopper pad was surrounded by barbed wire fencing. The only way in or out of the helipad was through that building. The doors to the building were operated by a seeing-eye device. They opened automatically as the men approached.

“What is this place?” Luke said.

“This?” Winn said. “You mean the camp?”

“Yes.”

“Ah, well, I’ll give you the thirty-second elevator pitch. It’s basically a detention camp. We’ve got just over two hundred and fifty detainees at the moment, including more than seventy children. Mostly, they’re illegal aliens from Mexico and Central America whose lives would be at risk from the drug cartels or criminal gangs if they were sent back home. They haven’t been granted asylum, so they stay here with their families until such time as the Immigration and Naturalization Service can decide what to do with them. Their immigration status is officially undetermined. Meanwhile, since this place is invisible, the gangs have no idea where they are.”

They passed through the building quickly. It was basically a hangout for flight controllers, helipad signalers, and pilots. There were a few desks and chairs, some radio and video monitoring equipment, a radar screen, a coffee maker, and an old box of stale donuts on a table.

“So they sit here endlessly?” Swann said.

“Well, endlessly is a long time,” Winn said. “The family that’s spent the most time with us has been here seven years.”

Winn must have seen the looks on their faces.

“It’s not as bad as it sounds. Really. All the children go to school five days a week. The school is right here on the grounds. There are enrichment activities, including two first-run movies each weekend, shown in both English and Spanish. There’s soccer and basketball, and the adults are able to take language classes and job skills training, including training with master carpenters we bring in here.”

“Sounds great,” Swann said. “You guys mind if I spend my vacation here?”

“You might be surprised,” Winn said. “People like it here. It’s a lot better than going home and getting murdered.”

A black SUV waited for them outside the hut. As the car drove through the camp, they passed another fence topped with looping razor wire. A handful of men sat on benches on the other side of the fence. Four or five of them were white men. A couple of them were black. They all wore bright yellow jumpsuits. They stared through the fence at the passing car.

“Those guys don’t look like Mexicans,” Ed Newsam said.

Pete Winn’s face began to change. Earlier it had been friendly, maybe even a touch nervous to meet Luke and his team. Now it seemed almost dismissive.

“No, they don’t,” he said. “We’ve got some home-grown in here, too.”

“Are they hiding out from the cartels?” Swann said.

Winn stared straight ahead. “Gentlemen, I’m sure there are aspects of your work that you aren’t at liberty to discuss. The same holds true for me.”

After a few minutes they had traveled to the far side of the camp from the helipad and administration buildings. The car stopped. There was no one around – no prisoners, no workers, no one at all. A small cabin sat by itself on a desultory dirt lot.

The men stepped out. The lot was barren, hard-packed earth. Any sense of camp activity, or even life itself, was far away from here.

Pete Winn handed Luke a key ring. There was only one key on it. Winn’s face was hard now. His eyes were steely and cold. His demeanor had completed its drastic change from the uncertain functionary who had greeted them on the helicopter pad, to whatever it was now.

“The existence of this cabin is classified. Officially, it doesn’t exist, nor does this prisoner. Your visit here does not exist. The Chinese government has made no inquiries, official or backdoor, into the whereabouts of a man named Li Quianguo. My understanding is the Chinese have acted like they have nothing to hide or to be concerned about, and have even offered assistance in finding the source of the hack into the dam operating system.”

He gestured with his head toward the cabin.

“The walls of the cabin are soundproof. The key opens an equipment cabinet in the back room. If you feel you need equipment to facilitate your interrogation, you may find what you’re looking for in that cabinet.”

Luke nodded, but didn’t say anything. He didn’t like the assumption these people all seemed to make that he had been called in here to torture the prisoner.

Had he tortured people before? He supposed he had, depending on the definition of that word. But no one had ever called him into a situation with the idea that he was going to torture a suspect. If they did, they’d be pretty foolish – there were people far more versed at it than Luke. When he

had done it in the past, it was on the fly and he was improvising, almost always because a subject had critical information and Luke needed that information now.

Pete Winn went on, but now his manner was more relaxed, and his words were mundane.

“If you need anything, lunch, beer, dinner, or you want the car to return you to the helipad, just pick up the telephone in the cabin and dial zero. We’ll send you what you need. We can put you up on the base for the night if you like, and provide any kind of toiletries or personal items. Soap, shampoo, shavers – we have all that stuff. We can also get you a change of clothes, within reason.”

“Thank you,” Luke said.

“I’m going to leave you to it,” Winn said. “Good luck.”

When the man was gone, Luke stopped to talk with his men outside the cabin. Green mountains towered around them outside the camp fence. The camp seemed to be built inside a bowl.

“Swann, how many years were you in China?”

“Six.”

“In what part?”

“All around. I lived in Beijing mostly, but I spent a lot of time in Shanghai and Chongqing, also a little bit in the south, in Guangzhou and Hong Kong.”

“Okay, I want you to watch this guy closely, get any indications from him that you can. Anything at all. Where you think he might be from. How old he might be. His level of education. His level of computer know-how. Is he even from China at all? Susan Hopkins’s people told me the guy is perfectly fluent in English. What are the chances he was born here in the States, or in Canada, or Hong Kong? Or anywhere at all, really. There are Chinese people everywhere.”

Swann shook his head. “If the guy’s an operative, I’m not going to know that stuff. He’ll be too good at hiding his origins.”

“Guess,” Luke said. “It’s not a math problem. There are no right or wrong answers. I just want to get your sense.”

Swann nodded. “Got it.”

Now Luke looked at him closely. “How squeamish are you?”

He had never worried about Swann’s personality before, but it occurred to him now that Swann could be something of a weak link in there.

“Squeamish? Squeamish, like how?”

“Ed and I may need to get serious in there.”

“Well, give me a heads-up and I’ll go for a little walk around these beautiful grounds.”

“If you do, make sure you wave to the snipers,” Ed Newsam said.

About a hundred yards away was a three-story guard tower. Luke and Swann glanced at it. A man with a rifle stood in the tower, apparently targeting them. From this distance, it looked like he had the rifle pointed right at them, and he was sighting down the scope.

“Can he hit us from there?” Swann said.

“With his eyes closed,” Luke said.

“He’s just practicing though,” Ed said. “Relieving a little boredom.”

They went inside.

\*

The man wore a bright yellow jumpsuit. He sat on a metal folding chair in the middle of an empty room. He was large, with broad shoulders, thick arms and legs, and a prominent stomach.

He wore a black hood over his head. His wrists were cuffed behind his back. His legs were cuffed together at the ankles. He was slumped forward, as if sleeping. With the hood over his head, it was impossible to tell.

Luke pulled the hood from the man's head. The man jerked in seeming surprise, and sat up. His jet black hair was mussed – it stood up in tufts in a few places, was flattened down in others. Even with the hood removed, he still wore airplane blinders – the kind people put over their faces to sleep on long flights.

He yawned as if waking from an afternoon nap.

“Li Quiangguo,” Luke said. “*Ni hui shuo yingyu ma?*”

In Mandarin Chinese, his words translated to *Do you speak English?*

The man smiled broadly. “Call me Johnny,” he said. “Please. It’s what I use here in the West. And let’s speak English. It makes it easier for everybody, especially me.”

The man’s English was the American version, certainly, but with no accent or regional flavor of any kind. Luke might have said he sounded like he was from the Midwest. But really, he didn’t sound like he was from anywhere. He could have been beamed down from a spaceship.

“Why is it easier for you?” Luke said.

“It’s easier on my ears. It means I don’t have to listen to people like you butcher the beautiful Chinese language.”

Now Luke smiled. “Tell me, Li. Why didn’t you kill yourself when you had the chance?”

Li made a face of exaggerated surprise, even disgust. “Why would I do that? I like America. And I’ve been treated pretty well so far.”

It was an interesting thing to say, considering that it came from a man who had been manacled to a metal chair overnight, with a black hood and airplane blinders on his head, in a detention center that didn’t exist, and with no way to contact the outside world. He was not technically under arrest and he hadn’t seen a lawyer. A lot of people might not agree that his arrangements constituted being treated well. Some might say he had been disappeared. Yes, he hadn’t been tortured, but for most people, lack of torture was a pretty low threshold.

Li almost seemed to read Luke’s mind. “I heard birds chirping outside this morning. That’s how I knew it was a new day.”

Luke reached with one hand and pulled off the man’s airplane blinders. “Birds at sunrise. That’s very nice. I’m glad to hear you’ve enjoyed your stay so far. Unfortunately, things are about to change.”

“Ah.” The man’s eyes squinted in the sudden brightness. He scanned the room, took in Swann and Ed Newsam. The eyes settled on Ed.

Ed was leaned up against one wall. He seemed very relaxed, and at the same time, menacing. His body barely moved. There was so much potential energy stored inside of it, he was like a storm about to happen. His eyes never left the Chinese man’s eyes.

“I see,” Li said.

Luke nodded. “Yes. You do.”

Li’s face hardened. “I’m a tourist. This is all a case of mistaken identity.”

“If you’re a tourist,” Ed said, “maybe you’d like to give us the names and contact information of your family, so we can let them know where you are. You know, and tell them that you’re doing fine.”

Li shook his head. “I would like to contact the Chinese embassy.”

“Our superiors have already done that for you,” Luke said. It wasn’t true, as far he knew. He began to inch out on a limb, but a limb he felt would hold his weight.

“It was a backchannel conversation, as you might imagine, given the sensitivity of the situation,” he said. “You may be disturbed to know that the Chinese government says you aren’t real. There are no school records, no job records, no hometown or family background. They’ve seen a scan of your passport, and they’ve determined that it’s a clever forgery.”

Li stared straight ahead. He didn’t respond.

Luke let the moment draw out. There was no reason to fill it with more talk. He had seen subjects break as soon as they realized their handlers had disavowed them. Break wasn’t even the right

word. Sometimes, when they suddenly found themselves without a country, they simply switched sides.

“Li, did you hear me? They’re not going to protect you. You’re not going to get away from this. You didn’t take your pill when you could have, and now you’re here. There is no way out. As far as your people are concerned, you don’t exist, and you never existed. The facility you’re in right now doesn’t exist. You could end up stuffed inside a fifty-five-gallon drum at the bottom of the ocean, or in a shallow ditch in the wilderness, with crows picking out your eyes... No one will care. No one will even know.”

The man still didn’t say a word. He just stared straight ahead.

“Li, what do you know about the Black Rock Dam, and how the floodgates opened?”

“I don’t know anything.”

Luke waited a few beats, then went on. “Well, let me tell you what I know. At last count, more than a thousand people have died. Do you have any idea how upset that makes me? It makes me want to take revenge for their deaths. It makes me want to find a scapegoat, and make that person pay. You’re a convenient scapegoat, aren’t you, Li? A man that nobody cares about, nobody remembers, and no one will miss. I’ll tell you something else. I know you’ve been trained to resist interrogation. That only makes me happier. It means I can take my time. We can stay here for days, or even weeks. We have people working on that dam problem. They’ll figure out what happened. We don’t need whatever pitiful information you might have. I don’t even want it, to be honest. I just want to hurt you. The more you just sit there, the more I want to do it.”

Now Luke squatted down on his haunches near Li’s face. He was inches away, so close that his breath exhaled on Li’s cheeks. “We’re going to get to know each other pretty well in here, okay, Li? Eventually, I’m going to know everything about you.”

Luke glanced at Swann. Swann stood in a corner by the steel-barred window. He hadn’t said a word since they walked in here. He looked out at the concrete compound and the lush green hillsides surrounding it. Swann was an analyst, a data guy. Luke imagined he might never have thought about how data was sometimes extracted. Death threats were just the beginning.

“Li, the man’s talking to you,” Ed said.

Li managed a smile then. It was a sickly smile, and there was no humor in it at all. “Please,” he said. “Call me Johnny.”

\* \* \*

An hour passed. Luke and Ed had taken turns talking to Li, but with no real effect. If anything, Li was becoming more confident. He had evidently decided that a few hard smacks from Ed were the most he was going to get.

Now Luke was watching Swann again.

“Okay, Swann,” he said. “Now is a good time to take that walk around the camp.”

A few minutes before, Luke had opened the cabinet with the key Pete Winn had given him. The cabinet was more of a utility closet than an actual cabinet. Inside was a fold-out table, a little bit like an ironing board, but wider, lower to the ground, and much more sturdy. It was about seven feet long and four feet wide.

When Luke and Ed set it up, the table had a noticeable incline. On the higher side, there were manacles for the subject’s ankles. In the middle were leather straps for tying down the subject’s wrists, and a large one in the center for the subject’s waist. At the lower end was a metal ring for securing the subject’s head to the table.

It was a platform for water torture.

When they brought the table out, Li became visibly agitated. He knew what it was right away. Of course he did. He was an intelligence agent, a field operative, and they had all seen it as part of

their training. Americans, Chinese, whoever. Luke had watched a live demonstration of the technique once upon a time. A hardened CIA agent, a man who had come to the agency out of the Navy SEALs, who had been in-country in numerous hotspots, was the test subject.

How they convinced this man to volunteer was something Luke never found out. Maybe he got a bonus. It should have been a big one. The agent seemed relaxed before the demonstration. He was laughing and joking with his soon-to-be tormentors. Once the procedure started, he transformed instantly. He lasted twenty-four seconds before he used the safe word to make it stop. They timed it.

“You have to know that this is against the Geneva Conventions,” Li said, his voice shaking just a little. “It’s against...”

“Last I checked, we’re not in Geneva,” Luke said. “In fact, we aren’t anywhere at all. As I mentioned earlier, this facility doesn’t exist, and neither does anyone named Li Quiangguo.”

Luke busied himself with the other implements he had taken out of the closet. They included two large watering cans, like the kind a nice older lady would use to water her gardens. There were also locks for the manacles and leather straps on the board. And finally there were a number of medium-sized heavy cloth towels and a roll of cellophane. If the towels didn’t work, they could always move on to the cellophane. Luke happened to know that the CIA didn’t bother with cloth towels.

“Man,” Ed said. “I haven’t done anything like this since Afghanistan. It’s been at least five years.”

“Then your experience is more recent than mine,” Luke said. “So we’ll let you do the honors. How’d it go when you did it?”

Ed shrugged. “Scary. We had a couple of them die on us. It’s not like some of the other methods I’ve seen. You can electrocute people all day, as long as the current is right. It hurts but it doesn’t kill them. People do die from this. They drown. They get brain damage. They have heart attacks. This is real.”

“Listen,” Li said. His entire body was trembling now. “Waterboarding is against all the laws of war. It is recognized as torture by every international body. You are committing a human rights violation.”

“Man, you’re all about rules and regulations all of a sudden,” Ed said. “My way of thinking, someone deliberately floods out thousands of people, I’m not dealing with a human at that point. I’d say you forfeited your human rights.”

“Guys,” Swann said. “I don’t feel right about this.”

Luke glanced at him. “Swann, I told you it was a good time for you to leave. Take about twenty minutes. That should be plenty.”

Swann’s face turned red. “Luke, everything I’ve read says that this won’t even give you decent intelligence. He’ll just lie to make it stop.”

Luke couldn’t remember a single time when Swann had questioned his actions before. He’d be curious to know if Swann was questioning his actions now. Either way, he just shook his head.

“Swann, you can’t believe everything you read. I’ve seen this get actionable, accurate intelligence from people in a matter of minutes. And because Mr. Li is our guest here, we’ll be able to quickly verify any claims he makes. We can also revisit those claims with him if they turn out to be inaccurate. The truth is they don’t want people to do this because as Li so accurately points out, it qualifies as torture. But it works, and in the right circumstances, it works really, really well.”

Luke gestured around the empty room. “And these are the right circumstances.”

Swann was staring now. “Luke...”

Luke raised a hand. “Swann. Out. Please.” He gestured at the door.

Swann shook his head. His face was very red now. He seemed on the verge of trembling himself. “Why did you even call me in for this?” he said. “I don’t work for the FBI anymore, and neither do you.”

Luke almost smiled. He didn't know how Swann really felt, but he couldn't have scripted this better than it was turning out. This was good cop, bad cop on steroids.

"By the end of this day, I'm going to need your skills," Luke said. "But not for this. Now get lost. Please. And notice how polite I've been so far. In a minute I'm going to lose my temper."

"I'm going to lodge a formal complaint," Swann said.

"Please do. You know who I work for. Your complaint will get as far as the office shredder. It will go right down the memory hole. But do it anyway, as an intellectual exercise."

"I plan to," Swann said. With that, he went out the door. He pulled it tight behind him, but did not slam it.

Luke exhaled. He looked at Ed. "Ed, can you please fill up these watering cans at the kitchen sink? We're going to need them in a minute."

Ed gave a devilish half-smile. "With pleasure."

As he picked up the watering cans, he stared at Li. He showed Li the crazy giant eyeball look that he sometimes used on people. It was a look that gave even Luke the willies. It made Ed seem psychotic. It made him look like a man who found sadism pleasurable. Luke wasn't sure where that look came from, or what it meant. He didn't really want to know.

"Brother," Ed said to Li. "Your day is about to get a lot longer."

As Ed busied himself in the cabin's tiny kitchen, Luke looked closely at Li. The man was quaking now. His entire body vibrated as if some low current of electricity was running through it. His eyes had become wide and scared.

"You've seen this before, haven't you?" Luke said.

Li nodded. "Yes."

"On prisoners?"

"Yes."

"It's bad," Luke said. "It's very bad. No one holds up against it."

"I know," Li said.

Luke glanced at the kitchen. Ed was taking his sweet time in there. "And Ed... you must know how he is. He enjoys this kind of thing."

Li didn't say anything to that. His face turned bright red, and then gradually morphed to dark red. It seemed like there was an explosion going on inside him, and he was trying to contain it. He squeezed his eyes shut. His teeth clenched, then started chattering. His whole body began to shudder.

"I'm cold," he said. "I can't do this."

Just then, something occurred to Luke.

"They've done it to you," he said. "Your own people." It wasn't a question. He knew it like he knew his own name. Li had been waterboarded before now, and in all likelihood, it was the Chinese government that had done it.

Suddenly Li's mouth opened in a scream. It was a silent scream, his jaws opened to their full extension. It somehow reminded Luke of a werewolf howling in agony during the bone-breaking transition from human to canine form. Except there was no sound. Almost nothing came out of Li, just a low gaggling sort of noise deep in his throat.

His entire body was stiff now, every muscle tensed as if the electrical current had just gone up ten notches.

"You were a traitor," Luke said. "An enemy of the state. But you were rehabilitated in prison. Torture was part of the process. They made you into an agent, but not a valuable one. You're one of the expendables. That's why you were out here in the field, and that's why you had cyanide pills. If you got caught, you were supposed to kill yourself. There was almost no way you wouldn't get caught, right? But you didn't do it, Li. You didn't kill yourself, and now we're the only hope you've got."

"Please!" Li shouted. "Please don't do it!"

The man's body shook uncontrollably. More than that. A smell started to come from him, the thick humid smell of feces.

"Oh my God," he said. "Oh my God. Help me. Help me."

"What's going on here?" Ed said as he returned with the watering cans. He made a face as the smell hit his nose. "Oh, man."

Luke raised his eyebrows. He almost felt sympathy for this man. Then he thought of the more than a thousand dead, and the many thousands who had lost their homes. Nothing, no negative life experience, could justify doing that.

"Yeah, Li's a mess," he said. "He's a trauma case. Looks like this isn't his first time around with waterboarding."

Ed nodded. "Good. So he knows the drill already." He looked down at Li. "We're gonna do it anyway, you hear me, girly boy? We don't care about the smell, so if that's your game, it didn't work." Ed glanced at Luke. "I've seen this before. People try it because they think that the smell is so rank we won't want to go forward. Or maybe we'll take pity on them. Or whatever." He shook his head. "The smell is nasty, but I've never seen it work. We wouldn't be here if we were the sensitive type, Li. I've smelled men after they've been disemboweled. Believe me, it's worse than anything you can push out the regular way."

"Please," Li said again. He said it quietly now, almost a whisper. His body was shaking out of control. He hung his head and stared at the floor. "Please don't do it. I can't take it."

"Give me something," Luke said. "Give me something good, and then we'll see. Look at me, Li."

Li's head hung even lower. He shook it. "I cannot look at you now." His face made a grimace, a mask of humiliation. Then he started crying.

"Help me. Please help me."

"You better give me something," Luke said. "Or we're going to get started."

Luke stood ten feet away and watched him. Li was slumped over in the chair, his head low, his arms tight behind his broad back, his entire body trembling. There was no organization to it – every part seemed to be doing something different and unrelated to every other part. Luke noticed now that the crotch of Li's jumpsuit was wet. He had also pissed himself.

Luke took a deep breath. They'd have to get somebody in here to clean this guy up.

"Li?" he said.

Li was still facing the ground. His voice sounded like it was coming from the bottom of a well. "There is a warehouse. It's a small warehouse, with an office. An importer of Chinese goods. In the office, everything is explained."

"Whose office is it?" Luke said.

"Mine."

"It's a front?" Ed said.

Li tried to shrug. His body jittered and jived. His teeth chattered as he talked. "Mostly. It had to be somewhat functional, or else there is no cover story."

"Where is it?"

Li mumbled something.

"What?" Luke said. "I don't hear you. If you play with me, we're going to do this the hard way. You think Ed wants you off the hook? Think again."

"It's in Atlanta," Li said, clear and firm now, as if telling it was a relief. "The warehouse is in Atlanta. That's where I was based."

Luke smiled.

"Well, you can give us the address, and we can fly down to Atlanta. We'll be right back in a few hours." He put his hand on Li's shoulder. "God help you if we find out you're lying."

\*

“Nice job, Swann,” Luke said. “I couldn’t have asked for better if I had written the script myself.”

“Did I ever mention I was in the theater club in high school? I played Mack the Knife one year.”

“You missed your calling,” Luke said. “You could’ve gone to Hollywood based on what I saw in there.”

They moved down the concrete walkway toward the waiting black SUV. Two men in FEMA jumpsuits had just exited the SUV and gone into the cabin. Luke glanced at the surroundings. All around them were fences and razor wire. Behind the closest guard tower, a steep green hillside rose up toward the northern mountains of Georgia.

Swann smiled. “I tried to put just the right note of moral indignation into it.”

“You had me fooled,” Ed said.

“Well, it was real. I didn’t have to act. I’m really not for torturing people.”

“Neither are we,” Ed said. “At least, not all the time.”

“Did you do it?” Swann said.

Luke smiled. “What do you think?”

Swann shook his head. “I was gone only ten minutes before you came out, so I’m guessing that you didn’t.”

Ed clapped him on the back. “Keep guessing, data analyst.”

“Well, did you or didn’t you?” Swann said. “Guys?”

Within minutes, the three of them were back on the helicopter, rising over the dense forest and headed south to Atlanta.

## CHAPTER SIX

**10:05 a.m.**

**United States Naval Observatory – Washington, DC**

“Congressman, thank you for coming.”

Susan Hopkins reached out to shake the hand of the tall man in the sharp blue suit. He was United States Representative from Ohio, Michael Parowski. He had prematurely white hair and squinty pale blue eyes. Fifty-five years old, he was handsome in a rugged, Marlboro man sort of way. Blue-collar born and bred, he had the big stone hands and the broad shoulders of a man who started his career as an iron worker.

Susan knew his story. He was a lifelong bachelor. He grew up in Akron, the son of immigrants from Poland. As a teenager, he was a Golden Gloves fighter. The industrial cities of the north, Youngstown, Akron, Cleveland, were his stronghold. His support up there was unshakeable. More than that, it was mythic, the stuff of legend. He was on his ninth term in the House, and his reelections were a breeze, an afterthought.

Would Michael Parowski get reelected in northern Ohio? Would the sun come up again tomorrow? Would the Earth continue to spin on its axis? If you dropped an egg, would it fall to the kitchen floor? He was as inevitable as the laws of physics. He wasn't going anywhere.

Susan had seen the videos of him wading into the crowds at union rallies, holidays, and ethnic festivals (where he did not discriminate – Polish, Greek, Puerto Rican, Italian, African-American, Irish, Mexican, Vietnamese – if you had an ethnicity, he was your man). He was a hand-shaker, a back-slapper, a high-fiver, and a hugger. His signature move was the whisper.

In the midst of mayhem and chaos, dozens or even hundreds of people pressing close to him, he would invariably take some older woman one step aside and whisper something in her ear. Sometimes the women would laugh, sometimes they would blush, sometimes they would wag a finger at him. The crowds adored it, and none of the women ever repeated what he said. It was political theatre of the highest order, the kind that Susan, frankly, loved.

Here in DC, he was a union man all the way – the AFL-CIO gave him a 100 percent rating. He was one of labor's best friends on Capitol Hill. He was more wobbly on some of Susan's other issues: women's rights, gay rights, the environment. But not so much that it was a deal breaker, and in a sense, his strengths complemented hers. She could speak with passion about clean water and clean air, and about women's health, and he could equal her passion when he talked about the plight of the American worker.

Even so, Susan wasn't sure he was the perfect fit, but the Party elders assured her he was. They wanted him on board more than anything. Truth be told, they had practically made the decision for her. And what they really wanted from him, besides his popularity, was his toughness. He was the baddest man in the room. He didn't drink, he didn't smoke, and it at least appeared that he didn't sleep. He lived on airplanes, bouncing back and forth to his district like a ping-pong ball. He would be on the Hill for committee meetings and votes at all hours, at a cemetery in Youngstown in the morning six hours later, fresh and alert, tears in his eyes, wrapping his big strong arms around the mother of a dead serviceman as she melted against his chest.

If his enemies claimed that he had quietly remained friends with a couple of the mobsters who he spent his childhood with in the old neighborhood... well, that only added to the image. He was soft, he was hard, he was loyal, and he was no one to mess with.

He gave her a bright smile. “Madam President, to what do I owe this honor?”

“Please, Michael. It's still Susan.”

“Okay. Susan.”

She led him back into her study. As Vice President, she had long ago dispensed with holding important meetings in her office. She preferred the somewhat informal feel, and the beautiful surroundings, of the study. When they walked in, Kat Lopez was already there and waiting.

“Do you know my chief-of-staff, Kat Lopez?”

“I haven’t had the pleasure.”

The two shook hands. Kat gave him one of her rare smiles. “Congressman, I’ve been a big fan of yours since I was in college.”

“When was that, last year?”

Kat did something out of character then. She blushed. It was fast, disappearing almost as soon as it arrived, but it was there. The man had an effect on people.

Susan offered Parowski a chair. “Shall we sit down?”

Parowski settled into one of the comfortable armchairs. Susan sat facing him. Kat stood behind her.

“Mike, we’ve known each other a long time. So I’m not going to dance around. As you know, I abruptly became President when Thomas Hayes died. It took me this long to get my wheels under me. And I delayed picking my Vice President until the crisis seemed like it was over.”

“I’ve heard some rumblings about what happened yesterday,” Parowski said.

Susan nodded. “It’s true. We believe it was a terror attack. But we’ll survive it like we did the others, and we’re going to move forward even stronger and more resilient than before. And one way we’re going to do that is with a strong Vice President.”

Parowski stared at her.

Susan nodded. “You.”

He glanced up at Kat Lopez, then back at Susan. He smiled. Then he laughed.

“I thought you were going to ask me to herd some votes for you on the Hill.”

“I am,” she said. “I’m going to ask you to do that. But as the Vice President and the President of the Senate, not as the Congressman from Ohio.”

She raised her hands. “I know. It feels like I’m throwing this in your lap, and I am. But I’ve been putting feelers out, and holding little hush-hush secretive meetings for the past six weeks. You’re the name that comes up again and again. You’re the one with massive popularity in your own district, and broad appeal across the entire northern tier of the United States, and even in conservative working class districts across the south. And you’re the tireless campaigner who can ride hard with me when the time comes to run for reelection.”

“I’ll do it,” he said.

“Take your time,” Susan said. “I don’t want to rush you.”

His smile became broader. Now he raised his hands, almost as if imploring the heavens. “What can I say? It’s a dream come true. I love what you’re doing. You held this country together at a time when it could have splintered apart. You were a lot tougher than anyone gave you credit for.”

“Thank you,” Susan said. If he could have seen her in the early days, weeping alone in this very room when she thought ninety thousand people were going to die from the Ebola attack, would he still think that?

She nodded to herself. Probably more than ever.

He pointed at her with his thick index finger. “I’ll tell you something else. I always knew that about you. I can read people with the best of them. I learned it as a kid, and I saw it in you years ago, when you first came to DC. Ask anybody. When June sixth came, I told people don’t worry, we’re in good hands. I told that to the people who were still alive on the Hill, I told it to the TV shows, and I told it personally to at least ten thousand people in my district.”

Susan nodded. “I know that.” And she did know it. That little fact had come up again and again in her meetings. *Michael Parowski has your back.*

“You need to know something about me, though,” he said. “I’m big. Physically I’m big, and I have a big personality. If you’re looking for someone to stand in the back and fade into the wallpaper, then I’m probably not your guy.”

“Michael, we vetted you eight ways to Sunday. We know everything about you. We don’t want you to stand in the background. We want you upfront, being yourself. We want your strength. We’re rebuilding a government here, and in a sense, we’re rebuilding people’s faith in America. It’s hard work, and it’s a lot of heavy lifting. That’s why we picked you.”

He gave her a sidelong look. “You know everything about me, huh?”

She smiled. “Well, almost everything. There’s still one mystery I’d like to solve.”

“Okay, I’ll bite,” he said. “What is it?”

“When you pull the old ladies aside at events, what do you whisper to them?”

He grunted. A funny look came into his face. It nearly transformed, decades of wear and tear dropping from it. For a few seconds, he looked almost (but not quite) innocent, like the hardscrabble child he must once have been.

“I tell them how beautiful they look today,” he said. “Then I say, ‘Don’t tell nobody. It’s our little secret.’ And I mean it, every word of it.”

He shook his head, and Susan thought it was almost with wonder – at people, at politics, at the sheer magnitude and audacity of what people like he and Susan did every single day of their lives.

“It works every time,” he said.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

**11:45 a.m.**

**Atlanta, Georgia**

“Is Mr. Li okay? I haven’t seen him here in quite a while.”

The man was small and thin, with a narrow and hunched back. He wore a gray uniform with the name *Sal* stitched over one breast. He kept a cigarette lit and in his mouth at all times. He talked with it in his mouth. He never seemed to see any need to take it out until it was finished. Then he lit another one. In one hand, he carried a heavy pair of bolt cutters.

“Oh, he’s fine,” Luke said.

They walked down a long, wide cinderblock corridor. It was lit by sputtering overhead fluorescents. As they walked, a small rat darted in front of them, then scurried along the bottom corner of the wall. Sal didn’t seem to feel the rat was worth commenting on, so Luke kept his mouth shut. He glanced at Ed. Ed smiled and said nothing. Trailing behind them, Swann coughed.

Li’s space was in a large old warehouse building which had been subdivided over the years into many smaller spaces. Dozens of tiny companies rented spaces here. There was a loading dock at the far end of the corridor, and the corridor itself was perfect for loading up dollies and rolling product in and out.

Sal seemed to work as some kind of manager or custodian of the place. He had initially been hesitant to cooperate. But when Ed showed him his FBI identification, and Swann showed him his new NSA badge, Sal became eager to please. Luke didn’t show his badge. It was his old Special Response Team ID, and the SRT didn’t exist anymore.

“What kind of trouble might he be in?” Sal said.

Luke shrugged. “Nothing too major. Tax trouble, trouble with trademark and patent infringements. About what you’d expect from a guy bringing stuff in from China. You must see it all the time, am I right? I was in Chongking a few years ago. You can go into the warehouses along the waterfront there and buy new iPhones for fifty bucks, and Breitling watches for a hundred and fifty. They’re not real, of course. But you wouldn’t know the difference to look at them.”

Sal nodded. “You wouldn’t believe the stuff I see come in and out of here.” He stopped in front of a corrugated steel door, the kind that slides up from the bottom. “Anyway, Li seems like a very nice man. He doesn’t speak much English, but I’d say he gets by on what little he has. And he’s very polite. Always bowing and smiling. Not sure how much business he does, though.”

The metal door had a clasp with a heavy lock. Sal lifted the bolt cutter and with one quick snap, chopped the lock right off.

“You’re in,” he said. “I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

He was already moving down the hall toward his office.

“Thanks for your help,” Ed called to his back.

Sal raised one hand. “I’m an American.” He didn’t turn around.

Ed bent over and pulled up the door. They observed what was visible before going in. Ed stuck his hand inside and slowly waved it side to side, up and down, looking for trip wires.

It wasn’t necessary. Li’s warehouse was unprotected by booby traps. More than that, it seemed long abandoned. When Luke flipped the switch, half the overhead lights didn’t work. Plastic-wrapped pallets of cheap toys were stacked in rows in the gloom, and covered with green tarps. Boxes of generic, no-name household cleaning products, the kind that would turn up in dollar stores and odd lot outlets, were piled in one corner, nearly to the ceiling. Everything was blanketed in a thin film of dust. The stuff had been sitting here for a while.

Li seemed to have imported a shipment of junk to keep up appearances, then never bothered with it again.

“The office is over there,” Swann said.

In the far corner of the warehouse was the door to the small office. The door was wood, with a frosted glass window for the top panel. Luke tried the knob. Locked. He glanced at Ed and Swann.

“Either of you guys have a pick on you? Otherwise, we have to go back down there and explain to Sal about how organized crime has cornered the market on year-old discount store crap.”

Ed shrugged and took his keys out of the pocket of his jeans. The key ring had a small black flashlight on it. Ed held the flashlight like the world’s smallest night stick, and smacked it against the window, smashing the glass in. He reached through the hole and unlocked the door from the inside. He held up the flashlight for Luke’s inspection.

“It’s like a pick, only more direct.”

They went in. The office was bleak, but tidy. There was no window. There was a three-drawer filing cabinet, which was mostly empty. The bottom drawers each had a few folders with shipping manifests and receipts. The top drawer had a few power bars and small bags of pretzels and potato chips, plus a couple bottles of spring water.

There was a long wooden desk, with an old desktop computer on it. On one side of the desk were the kind of deep drawers where people often kept files on hangars. These drawers were locked.

“Ed?” Luke said.

Ed walked over, grabbed the handle of the top drawer, and wrenched it open with brute force – to the naked eye, it looked like a parlor trick, one deft snap of the wrist breaking the lock. Luke knew better. Then Ed proceeded to open each drawer in turn using the exact same technique.

“Like a pick,” he said.

Luke nodded. “Yes, but more direct.”

There was nothing much in the drawers. Pencils, pens, faded pieces of stationery. An unopened pack of Wrigley chewing gum. An old Texas Instruments calculator. In one of the drawers, on the bottom, were three CD-ROMs in dirty plastic cases. The cases were marked with letters A, B, and C, written in magic marker on scraps of masking tape. The case with the letter B on it was cracked.

Swann sat down to the computer and booted it up. “Pretty low-tech,” he said. “This thing is probably twenty years old. I’ll bet it’s not even hooked to the internet. Sure. Look at this. It’s from a time before cable hookups, and from way before wireless. There’s nowhere to plug in a Cat 5 cable. You want an internet connection on this thing? Anybody here remember dial-up?”

To Luke, it didn’t make sense.

“Why would an advance man from a country known for sophisticated hacking have a computer that isn’t even on the internet, and almost couldn’t be on it, even if he wanted it to be?”

Swann shrugged. “I have a couple guesses.”

“Do you care to share them?”

“The first is that he’s not Chinese at all. He’s not part of any sophisticated anything. The hack that took the dam out wasn’t particularly advanced. That dam’s system was ripe for the plucking. He may be part of a group with no government backing.”

“If he’s not Chinese, then what is he?” Luke said.

Swann shrugged. “He could be American. He could be Canadian. He has high cheekbones and flat facial features, which could mean he’s Thai. He’s a big guy, which could mean northern Chinese. He could be an American of Asian descent. I didn’t get anything from being in that room with him that indicated any nationality. But I wouldn’t peg him as Chinese just because he has a Chinese passport.”

“Okay, what’s your second guess?” Luke said.

“My second guess is they went low tech so no prying eyes can see what they’re doing. You can’t hack into something that isn’t connected. If Li is not on the internet, no one can read his files. The only way to access them is to come here to this godforsaken warehouse in a crummy industrial district on the outskirts of Atlanta. The only way to find out this warehouse even exists is to torture Li, or in your case, threaten to torture him. And that’s something which never should have happened in the first

place, because Li was supposed to kill himself before he was caught. The people who were supposed to find this computer were Li's handlers, or in a worst-case scenario, Sal would find it when the rent money ran out. Then he would either toss this old computer in the trash, or sell it for ten bucks."

The computer screen came on and asked for a login code.

Swann gestured at the screen. "And that, right there, would have been enough to stop Sal in his tracks."

"Can you beat it?" Ed said.

Swann almost smiled. "Are you kidding? These circa 1994 encryptions are a joke. I was breaking these things when I was thirteen years old."

He typed in a command, and an old black MS-DOS screen appeared in the top left corner. He typed in a few more commands, hesitated for a moment, typed in a few more, and Windows returned, no longer asking for a password.

When the desktop loaded, Swann clicked around for a few moments. It didn't take long. "There are no files on here," he said. "No word processing documents, no spreadsheets, no photographs, nothing."

He glanced at Luke over his shoulder.

"This computer's been wiped clean. The hard drive is still here, and it functions, but there's no evidence of anything. I think our friend Mr. Li might have pulled a fast one."

"Can you get the files back that were deleted?" Luke said.

Swann shrugged. "Maybe, but I can't do it here. Could be there were never any files to begin with. We'll have to remove the hard drive and bring it back with us to NSA to know for sure."

Luke sagged the slightest amount. Generally, he had a lot of confidence in his ability to read people. But maybe Swann was right. Maybe Li had pulled a fast one. His terror seemed real enough, but maybe he had faked it. Why would he do that? He had to know that Luke was coming right back for him. There was nowhere to run.

"What about the CDs?" he said. "Let's check those."

Swann picked up the first one, marked A. He held it between two fingers as if it had something contagious on it. "Sure, why not?"

He slid the CD into its slot. The computer suddenly began to rev like an airplane preparing for takeoff. A moment passed, and then a window opened. It was a list of word processing files. The files had names that followed sequential patterns, most often with a word and then a number. There were dozens and dozens of files.

The first word in the list was "air," and it went from "air1" through "air27." A later word that seemed interesting was "grid," which went from "grid1" to "grid9." In between those two on the list was the word "dam." It went from "dam1" to "dam39." Much later, there was "rig1" to "rig19." Also, "train1" to "train21."

"Should I start with air?" Swann said.

"Okay."

Swann pulled up air1. The words at the top served as a title of sorts. *John F. Kennedy International Airport, New York City.*

"Uh-oh," Swann said.

There was a brief description of the airport, including opening date, its location by latitude and longitude, the number of flights and passengers per year, major airlines it served, and more. Then there were several pages of photographs of the terminal, a New York City map with the airport indicated, and then several maps of the terminals. Past that, things became technical – long lists of data appeared, a blur of numbers and letters. Swann went quiet as he pored over it.

"Houston, we have a problem," he said finally.

\*

The black SUV raced through city streets, headed for the highway.

Luke was on hold, trying to reach the President. In the background, he could hear both Ed and Swann working their own telephones.

“I’m going to need a team of analysts to dive into this stuff,” Swann said. “That’s right, as soon as I can get it all uploaded. No, it’s all on CD-ROM. I can’t do it right now. I’m in a car. Yes. There’s a base just outside of town here, Naval Air Station Atlanta, and we’ll be there in a little while. I assume somebody will lend me a system with a CD slot. Why do *you* think he put it on CD? So nobody could hack it, that’s why. It was in a drawer in a locked office in a locked warehouse that nobody knew about.”

Ed was nearly talking over Swann. “I need you to put me through to the FEMA camp in Chattahoochee National Forest,” he said. He paused for a moment, listened to what was said on the other end.

“I promise you, it exists. Try Camp Enduring Freedom, or Camp Nowhere. I was there this morning. There’s a guy named Pete Winn. I don’t know what his title is. Camp director, maybe. Swimming instructor, I don’t know. Yes, I know there’s no listing for the camp. I need this guy Winn anyway. He has a prisoner. He will know the one. We have confirmed information that we received from that prisoner. Yes, I repeat that. The prisoner is now a high-value prisoner, highest possible value. We are en route to that location. We need that prisoner prepped for further interrogation. I want a twenty-four-hour guard on him, and video surveillance. Prisoner is a flight risk and suicide risk.”

Ed paused again. “Lady, just find the camp! Ask your superior for clearance. I’m telling you, I was there.”

Luke listened to dead air. He was a little surprised at himself. They had left the FEMA camp without considering how they would contact it again. Luke had just assumed he could get back in touch through normal channels. It was interesting how quickly the rust built up after two months away. Would he have made that assumption if he were doing this all the time? Probably not.

After another moment, there was a click and the dead air over the phone changed. It became a wide open space, with some chatter in the background.

“Kat Lopez,” came the voice over the line.

“Hi, Kat. It’s Luke Stone. I need to talk to Susan.”

“Hi, Luke. Susan is in a meeting right now. I can take a message for her.”

“I’d like to speak to her directly, if you don’t mind.”

“Luke, I’m her chief-of-staff. I’m empowered to listen for her. You can trust me to take the message correctly and get it to her.”

“Time is of the essence here, Kat.”

Kat’s voice was firm. “So if we stop jousting over whether you’d like to leave a message with me or not, I think we’ll make better use of everyone’s time.”

Luke sighed. This was how it went. They brought you in, they sent you on a mission, and everything had to be done as soon as possible. Then, when you came to them with the intel, they were in meeting. Leave a message and we’ll call you back.

“Okay, Kat, you got a pen?”

“Very funny,” she said. Of course she was a tablet person. Luke had never quite adapted himself to the latest and greatest technology. He still had a tendency to scribble notes down on scraps of paper.

“We interrogated Li Quianguo this morning. Based on a lead he gave us, we have uncovered a list, and possibly more than one list, of dozens of facilities that are likely targets of terrorist attacks. Our tech guy believes these are probably cyber attacks, like the one that opened the floodgates on the Black Rock Dam. Each target facility has its own document. The documents describe technology in

use, network technology specs including data limits, size of backbone, processing speed, also age of the tech they're using, and its known vulnerabilities.”

“What kind of facilities are these?” she said.

“Airports. Power stations. Entire electricity grids. Oil rigs. Oil refineries. Dams. Bridges. Subway and train systems. You name it, it's on there.”

“Any timeframe indicated?”

“Yes. The last document in the list was called *Zero Hour*. We opened it. The date was August eighteenth, two days from now.”

There was silence over the line.

Luke went on. “We are heading back to question Li again. It'll take us about ninety minutes to get up there. The target lists are on CD. My tech guy, Swann, is going to stay here in Atlanta and oversee uploading of the data so we can get it to analysts at FBI, NSA, and CIA as soon as possible. You might want to consider pulling your National Security people in now, so they're ready as soon as analysis starts to become available. And if you don't mind, pull us some strings so that we have the analysts we need. We're probably going to need a hundred people, today, this afternoon, which means we'll need cross-agency cooperation.”

“You'd better talk to Susan directly,” Kat said.

“Yes. I'll remind you that I asked to do that at the beginning. So that we didn't waste time.”

“I understand.”

The line went dead again.

Ed was staring at Luke. Ed's eyes were large, but not in his typically frightening way. His face was pained. He looked like a man who had just been given an unpleasant surprise, or a child who had been told there were no more cookies.

Behind Ed's head, buildings and billboard zoomed by. They were on a highway overpass now.

“I've got the chopper pilot on the phone. That's the best I could do.”

“Okay, what does he say?”

“He's on the chopper pad here in Atlanta. And he's in touch with the FEMA facility.”

“Okay, Ed, let's not play twenty questions. Give it to me.”

Ed shrugged. His eyes narrowed.

“Li Quianguo is dead.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

**12:30 p.m.**

**The Situation Room, United States Naval Observatory – Washington, DC**

“Should I be in on this?” Michael Parowski said.

Susan nodded. “I want you there.”

They were on the ground floor of the New White House, walking briskly toward the Situation Room. Kat Lopez trailed two steps behind them. Two Secret Service men trailed two steps behind Kat.

“What do you want to tell people?”

Susan shrugged. “There’s no need to tell anyone anything, or even announce your presence. Kurt Kimball often kicks some people out if things go to a high level, but otherwise, no one would be shocked to see a sitting Congressman in there.”

“When will we tell people?”

Susan glanced back. “Kat?”

“We’ve got a tentative date of Wednesday, nine a.m. We’re putting together a press conference. If the weather looks good, we’ll do it on the back lawn. If not, we’ll do it in the communications room. Does that give you enough time, Congressman?”

“Two days? You’d be surprised at the amount of stuff I get done in two days.”

They passed through the open double doors of the Situation Room. Two more Secret Service men flanked the entryway. Big, bald Kurt Kimball, Susan’s National Security Advisor, was already inside, standing in front of a large flat-panel screen mounted on the wall. He was talking to a young tech guy and holding a remote control in his hand.

The place was filling up. Kurt had several staff members in the room, and his two top intelligence analysts, both of whom he’d brought over from the RAND Corporation as soon as he arrived.

Trish Markle, the new Secretary of State, was in a seat facing Kurt, and talking to two of her young staff members. Trish had been in her job six weeks already. She had been an Under Secretary at the State Department when Mount Weather happened, and Susan had simply promoted her to the top slot. Trish was forty-seven years old. She had spent long years as a government bureaucrat – maybe too many. So far, she was doing an unremarkable job as Secretary.

“Kurt,” Susan said, cutting through the background chatter.

He looked Susan’s way, then came over. He shook hands with Congressman Parowski. “Mike, good to see you. I hear there’s a big announcement coming.”

Parowski glanced at Susan. “Interesting. I just heard about it myself.”

Kimball smiled. “Word travels fast down these hallways.”

“Kurt,” Susan said, “if you’re ready, I want to get started. I feel like we’re already behind the eight ball on this. There are huge gaps in my knowledge.”

“I’m ready. But people are going to continue to straggle in while we’re talking. And the analysis we have is very, very preliminary. Mark Swann just finished uploading the last of the files to secure servers maybe twenty minutes ago.”

“That’s okay. I don’t need all the details. Just get me, and everyone else in this room, up to speed about the overall threat.”

Susan sat down at the head of the long conference table. Kat Lopez stood behind her and Mike Parowski sat to her left. For a second, Susan remembered how she used to feel in this room. In the early days, after the June sixth attacks, and during the Ebola crisis, she felt overwhelmed. Everything almost took on a surreal quality.

She had dropped into the Presidency as if from outer space. There were a lot more men around her in those days, and a lot of military men. It made her paranoid. The former President had just been assassinated, in part by military men. When the men stared at her, they looked like sharks eager to feed upon a tender morsel.

Things were different now. She was the quarterback. The people around her were her people – either hand-picked by her, or people from the previous crew chosen to stick around, in many cases vetted by Kurt Kimball personally. She liked the team she had.

“Okay,” Kurt said now. He raised his hands in the air. “Okay, everybody, let’s listen up. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover, and more is coming in all the time, so we’re going to get started. Anybody who doesn’t belong in here, you know where the door is.”

He looked at Susan. “Madam President, thanks for coming.”

She made a spinning wheel motion with her hand. *Let’s go.*

Behind Kurt, a photo of the Black Rock Dam appeared. It was a giant, made of gray concrete, looming high above the camera angle.

“Okay. All of you know by now that the floodgates opened early yesterday morning at the Black Rock Dam in western North Carolina, near Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Millions of cubic feet of water were released before workers could close the dam again, inundating a resort and several towns downriver from the dam. Preliminary estimates are that a thousand or more people died in the sudden flooding, and there was more than a billion dollars in property damage. The Black Rock resort, three miles south of the dam, was completely destroyed.”

Next to the image of the dam a new photo appeared. It was of a large Asian man in an orange jumpsuit, his arms and legs shackled as he was led from the back of an SUV. “This is a man identified as thirty-two-year-old Chinese national Li Quiangguo. We have no idea if that was his real name. We suspect that it wasn’t. We do suspect he was a Chinese intelligence agent.”

“Was?” Susan said. “Wasn’t? Why are you putting him in the past tense?”

Kimball looked at her. Then he looked at Kat Lopez. “Okay, somehow that little piece of news didn’t reach you. Li Quiangguo is dead. There was an incident at the FEMA camp where Li was being held. Luke Stone and another operative were there to question him this morning, on your orders.”

Susan nodded. “Yes, I’m aware of what my orders were.”

“No one is quite sure what happened because we haven’t talked to Stone yet, but apparently the prisoner soiled himself during the course of the interrogation.”

“Wonderful,” Susan said.

Susan thought of Luke Stone, and the idea of bringing him back for this operation. She wondered for a second if maybe it would have been better to let a sleeping dog lie. “How did that happen?”

Kimball shrugged. “People become afraid during aggressive interrogations. Afterwards, Stone told the camp director that the subject had been cooperative, and he and his team were going to investigate a lead Li had give them. Rather than have Li sit around with poop in his pants, the director decided to let him have a hot shower. This is also a pretty standard operating procedure. If a subject gives you something, you give them something in return. The reward makes it more likely they’ll give you something else.

“Only they allowed Li into the shower by himself, with two guards standing outside the door. They also removed his manacles at the wrists and ankles. It turned out he had a powerful dose of cyanide embedded in a capsule inside a false tooth in his mouth. He pulled out the tooth and swallowed the contents of the capsule within seconds of when the water started running. He began experiencing seizures within a minute and a half. He was dead inside four minutes.”

“Was he tortured?” Susan said.

“There are no marks on his body, except ones consistent with the small amount of resistance he put up when he was arrested.”

“Is that what I asked you?” Susan said.

Kurt shook his head. “I think you should ask Luke Stone if the subject was tortured.”

A low murmur went through the room.

“What’s next?” Susan said.

Kimball moved to another slide. It showed an image of a low-slung red brick warehouse building along an industrial road. “Li Quianguo gave Stone and his team information that led them to this warehouse. Inside the warehouse, they found evidence of the import-export business which was Li’s cover story in the United States. They also found evidence that Li was compiling intelligence about a list of potential cyber attack soft targets in the United States. That list is as long as your arm. It contains extensive data about each target, and was kept on three CD-Rom disks in a locked drawer in the locked office of the warehouse. The information was kept nowhere else that we are aware.”

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