

JACK MARS

A LUKE STONE THRILLER--BOOK #2

OATH
OF
OFFICE



A Luke Stone Thriller

Джек Марс

Oath of Office

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Дж. Марк

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— (A Luke Stone Thriller)

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A biological agent is stolen from a biocontainment lab. Weaponized, it could kill millions, and a desperate national hunt ensues to catch the terrorists before it is too late. Luke Stone, head of an elite FBI department, with his own family still in jeopardy, has vowed to walk away—but when the new President, barely sworn in, calls him, he can't turn his back on her. Shocking devastation follows, winding its way all the way to the President, who finds her own family in jeopardy. Her strength tested, as she steps into her new role, she surprises even her closest advisors. Rival presidential staff want Luke out of the picture, and with his team in danger, and left to his own resources, it becomes personal. But Luke Stone never gives up until he, or the terrorists, are dead. Luke realizes quickly that the terrorist's final target is even more high value—and more terrifying—than even he could imagine. Yet with only a few days before doomsday, it's unlikely that even he can stop what's already in motion. A political thriller with non-stop action, dramatic international settings, unexpected twists and heart-pounding suspense, OATH OF OFFICE is book #2 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

Oath of Office (A Luke Stone Thriller–Book 2)

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 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)

OATH OF OFFICE (Book #2)

SITUATION ROOM (Book #3)

CHAPTER ONE

June 6th

3:47 p.m.

Dewey Beach, Delaware

Luke Stone's entire body trembled. He looked at his right hand, his gun hand. He watched it shake as it rested on his thigh. He couldn't get it to stop.

He felt nauseated, sick enough to vomit. The sun was moving west, and the brightness of it made him dizzy.

Go time was in thirteen minutes.

He sat in the driver's seat of a black Mercedes M Series SUV, staring down the block at the house where his family might be. His wife, Rebecca, and his son, Gunner. His mind wanted to conjure images of them, but he wouldn't allow it. They could be somewhere else. They could be dead. Their bodies could be chained to cinderblocks with heavy shipping chains, and rotting at the bottom of Chesapeake Bay. For a split second, he saw Rebecca's hair moving like seaweed, back and forth with the current, deep underwater.

He shook his head to clear it.

Becca and Gunner had been abducted last night by agents working for the men who had taken down the United States government. It was a coup d'état, and its planners had taken Stone's family as a bargaining chip, hoping to stop him from toppling the new government in turn.

It hadn't worked.

"That's the place," Ed Newsam said.

"Is it?" Stone said. He looked at his partner in the passenger seat. "You know that?"

Ed Newsam was big, black, and rippling muscle. He looked like a linebacker in the NFL. There was no softness to him anywhere. He wore a close-cropped beard and a flat-top haircut. His massive arms were dark with tattoos.

Ed had killed six men yesterday. He had been strafed by machine gun fire. A flak vest had saved his life, but a stray bullet had found his pelvis. Cracked it. Ed's wheelchair was in the back of the car. Neither Ed nor Luke had slept in two days.

Ed looked at the tablet computer in his hand. He shrugged.

"That's definitely the house. If they're in there or not, I don't know. I guess we're about to find out."

The house was an old three-bedroom beach house, a little bit rambling, three blocks from the Atlantic Ocean. It fronted the bay and had a small dock. You could pull a thirty-foot boat right up behind it, walk ten feet of dock, climb a few steps, and enter the house. Night was a good time to do this.

The CIA had used the place as a safe house for decades. In the summer, Dewey Beach was so crowded with vacationers and college-age party types, the spooks could sneak Osama bin Laden in there and no one would notice.

"When the hit comes, they don't want us in on it," Ed said. "We don't even have an assignment. You know that, right?"

Luke nodded. "I know."

The FBI was the lead agency on this raid, along with a Delaware state police SWAT team that had come down from Wilmington. They had been quietly amassing in the neighborhood for the past hour.

Luke had seen these things unfold a hundred times. A Verizon FIOS van was parked down at the end of the block. That had to be FBI. A fishing boat was anchored about a hundred yards out

in the bay. Also feds. In a few minutes, at 4 p.m., that boat would make a sudden run right at the safe house dock.

At the same instant, an armored truck from SWAT would come roaring down this street. Another would come down the street one block over, in case anyone tried to make an escape through the backyards. They were going to hit hard and fast, and they would leave no wiggle room at all.

Luke and Ed were not invited. Why would they be? The cops and the feds were going to run this thing by the book. The book said Luke had no objectivity. It was his family in there. If he went in, he would lose his head. He would put himself, his family, the other officers, and the entire operation at risk. He shouldn't even be on this street right now. He shouldn't be anywhere near here. That's what the book said.

But Luke knew the type of men inside that house. He probably knew them better than the FBI or SWAT. They were desperate right now. They had gone all-in on a government overthrow, and the plot had failed. They were looking down the barrel at treason, kidnapping, and murder charges. Three hundred people had died in the coup attempt, and counting, including the President of the United States. The White House was destroyed. It was radioactive. It might be years before it was rebuilt.

Luke had been with the new President last night and this morning. She was not in the mood for mercy. The law was on the books: treason was punishable by death. Hanging. Firing squad. The country might go old-school for a little while, and if so, men like the ones inside that house were going to get the brunt of it.

All the same, they wouldn't panic. These were not common criminals. They were highly skilled and trained men, men who had seen combat, and who had won out against heavy odds. Surrender was not part of their vocabulary. They were very, very clever, and they would be hard to dislodge. A paint-by-numbers SWAT team raid wasn't going to be good enough.

If Luke's wife and child were in there, and if the men inside managed to fight off the first attack... Luke refused to think about it.

It wasn't an option.

"What are you going to do?" Ed said.

Luke stared out the window at the blue sky. "What would you do, if you were me?"

Ed didn't miss a beat. "I'd go in hard as I could. Kill every single man I saw."

Luke nodded. "Me too."

*

The man was a ghost.

He stood in an upstairs bedroom at the back of the old beach house, staring at his prisoners. A woman and a little boy, tucked away in a room with no windows. They sat side by side in folding chairs, their hands cuffed behind them, their ankles cuffed together. They wore black hoods over their heads so they couldn't see. The man had left them without gags in their mouths, so the woman could speak quietly to her son and keep him calm.

"Rebecca," the man said, "we might have some excitement here in a little while. If we do, I want you and Gunner to stay quiet. You're not to scream or call out. If you do, I'll have to come in here and kill you both. Is that understood?"

"Yes," she said.

"Gunner?"

Beneath his hood, the boy made a sort of croaking noise.

"He's too frightened to speak," the woman said.

"That's good," the man said. "He should be afraid. He's a smart boy. And a smart boy won't do anything stupid, will he?"

The woman didn't answer. Satisfied, the man nodded to himself.

Once, the man had a name. Then, over time, he had ten names. Now he didn't bother with names. He introduced himself as "Brown," if such niceties were necessary. Mr. Brown. He liked it. It made him think of dead things. Dead leaves in fall. Barren, burned out woods, months after a fire had destroyed everything.

Brown was forty-five years old. He was big, and he was still strong. He was an elite soldier, and he kept himself that way. He had learned to withstand pain and exhaustion many years ago in Navy SEAL School. He had learned how to kill, and not be killed, in a dozen hot spots around the world. He had learned how to torture at the School of the Americas. He had put what he learned into practice in Guatemala and El Salvador, and later, at Bagram Air Force Base and Guantanamo Bay.

Brown didn't work for the CIA anymore. He didn't know who he worked for and he didn't care. He was a freelancer, and he got paid by the job.

The money, and it was a lot of money, came in cash. Canvas bags full of brand new hundred-dollar bills left in the trunk of a rental sedan at Reagan National Airport. A leather briefcase with half a million dollars in random tens, twenties, and fifties from Series 1974 and 1977 waiting in a locker at a gym in suburban Baltimore. They were old bills, but they had never been touched before, and they were as good as any General Grant minted in 2013.

Two days ago, Brown got a message to come to this house. It was his house until further notice, and his job to run it. If anyone showed up, he was in charge. Okay. Brown was good at many things, and one of them was being the boss.

Yesterday morning, somebody blew up the White House. The President and Vice President escaped to the bunker at Mount Weather, with about half the civilian government. Last night, somebody blew up Mount Weather with all the kiddies still inside. A couple hours later, a new President took the stage, the former Vice President. Nice.

A total flip, from liberals running the show to conservatives, and it all happened in the course of one day. Naturally, the public needed someone to blame, and the new masters pointed their fingers at Iran.

Brown waited up to see what happened next.

Late in the night, four guys pulled up to the back dock in a motorboat. The guys brought this woman and child. The prisoners belonged to someone named Luke Stone. Apparently, people thought Stone might turn into a problem. This morning, it became clear just how much of a problem he was.

When the smoke cleared, the whole overthrow had gone belly up in a matter of hours. And there was Luke Stone, standing astride the rubble.

But Brown still had Stone's wife and kid, and he had no idea what to do with them. Communications were down, to say the least. He probably should have killed them and abandoned the house, but instead he waited for orders that never came. Now, there was a Verizon FIOS van out in front of the house, and a nondescript flying deck fishing boat maybe a hundred meters out on the water.

Did they think he was that dumb? Jesus. He could see them coming a mile away.

He stepped into the hallway. Two men stood there. Both of them mid-thirties, crazy hair and long beards – lifetime special operators. Brown knew the look. He also knew the look in their eyes. It wasn't fear.

It was excitement.

"What's the problem?" Brown said.

"In case you didn't notice, we're about to get hit."

Brown nodded. "I know."

"I can't go to jail," Beard #1 said.

Beard #2 nodded. "I can't either."

Brown was with them. Even before this happened, if the FBI found out his real identity, he was looking at multiple life sentences. Now? Forget it. It might take months for them to identify him, and

in the meantime he would sit in a county jail somewhere, surrounded by low-rent hoodlums. And the way things were right now, he couldn't bank on an angel to step in and make it all go away.

Still, he felt calm. "This place is harder than it looks."

"Yeah, but there's no way out," Beard #1 said.

True enough.

"So we hold them off, and see if we can negotiate something. We've got hostages." Brown didn't believe it as soon as the words were out of his mouth. Negotiate what, safe passage? Safe passage to where?

"They're not going to negotiate with us," Beard #1 said. "They'll tell us lies until a sniper gets a clear shot."

"Okay," Brown said. "So what do you guys want to do?"

"Fight," Beard #2 said. "And if we get rolled back, I want to come up here and put a bullet in the heads of our guests before I get one myself."

Brown nodded. He'd been in a lot of tight spots before, and he had always found a way out. There might still be a way out of this one. He thought so, but he didn't tell *them* that. Only so many rats could make it off a sinking ship.

"Fair enough," he said. "That's what we'll do. Now take up your positions."

*

Luke shrugged into his heavy tactical vest. The weight settled onto him. He fastened the vest's waistband, taking a little of the weight off his shoulders. His cargo pants were lined with lightweight Dragon Skin armor. On the ground at his feet was a combat helmet with an aftermarket facemask attached.

He and Ed stood behind the open rear door of the Mercedes. The smoked window of the rear door hid them somewhat from the windows of the house. Ed leaned against the car for support. Luke pulled Ed's wheelchair out, opened it, and placed it on the ground.

"Great," Ed said and shook his head. "I got my chariot, and I'm ready for battle." A sigh escaped from him.

"Here's the deal," Luke said. "You and I are not playing around. When SWAT goes in, they'll probably put guns on the porch door that faces the dock, and swing a hammer on that backyard door. I don't think it's going to work. My guess is the backyard door is double steel and doesn't budge, and the porch is going to be a firestorm. We've got ghosts in there, and they're not going to have the doors covered? Come on. I think our guys are going to get pushed back. Hopefully nobody gets hit."

"Amen," Ed said.

"I'm going to walk up behind the initial action. With this." Luke lifted an Uzi submachine gun out of the trunk.

"And this." He pulled out a Remington 870 pump shotgun.

He felt the heft of both guns. They were heavy. The weight was reassuring.

"If the cops get in and secure the place, great. If they can't get in, we don't have any time to waste. The Uzi's got Russian-made overpressure armor-piercing rounds. They should punch through most body armor the bad guys could be wearing. I've got half a dozen magazines fully loaded, just in case I need them. If I end up in a hallway fight, I'll go to the shotgun. Then I'm going to be shredding legs, arms, necks, and heads."

"Yeah, but how do you plan on getting inside?" Ed said. "If the cops aren't in, how do you get in?"

Luke reached into the SUV and pulled out an M79 grenade launcher. It looked like a big sawed-off shotgun with a wooden stock. He handed it to Ed.

"You're going to get me in."

Ed took the gun in his large hands. “Beautiful.”

Luke reached in and grabbed two boxes of M406 grenades, four to a box.

“I want you to move up the block behind the parked cars on the other side of the street. Just before I get there, rip me open a nice hole right through the wall. Those guys are going to be focused on the doors, expecting the cops to try to do a knock-down. We’re going to put a grenade right in their laps instead.”

“Nice,” Ed said.

“After the first one hits, give them one more for good luck. Then get yourself down and out of harm’s way.”

Ed ran his hand along the grenade launcher’s barrel. “You think it’s safe to do it this way? I mean... that’s your people in there.”

Luke stared at the house. “I don’t know. But in most cases I’ve seen, the prisoner room is either upstairs or in the basement. We’re on the beach and the water table is too high for a basement. So I’ll guess that if they’re in this house, they’re upstairs, in that far right corner, the one with no windows.”

He checked his watch. 4:01 p.m.

Right on cue, a blue armored car came roaring around the corner. Luke and Ed watched it pass. It was a Lenco BearCat with steel armor, gunports, spotlights, and all the trimmings.

Luke felt the tickle of something in his chest. It was fear. It was dread. He had spent the past twenty-four hours pretending that he had no emotion about the fact that hired killers were holding his wife and son. Every so often, his real feelings about it threatened to break through. But he stomped them back down again.

There was no room for feelings right now.

He looked down at Ed. Ed sat in his wheelchair, grenade launcher on his lap. Ed’s face was hard. His eyes were cold steel. Ed was a man who lived his values, Luke knew. Those values included loyalty, honor, courage, and the application of overwhelming force on the side of what was good, and right. Ed was not a monster. But at this moment, he may as well be.

“You ready?” Luke said.

Ed face’s barely changed. “I was born ready, white man. The question is are you ready?”

Luke loaded up his guns. He picked up his helmet. “I’m ready.”

He slipped the smooth black helmet over his head, and Ed did the same with his. Luke pulled his visor down. “Intercoms on,” he said.

“On,” Ed said. It sounded like Ed was inside Luke’s own head. “I hear you loud and clear. Now let’s do this.” Ed started to roll away across the street.

“Ed!” Luke said to the man’s back. “I need a big hole in that wall. Something I can walk through.”

Ed raised a hand and kept going. A moment later he was behind the line of parked cars across the street, and out of sight.

Luke left the trunk door up. He crouched behind it. He patted all his weapons. He had an Uzi, a shotgun, a handgun, and two knives, if it came to that. He took a deep breath and looked up at the blue sky. He and God were not exactly on speaking terms. It would help if one day they could get on the same page about a few things. If Luke had ever needed God, he needed Him now.

A fat, white, slow-moving cloud floated across the horizon.

“Please,” Luke said to the cloud.

A moment later, the shooting started.

CHAPTER TWO

Brown stood in the small control room just off the kitchen.

On the table behind him sat an M16 rifle and a Beretta nine-millimeter semi-automatic, both fully loaded. There were three hand grenades and a ventilator mask. There was also a black Motorola walkie-talkie.

A bank of six small closed-circuit TV screens was mounted on the wall above the table. The images came to him in black and white. Each screen gave Brown a real-time feed from cameras planted at strategic points around the house.

From here, he could see the outside of the sliding glass doors as well as the top of the ramp to the boat dock; the dock itself and the approach to it from the water; the outside of the double-reinforced steel door on the side of the house; the foyer on the inside of that door; the upstairs hallway and its street-facing window; and last but not least, the windowless interrogation room upstairs where Luke Stone's wife and son sat quietly strapped to their chairs, hoods covering their heads.

There was no way to take this house by surprise. With the keyboard on the desk, he took manual control of the camera on the dock. He raised the camera just a hair until the fishing boat out on the bay was centered, then he zoomed in. He spotted three flak-jacketed cops outside on the gunwales. They were pulling anchor. In a minute, that boat was going to come zooming in here.

Brown switched to the back porch view. He turned that camera to face the side of the house. He could just get the front grille of the cable van across the street. No matter. He had a man at the upstairs window with the van in his gun sights.

Brown sighed. He supposed the right thing to do would be to raise these cops on the radio and tell them he knew what they were doing. He could bring the woman and boy downstairs, and stand them up right in front of the sliding glass door so everybody could see what was on offer.

Rather than start with a firefight and bloodbath, he could skip straight to fruitless negotiations. He might even spare a few lives that way.

He smiled to himself. But that would spoil all the fun, wouldn't it?

He checked the foyer view. He had three men downstairs, the two Beards and a man he thought of as the Australian. One man covered the steel door, and two men covered the rear sliding glass door. That glass door and the porch outside of it were the main vulnerabilities. But there was no reason the cops would ever get that far.

He reached behind him and picked up the walkie-talkie.

"Mr. Smith?" he said to the man crouched near the open upstairs window.

"Mr. Brown?" came a sarcastic voice. Smith was young enough that he still thought aliases were funny. On the TV screen, Smith gave a wave of his hand.

"What's the van doing?"

"It's rocking and rolling. Looks like they're having an orgy in there."

"Okay. Keep your eyes open. Do not... I repeat... Do not let anyone reach the porch. I don't need to hear from you. You have authorization to engage. Copy?"

"I copy that," Smith said. "Fire at will, baby."

"Good man," Brown said. "Maybe I'll see you in hell."

Just then, the sound of a heavy vehicle came in from the street. Brown ducked low. He crawled into the kitchen and crouched by the window. Outside, an armored car pulled up in front of the house. The heavy back door clunked open, and big men in body armor began to pile out.

A second passed. Two seconds. Three. Eight men had gathered on the street.

Smith opened up from the skies above.

Duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh.

The power of the gunshots made the floorboards vibrate.

Two of the cops hit the ground instantly. Others ducked back inside the truck, or behind it. Behind the armored car, three men burst out of the cable TV van. Smith lit them up. One of them, caught by a rain of bullets, did a crazy dance in the street.

“Excellent, Mr. Smith,” Brown said into the Motorola.

One of the police had gotten halfway across the street before he was shot. Now he was crawling toward the near sidewalk, maybe hoping to reach the shrubbery in front of the house. He wore body armor. He was probably hit where the gaps were, but he might still be a threat.

“You’ve got one on the ground still coming! I want him out of the game.”

Almost immediately, a hail of bullets struck the man, making his body twitch and shudder. Brown saw the kill shot in slow motion. It hit the man in the gap at the back of his neck, between the top of his torso armor and the bottom of his helmet. A spray cloud of blood filled the air and the man went completely still.

“Nice shooting, Mr. Smith. Lovely shooting. Now keep them all locked down.”

Brown slipped back into the command room. The fishing boat was pulling up. Before it even reached the dock, a team of black-jacketed and helmeted men began to jump across.

“Masks on downstairs!” Brown said. “Incoming through that sliding door. Prepare to return fire.”

“Affirmative,” someone said.

The invaders took up positions on the dock. They carried heavy armored ballistic shields and got low behind them. A man popped up and raised a tear gas gun. Brown reached for his own mask and watched the projectile fly toward the house. It hit the glass door and punched through into the main room.

A different man popped up and fired another canister. Then a third man fired yet another. All the tear gas canisters burst through the glass and into the house. The glass door was gone. On Brown’s screen, the area near the foyer began to fill with smoke.

“Status downstairs?” Brown said. A few seconds passed.

“Status!”

“No worries, matey,” the Australian said. “A little smoke, so what? We’ve got our masks on.”

“Fire when ready,” Brown said.

He watched as the men at the sliding door opened fire toward the dock. The invaders were pinned down out there. They couldn’t get up from behind their ballistic shields. And Brown’s men had stacks of ammunition ready.

“Good shooting, boys,” he said into the walkie-talkie. “Be sure to sink their boat while you’re at it.”

Brown smirked to himself. They could hold out here for days.

*

It was a rout. There were men down all over the place.

Luke walked toward the house, scanning carefully. The worst of the shooting was coming from a man in the upstairs window. He was making Swiss cheese out of these cops. Luke was close to the side of the house. From his angle he didn’t have a shot, but the man also probably couldn’t see him.

As Luke watched, the bad guy finished a downed cop with a kill shot to the back of the neck.

“Ed, how’s your look on that upstairs shooter?”

“I can put one right down his throat. Pretty sure he doesn’t see me over here.”

Luke nodded. “Let’s do that first. It’s getting messy out here.”

“You sure you want that?” Ed said.

Luke studied the upstairs. The windowless room was on the far side of the house from the sniper’s nest.

“I’m still banking they’re in that room with no windows,” he said.

Please.

“Just say the word,” Ed said.

“Go.”

Luke heard the distinctive hollow report of the grenade launcher.

Doonk!

A missile flew from behind the line of cars across the street. It had no arc – just a sharp flat line zooming up on a diagonal. It hit right where the window was. A split second passed, then:

BANG.

The side of the house blew outward, chunks of wood, glass, steel, and fiberglass. The gun in the window went silent.

“Nice, Ed. Real nice. Now give me that hole in the wall.”

“What do you say?” Ed said.

“Pretty please.”

Luke raced around and ducked behind a car.

Doonk!

Another flat line zoomed by, four feet above the ground. It hit the side of the house like a car crash, and punched a gaping wound through the wall. A fireball erupted inside, spitting smoke and debris.

Luke nearly jumped up.

“Hold on,” Ed said. “One more on its way.”

Ed fired again, and this one went deep into the house. Red and orange flared through the hole. The ground trembled. Okay. It was time to go.

Luke climbed to his feet and started running.

*

The first explosion was above his head. The entire house shook from it. Brown glanced at the upstairs hallway on his screen.

The far end of it was gone. The spot where Smith had been stationed was no longer there. There was just a ragged hole where the window and Mr. Smith used to be.

“Mr. Smith?” Brown said. “Mr. Smith, are you there?”

No answer.

“Anybody see where that came from?”

“You’re the eyes, Yank,” came a voice.

They had trouble.

A few seconds later, a rocket hit the front of the house. The shockwave knocked Brown off his feet. The walls were collapsing. The kitchen ceiling suddenly caved in. Brown lay on the floor among falling junk. This had gone the opposite of what he expected. Cops rammed down doors – they didn’t fire rockets through walls.

Another rocket hit, this one deep inside the house. Brown covered his head. Everything shook. The whole house could come down.

A moment passed. Someone was screaming now. Otherwise, it was quiet. Brown jumped up and ran for the stairs. On the way out of the room, he grabbed his handgun and one grenade.

He passed through the main room. It was carnage, a slaughterhouse. The room was on fire. One of the Beards was dead. More than dead – blown to shredded pieces all over the place. The Australian had panicked and taken his mask off. His face was covered in dark blood, but Brown couldn’t tell where he was hit.

“I can’t see!” the man screamed. “I can’t see!”

His eyes were wide open.

A man in body armor and helmet stepped calmly through the shattered wall. He quieted the Australian with an ugly blast of automatic gunfire. The Australian's head popped apart like a cherry tomato. He stood without a head for a second or two, and then dropped bonelessly to the floor.

The second Beard lay on the ground near the back door, the double-steel reinforced door which Brown had been so delighted about just a few moments ago. The cops were never going to get through that door. Beard #2 was cut up from the explosion, but still in the fight. He dragged himself to the wall, propped himself upright, and reached for the gun strapped at his shoulder.

The intruder shot Beard #2 in the face at point-blank range. Blood and bone and gray matter splattered against the wall.

Brown turned and stormed up the stairs.

*

The air was thick with smoke, but Luke saw the man bolt for the stairs. He glanced around the room. Everyone else was dead.

Satisfied, he took the stairs at a run. His own breathing sounded loud in his ears.

He was vulnerable here. The stairs were so narrow it would be the perfect time for someone to spray gunfire down on him. No one did.

At the top, the air was clearer than below. To his left was the shattered window and wall where the sniper had taken position. The sniper's legs were on the floor. His tan work boots pointed in opposite directions. The rest of him was gone.

Luke went right. Instinctively, he ran to the room at the far end of the hall. He dropped his Uzi in the hallway. He took the pump shotgun off his shoulder and dropped that, too. He slid his Glock from its holster.

He turned left and into the room.

Becca and Gunner sat tied to two folding chairs. Their arms were pulled behind their backs. Their hair was wild, as if some funny person had just mussed it with his hand. Indeed, a man stood behind them. He dropped two black hoods to the floor and placed the muzzle of his gun to the back of Becca's head. He crouched very low, putting Becca in front of him as a human shield.

Becca's eyes were very wide. Gunner's were tightly closed. He was weeping uncontrollably. His entire body shook with silent sobs. He had wet his pants.

Was it worth it?

To see them like this, helpless, in terror, had it been worth it? Luke had helped stop a coup d'état the night before. He had saved the new President from almost certain death, but was it worth this?

"Luke?" Becca said, as if she didn't recognize him.

Of course she didn't. He pulled his helmet off.

"Luke," she said. She gasped, maybe in relief. He didn't know. People made sounds in extreme moments. They didn't always mean anything.

Luke raised his gun, sighting it directly between Becca's and Gunner's heads. The man was good. He wasn't giving Luke anything to hit. But Luke left the gun pointed there anyway. He watched patiently. The man wouldn't always be good. No one was good forever.

Luke felt nothing right now, nothing but... dead... calm.

He did not feel relief flooding his system. This wasn't over yet.

"Luke Stone?" the man said. He grunted. "Amazing. You're everywhere at once these past couple of days. Is it really you?"

Luke could picture the man's face from the moment before he ducked behind Becca. He had a thick scar across his left cheek. He had a flat-top haircut. He had the sharp features of someone who had spent his life in the military.

“Who wants to know?” Luke said.

“They call me Brown.”

Luke nodded. A name that wasn't a name. The name of a ghost. “Well, Brown, how do you want to do this?”

Below them, Luke could hear the police storming the house.

“What options do you see?” Brown said.

Luke stood without moving, his gun waiting for that shot to appear. “I see two options. You can either die right this minute or, if you're lucky, in prison a long time from now.”

“Or I could blow your lovely wife's brains all over you.”

Luke didn't answer. He just pointed that gun. His arm wasn't tired. It would never get tired. But the cops were coming upstairs in a minute, and that was going to change the equation.

“And you'll be dead one second later.”

“True,” Brown said. “Or I could do this.”

His free hand dropped a grenade into Becca's lap.

As Brown dashed away, Luke dropped the gun and dove for it. In one series of motions, he picked up the grenade, flipped it toward the back wall of the room, collapsed the two chairs, and pushed both Becca and Gunner to the ground.

Becca screamed.

Luke gathered them together, rough with it, no time for gentleness. He pushed them closer and closer, mounted them, blanketed them with his body, and with his armor. He tried to make them disappear.

For a split second, nothing happened. Maybe it was a ruse. The grenade was a fake, and now the man called Brown would have the drop on him. He would kill them all.

BOOOOOM!

The explosion came, deafening in the close confines of the room. Luke gathered them closer. The floor shook. Shards of metal sprayed him. He ducked his head low. Bare flesh on his neck was torn away. He covered them and held them.

A moment passed. His little family trembled beneath him, frozen in shock and fear, but alive.

Now it was time to kill that bastard. Luke's Glock lay on the floor beside him. He grabbed it and jumped to his feet. He turned.

A huge ragged hole had been blown through the back of the room. Through it, Luke could see daylight and blue sky. He could see the dark green water of the bay. And he could see the man called Brown was gone.

Luke approached the hole from an angle, using the remnants of the wall to shield himself. The edges were a shredded mix of wood, broken drywall, and ripped up fiberglass insulation. He expected to see a body on the ground, possibly in several bloody pieces. No. There was no body.

For a split second, Luke thought he saw a splash. A man might have dived into the bay and disappeared. Luke blinked to clear his eyes, then looked again. He wasn't sure.

Either way, the man called Brown was gone.

CHAPTER THREE

9:03 p.m.

Bethesda Navy Medical Center – Bethesda, Maryland

The light of the laptop computer flickered in the semi-darkness of the private hospital room. Luke sat slumped in an uncomfortable armchair, staring at the screen, a pair of white ear buds extending from the computer to his ears.

He was almost breathless with gratitude and relief. His chest hurt from gasping for air the past four or five hours. He sometimes thought about crying, but he hadn't done so yet. Maybe later.

There were two beds in the room. Luke had pulled some strings, and now Becca and Gunner lay in the beds, sleeping deeply. They were under sedation, but it didn't matter. Neither of them had slept a wink between the time they were abducted and the moment when Luke stormed the safe house.

They had spent eighteen hours in sheer terror. Now they were out cold. And they were going to be out for a good long while.

Neither one of them had been hurt. True, they were going to carry emotional scars from this, but physically, they were fine. The bad guys did not harm the merchandise. Maybe Don Morris's hand had been in there somewhere, protecting them.

He gave a brief thought to Don. Now that events had played out, it seemed right to do so. Don had been Luke's greatest mentor. Since the time Luke joined Delta Force at twenty-seven years old, until early this morning, twelve years later, Don had been a constant presence in Luke's life. When Don first created the FBI Special Response Team, he had made a place for Luke. More than that – he had recruited Luke, wined him, dined him, and stole him away from Delta.

But Don had turned at some point, and Luke never saw it coming. Don had been among the conspirators who had tried to topple the government. One day, Luke might understand Don's reasoning for all this, but not today.

On the computer screen in front of him, a live stream played from the packed media room of what they were calling "the New White House." The room had at most a hundred seats. It had a gradual slope, upward from the front, as though it doubled as a movie theater. Every seat was taken. Every space along the back wall was taken. Dense throngs of people stood in the wings on both sides of the stage.

Images of the house itself briefly appeared on the screen. It was the beautiful, turreted and gabled Queen Anne-style 1850s mansion on the grounds of the Naval Observatory in Washington, DC. And it was indeed white, for the most part.

Luke knew something about it. For decades, it had been the official residence of the Vice President of the United States. Now, and for the foreseeable future, it was the home and office of the President.

The screen cut back to the media room. As Luke watched, the President herself came to the podium: Susan Hopkins, the former Vice President, who had taken the oath of office this very morning. This was her first address to the American people as President. She wore a dark blue suit, her blonde hair in a bob. The suit seemed bulky, which meant she was wearing bulletproof material beneath it.

Her eyes were somehow both stern and soft – her media people had probably coached her to look angry, brave, and hopeful all at once. A top-flight makeup artist had covered the burns on her face. Unless you knew where to look, you wouldn't even see them. Susan, as she had been her entire life, was the most beautiful woman in the room.

Her resume thus far was impressive. It included teenage supermodel, young wife of a technology billionaire, mom, United States Senator from California, Vice President, and now, suddenly,

President. The former President, Thomas Hayes, had died in a fiery underground inferno, and Susan herself was lucky to be alive.

Luke had saved her life yesterday, twice.

He undid the mute feature on his computer.

She was surrounded by bulletproof glass panels. Ten Secret Service agents stood on the stage with her. The crowd of reporters in the room was giving her a standing ovation. The TV announcers were speaking in hushed tones. The camera panned, finding Susan's husband, Pierre, and their two daughters.

Back to the President: she was holding her hands up, asking for quiet. Despite herself, she broke into a bright smile. The crowd erupted again. That was the Susan Hopkins they knew: the enthusiastic, gung-ho queen of daytime talk shows, of ribbon-cutting ceremonies and political rallies. Now her small hands made fists and she raised them high above her head, almost like a referee indicating a touchdown. The audience was loud and grew louder.

The camera panned. Hardened Washington, DC, and national journalists, one of the most jaded groups of people known to man, stood with moist eyes. Some of them were openly weeping. Luke caught a brief glimpse of Ed Newsam in a dark pin-striped suit, leaning on crutches. Luke had been invited as well, but he preferred to be here in this hospital room. He wouldn't consider being anywhere else.

Susan came to the microphone. The audience quieted, just enough so she could be heard. She put her hands on the podium, as if steadying herself.

"We're still here," she said, her voice shaking.

Now the crowd exploded.

"And you know what? We're not going anywhere!"

Deafening noise came through the ear buds. Luke turned the sound down.

"I want..." Susan said, and then stopped again. She waited. The cheering went on and on. Still she waited. She stepped back from the microphone, smiled, and said something to the very tall Secret Service man standing next to her. Luke knew him a little. His name was Charles Berg. He had also saved her life yesterday. Over an eighteen-hour span, Susan's life had been on the line almost nonstop.

When the crowd noise died somewhat, Susan stepped back to the podium.

"Before we talk, I want you to do something with me," she said. "Will you? I want to sing 'God Bless America.' It's always been one of my favorite songs." Her voice cracked. "And I want to sing it tonight. Will you sing it with me?"

The crowd roared its assent.

Then she did it. All by herself, in a small, untrained voice, she did it. There was no celebrity singer there with her. There were no world-class musicians accompanying her. She sang, just her, in front of a room full of people, and with hundreds of millions of people watching worldwide.

"God bless America," she began. She sounded like a little girl. "Land that I love."

It was like watching someone walk out onto a high wire between buildings. It was an act of faith. Luke's throat felt tight.

The crowd did not leave her out there by herself. Instantly, they began to flood in. Better, stronger voices joined her. And she led them.

Outside the darkened room, somewhere down the hall in the quiet of an after-hours hospital, people on duty began to sing.

In the bed next to Luke, Becca stirred. Her eyes opened and she gasped. Her head darted left and right. She seemed ready to spring out of the bed. She saw Luke there, but her eyes showed no recognition.

Luke took out his ear buds. "Becca," he said.

"Luke?"

"Yes."

“Can you hold me?”

“Yes.”

He closed the cover to the laptop. He slid into the bed next to her. Her body was warm. He gazed at her face, as beautiful as any supermodel’s. She pressed herself tight against him. He held her in his strong arms. He held her so close, it was almost as if he wanted to become her.

This was better than watching the President.

Down the hall, and everywhere in the country, in bars, in restaurants, in homes, and in cars, the people sang.

CHAPTER FOUR

June 7th

8:51 p.m.

Galveston National Laboratory, campus of the University of Texas Medical Branch – Galveston, Texas

“Working late again, Aabha?” a voice said from Heaven.

The exotic, black-haired woman was almost ethereal in her beauty. Indeed, her name was a Hindi word for beautiful.

She was startled by the voice, and her body jerked involuntarily. She stood, wearing a white airtight containment suit, deep inside the Biosafety Level 4 facility at the Galveston National Laboratory. The suit which protected her also made her look almost like an astronaut on the moon. She always hated wearing the suit. She felt trapped inside of it. But it was what her job demanded.

Her suit was attached to a yellow hose which descended from the ceiling. The hose continually pumped clean air from outside the facility into the containment suit. Even if the suit ruptured, the positive pressure from the hose ensured that none of the laboratory air could get inside.

BSL-4 labs were the highest security laboratories in the world. Inside them, scientists studied deadly, highly infectious organisms that posed a severe threat to public health and safety. Right now, in her blue-gloved hand, Aabha held a sealed vial of the most dangerous virus known to man.

“You know me,” she said. Her suit had a microphone that would carry her voice to the guard watching her on closed circuit television. “I’m a night owl.”

“I know it. I’ve seen you here a lot later than this.”

She pictured the man watching over her. Tom was his name. He was overweight, middle-aged, she thought divorced. Just her and him, alone inside this big empty building at night, and he had very little to do but look at her. It would give her the creeps if she thought about it too much.

She had just removed the vial from the freezer. Moving carefully, she approached the biosafety cabinet, where under normal circumstances, she would open the vial and study its contents.

Tonight wasn’t normal circumstances. Tonight was the culmination of years of preparation. Tonight was what Americans called the Big Game.

Her co-workers at the lab, including Tom the night watchman, thought the beautiful young woman’s name was Aabha Rushdie.

It wasn’t.

They thought she had been born into a wealthy family in the great city of Delhi, in northern India, and that her family had moved to London when she was a young girl. It was laughable. Nothing like that had ever happened to her.

They thought she had obtained a Ph.D. in microbiology and extensive BSL-4 training from King’s College, London. This wasn’t true either, but it might as well be. She knew as much about handling bacteria and viruses as any Ph.D. candidate, if not more.

The vial she held contained a freeze-dried sample of the Ebola virus, which had wreaked such havoc in Africa in recent years. If it were just an Ebola virus sample taken from a monkey, or a bat, or even a human victim... that alone would make it very, very dangerous to handle. But there was much more to the story.

Aabha glanced at the digital clock on the wall. 8:54 p.m. One minute to go. She need only delay for a very short time longer.

“Tom?” she said.

“Yes?” came the voice.

“Did you watch the President on the TV last night?”

“I did.”

Aabha smiled. “What did you think?”

“Think? Well, I think we got problems.”

“Really? I like her very much. I think she is a great lady. In my country...”

The lights in the laboratory went out. It happened without any warning – no flickering, no beeping, nothing at all. For several seconds, Aabha stood in absolute darkness. The sound of convection fans and electrical equipment that was a constant background hum in the lab slowed to a halt. Then there was total silence.

Aabha put what she hoped was just the right note of alarm in her voice.

“Tom? Tom!”

“Okay, Aabha, it’s okay. Hold on. I’m trying to get my... What’s going on in there? My cameras are down.”

“I don’t know. I’m just...”

A bank of yellow emergency lights came on, and the fans started up again. The low light turned the empty lab into an eerie, shadowy world. Everything was dim, except for the bright red EXIT lights which shone in the semi-dark.

“Wow,” she said. “That was scary. For a minute there, my air hose stopped working. But it’s back on now.”

“I don’t know what happened,” Tom said. “We’re on reserve power all over the building. We have full-power backup generators that should have kicked on, but they didn’t. I don’t think this has ever happened before. I still don’t have my cameras. Are you okay? Can you find your way out?”

“I’m okay,” she said. “A little scared, but okay. The exit lights are on. Can I just follow them?”

“You can. But you need to follow all safety protocols, even in the dark. Chemical shower for the suit, regular shower for you – all of it. Otherwise, if you feel like you can’t follow protocol, we need to wait until I can send someone in there, or until we get the power back up.”

Her voice shook a tiny amount. “Tom, my air hose went off. If it goes off again... Let’s just say I don’t want to be in here without my air hose. I can follow the protocols in my sleep. But I need to get out of here.”

“That’s fine. All procedures to the letter, though. I trust you. But I don’t have any lights. It looks like it’s going to be dark everywhere, the whole way out. The airlock was off for a minute, but it just came back on. It’s probably best if we get you out of there. Once you’re through the airlock, you shouldn’t have any problems. Let me know when you’re through, okay? I want to shut it down again to conserve power.”

“I will,” she said.

She moved slowly through the darkness toward the exit door to the airlock, the vial of Ebola still cupped in her gloved right hand. It would take twenty or thirty minutes to follow all procedures on her way out. That wasn’t going to happen. She planned to cut corners from here on out. This would be the fastest lab exit they had ever seen.

Tom was still talking to her. “Also, please make sure you secure all materials and equipment before you exit. We wouldn’t want anything dangerous floating around.”

She opened the first door and slid through. Just before it closed, she heard his voice for the last time.

“Aabha?” he said.

*

Aabha drove the BMW Z4 convertible with the top down.

It was a warm night, and she wanted to feel the wind in her hair. It was her last night in Galveston. It was her last night as Aabha. She had accomplished her mission, and after five long years undercover, this part of her life was over.

It was an amazing feeling, to cast off an identity as though it were a suit of clothes. It was freedom, it was exhilaration. She felt like she could be the protagonist in a television advertisement.

She had grown tired of studious, serious Aabha a long time ago. Who would she become next? It was a delicious question.

The drive to the marina was brief, just a few miles. She pulled off the highway and down the ramp to the parking lot. She took her overnight bag and her purse out of the trunk and left the keys in the glove compartment. In an hour a woman she had never seen, but who had similar features to Aabha, would get in and drive it away. The car would be two hundred miles away by the morning.

This made her a touch sad because she had loved this car so much.

But what was a car? Nothing more than many individual parts, welded and screwed and fastened together. An abstraction, really.

She walked on high heels through the marina. Her shoes clacked on the tiled ground. She passed the swimming pool, closed at this time of night, but lit up from below by an unearthly blue light. The thatched roofs of the little picnic sun shelters rustled in the breeze. She walked down a ramp to the first dock.

From here, she could see the great boat lighting up the night out on the water, well beyond the farthest reach of a Byzantine maze of interconnected docks. The boat, a 250-foot oceangoing yacht, was far too large to bring in close to the marina. It was a floating hotel, complete with disco, pool and hot tub, workout room, and its own four-person helicopter and helipad. It was a mobile castle, fit for a modern king.

Here at the dock, a small motorboat waited for her. A man offered his hand and helped her cross from the dock to the gunwale and then down into the cockpit. She sat in the back as the man untied and pushed off, and the driver put the boat in gear.

Approaching the yacht in the speedboat was like piloting a tiny space capsule to dock with the most gigantic star destroyer in the universe. They didn't even dock. The speedboat pulled behind the yacht, and another man helped her climb a five-rung ladder to the deck. This man was Ismail, the notorious *assistant*.

"Do you have the agent?" he said when she had climbed on board.

She smirked. "Hi, Aabha, how are you?" she said. "Nice to see you. I'm glad you escaped unscathed."

He made a motion with his hand as if a wheel were turning. *Let's go, let's go.* "Hi, Aabha. Whatever you just said. Do you have the agent?"

She reached into her purse and pulled out the vial full of Ebola virus. For a split second, she had a funny urge to toss it into the ocean. She held it up for his inspection instead. He stared at it.

"That tiny container," he said. "Incredible."

"I gave five years of my life for this container," Aabha said.

Ismail smiled. "Yes, but a hundred years from now, people will still sing songs of the heroic girl called Aabha."

He held his hand out as if Aabha were going to put the vial in his palm.

"I'll give it to him," she said.

Ismail shrugged. "As you wish."

She climbed a flight of green-lit stairs and entered the main cabin through a glass door. The giant cabin had a long bar against one wall, several tables along the walls, and a dance floor in the middle. Her boss used the room for entertaining. Aabha had been in this room when it was like a club in Berlin – standing room only, music pumping so loud the walls seemed to pulsate with it, lights strobing, bodies pressed together on the dance floor. Now the room was silent and empty.

She moved along a red carpeted hallway with half a dozen staterooms on either side, and then she climbed another flight of stairs. At the top of the stairs was another hall. She was deep inside

the boat now, moving deeper. Most guests never came this far. She reached the end of this hall and knocked on the wide double doors she found there.

“Come in,” a man’s voice said.

She opened the left-hand door and went in. The room never ceased to amaze her. It was the master bedroom, located directly below the pilot house. Across the room from her, a curved, floor to ceiling, 180-degree window gave a view of what the boat was approaching, as well as much of what was to its right and left. Often, these views were of wide-open ocean.

On the left side of the room was a sitting area with a large sectional sofa formed into a party pit. There were also two easy chairs, a four-seat dining table, and a huge flat panel television on the wall, with a long sound bar mounted just below it. A tall, glass-faced liquor case stood near the wall in the corner.

To her right was the custom-built double-king-sized bed, complete with mirror mounted on the ceiling above it. The owner of this boat enjoyed his entertaining, and the bed could easily accommodate four people, sometimes five.

Standing in front of the bed was the owner himself. He wore a pair of white silk drawstring pants, a pair of sandals on his feet, and nothing else. He was tall and dark. He was perhaps forty years old, his hair peppered with gray, and his short beard just starting to turn white. He was very handsome, with deep brown eyes.

His body was lean, muscular, and perfectly proportioned in an inverted triangle – broad shoulders and chest tapering down to six-pack abs and a narrow waist, with well-muscled legs below. On his left pectoral was a tattoo of a giant black horse, an Arabian charger. The man owned a string of chargers, and he took them as his personal symbol. They were strong, virile, regal, as he was.

He appeared fit, healthy, and well-rested, in the way of a vastly wealthy man with easy access to skilled personal trainers, the best foods, and doctors ready to administer the precise hormone treatments to defeat the aging process. He was, in a word, beautiful.

“Aabha, my lovely, lovely girl. Who will you be after tonight?”

“Omar,” she said. “I brought you a gift.”

He smiled. “I never doubted you. Not for one moment.”

He beckoned to her, and she went to him. She handed him the vial, but he placed it on the table next to the bed almost without looking at it.

“Later,” he said. “We can think about that later.”

He pulled her close to him. She moved into his strong embrace. She pressed her face to his neck and got his scent, the subtle smell of his cologne out in front, and the deeper, earthier smell of him. He was not a clean freak, this man. He wanted you to smell him. She found it exciting, his smell. She found everything about him exciting.

He turned and pressed her, face down, onto the bed. She went willingly, eagerly. In a moment, she writhed as his hands removed her clothes and roamed her body. His deep voice murmured to her, words that might normally shock her, but here, in this room, made her groan with animal pleasure.

*

When Omar awoke, he was alone.

That was good. The girl knew his preferences. While sleeping, he did not like to be disturbed by the jarring movements and noises of others. Sleep was rest. It was not a wrestling match.

The boat was moving. They had left Galveston, exactly on schedule, and were heading across the Gulf of Mexico toward Florida. Sometime tomorrow, they would anchor near Tampa, and the little vial Aabha had brought him would go ashore.

He reached over to the table and picked up the vial. Just a small vial, made of thick, hardened plastic, and blocked at the top with a bright red stopper. The contents were unremarkable. They looked like little more than a pile of dust.

Even so...

It took his breath away! To hold this power, the power of life and death. And not just the power of life and death over one person – the power to kill many, many people. The power to destroy an entire population. The power to hold nations hostage. The power of total war. The power of revenge.

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply from his diaphragm, seeking calm. It had been a risk for him to come to Galveston personally, and an unnecessary one at that. But he had wanted to be there in the moment when such a weapon passed into his possession. He wanted to hold the weapon, and feel the power in his own hand.

He placed the vial back on the table, pulled on his pants, and rolled out of bed. He shrugged into a Manchester United soccer jersey and went out onto the deck. He found her there, sitting back in a lounge chair and gazing out at the night, the stars, and the vast dark water around them.

A bodyguard stood quietly near the door.

Omar gestured to the man, and the man moved to the railing.

“Aabha,” Omar said. She turned to him, and he could see how sleepy she was.

She smiled, and he smiled as well. “You’ve done a wonderful thing,” he said. “I’m very proud of you. Perhaps it’s time for you to sleep.”

She nodded. “I’m so tired.”

Omar bent down and their lips met. He kissed her deeply, savoring the taste of her, and the memory of the curves of her body, her movements, and her sounds.

“For you, my darling, rest is much deserved.”

Omar glanced at the bodyguard. He was a tall, strong man. The guard removed a plastic bag from his jacket pocket, moved in behind her, and in one deft move slipped the bag over her head and pulled it tight.

Instantly, her body became electric. She reached back, trying to scratch and pummel him. Her feet kicked her up out of the chair. She struggled, but it was impossible. The man was far too strong. His wrists and forearms were taut, rippling with veins and muscle doing their work.

Through the translucent bag, her face became a mask of terror and desperation, her eyes round saucers. Her mouth was a huge O, a full moon, gasping for air and finding none. She sucked in thin plastic instead of oxygen.

Her body tensed and became rigid. It was like she was a wood carving of a woman, her body sloping, bending slightly backwards at the middle. Gradually, she began to settle down. She weakened, subsided, and then stopped entirely. The guard allowed her to sink slowly back into her chair. He sank with her, guiding her. Now that she was dead, he treated her with tenderness.

The man took a deep breath and looked up at Omar.

“What shall I do with her?”

Omar stared out at the dark night.

It was a shame to kill such a good girl as Aabha, but she was tainted. Sometime soon, perhaps as early as tomorrow morning, the Americans would learn that the virus was missing. Soon after that, they would discover that Aabha was the last person in the laboratory, and was there when the lights went out.

They would come to realize that the power failure was the result of an underground cable being deliberately cut, and the failure of the backup generators was the result of careful sabotage conducted several weeks ago. They would make a desperate search for Aabha, a no-holds-barred search, and they must never find her.

“Get some help from Abdul. He has empty buckets and some fast-drying cement in the equipment locker down by the engine room. Take her there. Weight her with a bucket of cement

around her feet and calves, and drop her into the deepest part of the ocean. A thousand feet deep or more, please. The data is readily available, is it not?"

The man nodded. "Yes sir."

"Perfect. Afterwards have all my sheets, pillows, and blankets laundered. We must be thorough and destroy all evidence. On the very unlikely chance that the Americans raid this ship, I don't want the girl's DNA anywhere near me."

The man nodded. "Of course."

"Very good," Omar said.

He left his bodyguard with the corpse and went back into the master bedroom. It was time to take a hot bath.

CHAPTER FIVE

June 10th

11:15 a.m.

Queen Anne's County, Maryland – Eastern Shore of Chesapeake Bay

“Well, maybe we should just sell the house,” Luke said.

He was talking about their old waterfront country house, twenty minutes up the road from where they were now. Luke and Becca had rented a different, much more spacious and modern house for the next two weeks. Luke liked this new house better, but they were here only because Becca wouldn't go back to their place.

He understood her reluctance. Of course he did. Four nights ago, both Becca and Gunner had been abducted from that house. Luke hadn't been there to protect them. They could have been killed. Anything could have happened.

He glanced out the big, bright kitchen window. Gunner was outside in jeans and a T-shirt playing some imaginary game, the way nine-year-old kids sometimes did. In a few minutes, Gunner and Luke were going to take the skiff out and go fishing.

The sight of his son gave Luke a pang of terror.

What if Gunner had been killed? What if both of them had simply disappeared, never to be found again? What if two years from now, Gunner didn't play imaginary games anymore? It was all a jumble in Luke's mind.

Yes, it was horrible. Yes, it should never have happened. But there were larger issues here. Luke and Ed Newsam and a small handful of people had taken down a violent coup attempt, and had reinstalled what was left of the democratically elected government of the United States. It was possible that they had saved American democracy itself.

That was nice, but Becca didn't seem interested in larger issues right now.

She sat at the kitchen table in a blue robe, drinking her second cup of coffee. “Easy for you to say. That house has been in my family for a hundred years.”

Rebecca's hair was long, flowing down her shoulders. Her eyes were blue, framed in thick eyelashes. To Luke, her pretty face looked thin and drawn. He felt sick about that. He felt sick about the whole thing, but he couldn't think of something he could say that would make this better.

A tear rolled down Becca's cheek. “My garden is over there, Luke.”

“I know.”

“I can't work in my garden because I'm afraid. I'm afraid of my own house, a house I've been going to since I was born.”

Luke said nothing.

“And Mr. and Mrs. Thompson... they're dead. You know that, don't you? Those men killed them.” She looked at Luke sharply. Her eyes were hot and mad. Becca had a tendency to grow angry with him, sometimes over very small matters. He forgot to do the dishes, or take the garbage outside. When she did, she would get a look in her eyes similar to the one she had now. Luke thought of it as the Blame Look. And for Luke, right now the Blame Look was too much.

In his mind, he caught a brief image of their neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Thompson. If Hollywood were to cast a kindly older couple who lived next door, the Thompsons would be it. He liked the Thompsons, and he would never have intended for their lives to end like that. But a lot of people died that day.

“Becca, I didn't kill the Thompsons. Okay? I'm sorry they're dead, and I'm sorry you and Gunner were taken – I will be sorry for that the rest of my life and I will do everything I can to make it up to both of you. But I didn't do it. I didn't kill the Thompsons. I didn't send people to abduct you. You seem to be blurring these things in your mind, and I won't have it.”

He paused. It was a good time to stop talking, but he didn't stop. His words came out in a torrent.

"All I did was fight my way through a blizzard of gunfire and bombs. People were trying to kill me all day and all night. I got shot, I got blown up, I got run off the road. And I saved the President of the United States, your President, from almost certain death. That's what I did."

He breathed heavily, as if he had just sprinted a mile.

He regretted everything. That was the truth. It hurt him to think that the work he did had ever caused her pain, it hurt more than she would ever know. He had left the job last year for that very reason, but then he had been called back for one night – one night that turned into a night, a day, and another impossibly long night. A night during which he thought he had lost his family forever.

Becca no longer trusted him. He could see that much. His presence frightened her. He was the cause of what had happened. He was reckless, he was fanatical, and he was going to get her, and their only son, killed.

Tears streamed silently down her face. A long minute passed.

"Does it even matter?" she said.

"Does what matter?"

"Does it matter who the President is? If Gunner and I were dead, would you really care who was President?"

"But you're alive," he said. "You're not dead. You're alive and well. There's a big difference."

"Okay," she said. "We're alive." It was agreement that wasn't agreement.

"I want to tell you something," Luke said. "I'm retiring. I'm not going to do it anymore. I might have to take a few meetings in the coming days, but I'm not going on any more assignments. I did my part. Now it's over."

She shook her head, but just slightly. It was as if she didn't even have the energy to move. "You've said that before."

"Yes. But this time I mean it."

*

"You want to always keep the boat on an even keel."

"Okay," Gunner said.

He and his dad loaded the boat with gear. Gunner wore jeans, a T-shirt, and a big floppy fishing hat to keep the sun off his face. He also had a pair of Oakley sunglasses his dad had given him because they looked cool. His dad wore the same exact pair.

The T-shirt was okay – it was from *28 Days Later*, which was a pretty awesome zombie movie with English people in it. The problem with the shirt was it didn't have any actual zombies on it. It was just a red biohazard symbol against a black background. He guessed that made sense. The zombies in the movie weren't really the undead. They were people who got infected with a virus.

"Slide that cooler athwartships," his dad said.

His dad had all these crazy words he used whenever they went fishing. It made Gunner laugh sometimes. "Athwartships!" he shouted. "Aye, aye, Captain."

His dad motioned with his hand to show the placement he wanted; across the middle, sideways, not near the back rail where Gunner had originally stowed it. Gunner slid the big blue cooler into place.

They stood, facing one another. His dad gave him a funny look from behind his sunglasses. "How are you doing, son?"

Gunner hesitated. He knew they were worried about him. He had heard them whispering his name in the night. But he was okay. He really was. He had been afraid, and he was still a little bit afraid now. He had even cried a lot, which was okay. You were supposed to cry sometimes. You weren't supposed to hold it in.

“Gunner?”

Well, he might as well talk about it.

“Dad, you kill people sometimes, don’t you?”

His dad nodded. “Sometimes I do, yeah. It’s part of my job. But I only kill bad guys.”

“How can you tell the difference?”

“Sometimes it’s hard to tell. And sometimes it’s easy. Bad guys will hurt people who are weaker than them, or innocent people who are just minding their own business. My job is to stop them from doing that.”

“Like the men who killed the President?”

His dad nodded.

“Did you kill them?”

“I killed some of them, yes.”

“And the men who took Mom and me? You killed them, too, didn’t you?”

“I did, yeah.”

“I’m glad you did that, Dad.”

“I am too, monster. They were the exact kind of men who are good to kill.”

“Are you the best killer in the world?”

His dad shook his head and smiled. “I don’t know, buddy. I don’t think they keep tabs on who the best killers are. It’s not really like a sport. There’s no world champion of killing. In any case, I’m retiring from the whole thing. I want to spend more time with you and Mom.”

Gunner thought about it. He had seen a news show about his dad on TV the day before. It was really just a short segment, but it was his dad’s picture and name, and video of his dad when he was younger and in the Army. Luke Stone, Delta Force operator. Luke Stone, FBI Special Response Team. Luke Stone and his team had saved the United States government.

“I’m proud of you, Dad. Even if you never got to be world champion.”

His dad laughed. He gestured toward the dock. “Okay, are we ready?”

Gunner nodded.

“We’ll head way out, drop anchor, see if we can find a few stripers feeding on the dropping tide.”

Gunner nodded. They pulled away from the dock and moved slowly through the No Wake zone. He braced himself as the boat picked up speed.

Gunner scanned the horizon ahead of them. He was the spotter, and he had to keep his eyes sharp and his head on a swivel, as his dad liked to say. They had been out together fishing three times earlier in the spring, but they hadn’t caught anything. When you went fishing and you didn’t catch anything, Dad called that being “on the snide.” Right now, they were on the snide big time.

In a few moments, Gunner spotted some splashes in the middle distance off the starboard quarter. Some white terns were diving, dropping like bombs into the water.

“Hey, look!”

His dad nodded and smiled.

“Stripers?”

Dad shook his head. “Bluefish.” Then he said, “Hold on.”

He gunned the engine and soon they were skimming, skittering, still picking up speed, as the boat got up on plane with Gunner nearly thrown backwards. A minute later, they eased up to the thrashing whitewater, the boat came off plane, and they settled back into the swells.

Gunner grabbed the two long fishing rods with the single hooks. He handed one to his dad and then cast his line without waiting. Almost instantly, he felt a tug, a heavy pull. A wild liveliness came into the rod now, vibrating with life. Some unseen force nearly yanked the rod out of his hands. The line snapped and went slack. The bluefish had broken him off. He turned to tell his dad, but the old man was hooked up now too, his rod bent double.

Gunner grabbed a net and got ready. The bluefish – silver and blue and green and white and very, very angry, was hoisted from the water and into the cockpit.

“Nice fish.”

“A slump breaker!”

The bluefish flopped on deck, caught in the green mesh of the hand net.

“Will we keep him?”

“No. He gets us off the snide, but we’re here for stripers. Blues are exciting, but striped bass are bigger and they’re better on the grill, too.”

They released the fish – Gunner watched as his dad seized the still-jerking, snapping bluefish, and removed the hook, his fingers just inches from those hungry teeth. His dad dropped the fish over the side, where with a quick tail whip, it headed for the deep.

No sooner had the fish disappeared than his dad’s phone started to ring. His dad smiled and looked at the phone. Then he put it aside. It buzzed and buzzed. After a while, it stopped. Ten seconds passed before it started ringing again.

“Aren’t you going to answer it?” Gunner said.

His dad shook his head. “No. In fact, I’m going to turn my phone off.”

Gunner felt a surge of fear in his stomach. “Dad, you have to answer it. What if it’s an emergency? What if the bad guys are taking over again?”

His dad stared at Gunner for a long second. The phone stopped buzzing. Then it started again. He answered it.

“Stone,” he said.

He paused and his face darkened. “Hi, Richard. Yes, Susan’s chief-of-staff. Sure. I’ve heard of you. Well, listen. You know I’m taking some time off, right? I haven’t even decided if I’m still on the Special Response Team, or whatever it’s called now. Yes, I understand, but there’s always something urgent. No one ever calls me at home and tells me it isn’t urgent. Okay... okay. If the President is serious that she wants a meeting, then she can call me personally. She knows where to reach me. Okay? Thanks.”

When his dad hung up, Gunner watched him. He didn’t look like he was having as much fun as just a minute ago. Gunner knew that if the President called, his dad would quickly pack his bags and go somewhere. Another mission, maybe more bad guys to kill. And he would leave Gunner and his mom home alone again.

“Dad, is the President going to call you?”

His dad ruffled Gunner’s hair. “Monster, I sure hope not. Now what do you say? Let’s go get some stripers.”

*

Hours later, the President still hadn’t called.

Luke and Gunner had caught three nice stripers, and Luke showed Gunner how to gut, clean, and filet them. It was old ground, but repetition was how you learned. Becca even got into the act, bringing a bottle of wine out to the patio and setting a cheese and cracker plate on the outdoor table.

Luke was just firing up the grill when the phone rang.

He looked at his family. They had frozen on the first ring. He and Becca made eye contact. He couldn’t read what was in her eyes anymore. Whatever it was, it was not supportive approval. He answered the phone.

A deep voice, a man: “Agent Stone?”

“Yes.”

“Please hold for the President of the United States.”

He stood numb, listening to blank air.

The phone clicked and she came on. “Luke?”

“Susan.”

His mind flashed back to an image of her, leading the entire country, and much of the world, in singing “God Bless America.” It was an amazing moment, but that’s all it was, a moment. And it was the kind of thing politicians were good at. It was practically a parlor trick.

“Luke, we’ve got a crisis on our hands.”

“Susan, we always have a crisis on our hands.”

“Right now, I am up to my ass in alligators.”

Nice. He hadn’t heard that one in a while.

“We’re going to have a meeting. Here at the house. I need you there.”

“When is the meeting?”

She didn’t hesitate. “In an hour.”

“Susan, with traffic, I’m two hours away. That’s on a good day. Right now, half the roads are still closed.”

“You won’t be sitting in traffic. There’s a helicopter on the way to you now. It’ll be there in fourteen minutes.”

Luke looked at his family again. Becca had poured herself a glass of wine and sat faced away from him, staring toward the late afternoon sun sinking toward the water. Gunner stared down at the fish on the grill.

“Okay,” Luke said into the phone.

CHAPTER SIX

6:45 p.m.

United States Naval Observatory – Washington, DC

“Agent Stone, I’m Richard Monk, the President’s chief-of-staff. We talked on the phone today.”

Luke had come off the Naval Observatory helipad five minutes before. He shook hands with a tall, fit-looking guy, maybe late-thirties, probably right around Luke’s age. The man wore a blue dress shirt with sleeves rolled up his forearms. His tie hung askew. His upper body was scientifically muscular, like in an ad for *Men’s Health*. He worked hard and he played hard – that’s what Richard Monk’s look told anyone who would listen.

They walked the marble hallway of the New White House toward wide double doors down at the end. “We’ve adapted our old conference room into a situation room,” Monk said. “It’s a work in progress, but we’re going to get there.”

“You’re lucky to be alive, aren’t you?” Luke said.

The mask of confidence on the man’s face faltered, only for a second. He nodded. “The Vice... Well, she was the Vice President at the time. The President and I and a bunch of staff were on a West Coast swing when President Hayes summoned her back East. It was very sudden. I stayed behind in Seattle with a few people to tie up some loose ends. When Mount Weather happened...”

He shook his head. “It’s too horrible. But yes, that could have been me, too.”

Luke nodded. Workers were still pulling bodies out of Mount Weather days after the disaster. Three hundred so far, and counting. Among them were the former Secretary of State, the former Secretary of Education, the former Secretary of the Interior, the head of NASA, and dozens of United States Representatives and Senators.

The firefighters had only put out the central underground fire yesterday.

“What is the crisis that Susan called me out here for?” Luke said.

Monk gestured toward the end of the hall. “Uh, President Hopkins is there in the conference room, along with some key staff. I think I’m going to let them tell you what’s going on.”

They passed through the double doors and into the room. More than a dozen people were already seated at a large oval table. Susan Hopkins, President of the United States, sat at the far side of the room from the door. She was small, almost unassuming, surrounded by large men. Two Secret Service agents stood on either side of her. Three more stood in various corners of the room.

A nervous-looking man stood at the head of the table. He was tall, balding, a little paunchy, wearing glasses and an ill-fitting suit. Luke sized him up in about two seconds. This was not his normal venue, and he believed himself to be in deep trouble. He looked like a man who was currently being grilled from all sides.

Susan stood. “Everyone, before we begin, I want to introduce you to Agent Luke Stone, formerly of the FBI Special Response Team. He saved my life a few days ago, and he was instrumental in saving the Republic as we know it. That is not an exaggeration. I’m not sure I’ve ever before met an operative as skilled, as knowledgeable, and as fearless in the face of adversity. It’s a credit to our nation, our Armed Forces, and our intelligence community that we identify and train men and women like Agent Stone.”

Now everyone stood and applauded. To Luke’s ears, the applause sounded stilted and formal. These people *had to* applaud. The President wanted them to. He raised a hand, trying to make it stop. The situation was absurd.

“Hi,” he said when the clapping ended. “Sorry I’m late.”

Luke sat in an empty chair. The man standing in the front stared directly at him. Now Luke couldn’t tell what was in the man’s eyes. Hope? Maybe. He looked like a desperate quarterback about to launch a Hail Mary pass in Luke’s direction.

“Luke,” Susan said. “This is Dr. Wesley Drinan, Director of the Galveston National Laboratory at the University of Texas Medical Branch. He is briefing us on a possible security breach at the Biosafety Level 4 lab there.”

“Ah,” Luke said. “All right.”

“Agent Stone, are you familiar with Biosafety Level 4 laboratories?”

“Uh, Luke is fine. I’m familiar with the term. Maybe you can bring me all the way up to speed, however.”

Drinan nodded. “Of course. I’ll give you the thirty-second elevator pitch. BSL-4 labs are the highest level of security when dealing with biological agents. BSL-4 is the level required for work with dangerous and exotic viruses and bacteria that pose a high risk of laboratory infections, as well as those which cause severe to fatal disease in humans. These are diseases for which vaccines or other treatments aren’t currently available. In general, I’m talking about Ebola, Marburg, and some of the emerging hemorrhagic viruses that we’re just discovering in deep jungle regions of Africa and South America. Sometimes we also handle newly mutated influenza viruses until we understand their transmission mechanisms, infection rates, mortality rates, and so on.”

“Okay,” Luke said. “I get it. And something was stolen?”

“We don’t know. Something is missing. But we don’t know what happened to it.”

Luke didn’t speak. He simply nodded at the man to keep him talking.

“We had a power failure two nights ago. That in itself is rare. Rarer still is that our backup generators didn’t immediately kick on. The design of the facility is that in the event of an outage, there should be a seamless shift from main power to backup power. It didn’t happen. Instead, the facility went to emergency reserves, which is a low-power state that only keeps essential systems running.”

“What sort of non-essential systems went down?” Luke said.

Drinan shrugged. “The things you can imagine. Lights. Computers. Camera systems.”

“Security cameras?”

“Yes.”

“Inside the facility?”

“Yes.”

“Was there anyone inside?”

The man nodded. “There were two people inside at the time. One was a security guard named Thomas Eder. He’s worked at the facility for fifteen years. He was at the guard station and not inside the containment facility. We’ve interviewed him, as have the police and the Texas Bureau of Investigation. He’s being cooperative.”

“Who else?”

“Uh, there was a scientist inside the containment facility. Her name is Aabha Rushdie. She’s from India. She is a beautiful person and a very good scientist. She studied in London, has gone through multiple BSL-4 trainings, and has all the required security clearances. She’s been with us for three years and I’ve worked directly with her on many occasions.”

“Okay...” Luke said.

“When the power went down, she temporarily lost flow in her air hose. This is a potentially dangerous situation. She was also cast into total darkness. She became afraid, and it seems that Thomas Eder may have allowed her to exit the facility without following all the required safety protocols.”

Luke smiled. This seemed like an easy one. “And then something was missing?”

Drinan hesitated. “The following day, an inventory discovered that a vial of a very specific Ebola virus had gone missing.”

“Has anyone spoken with the Rushdie woman?”

Drinan shook his head. “She’s also gone missing. Yesterday, her car was found by a rancher on an isolated property in the hill country fifty miles west of Austin. The state police suggest that cars

abandoned like that are often a sign of foul play. She's not at her apartment. We've tried to contact her family in London, with no luck."

"Would she have any reason to steal the Ebola virus?"

"No. It's impossible to believe. I've wrestled with this for two days. The Aabha I know is not someone who... I can't even say it. She just isn't that way. I don't understand what's going on. I'm afraid she might have been kidnapped or fallen into the hands of criminals. I'm at a loss for words."

"We haven't even reached the worst part," Susan Hopkins said abruptly. "Dr. Drinan, can you tell Agent Stone about the virus itself, please?"

The good doctor nodded. He looked at Stone.

"The Ebola is weaponized. It's similar to Ebola found in nature, like the Ebola that killed ten thousand people during the West African outbreak, only worse. It's more virulent, more fast acting, can be transmitted more easily, and has a higher fatality rate. It is a very dangerous substance. We need to either get it back, destroy it, or determine to our satisfaction that it was already destroyed."

Luke turned to Susan.

"We want you to go down there," she said. "See what you can find out."

Those were the exact words Luke didn't want to hear. Over the phone, she had invited him to a meeting. But she had brought him here to give him a mission.

"I wonder," he said, "if we can talk about this in private?"

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"Can we get you anything?" Richard Monk said. "Coffee?"

"Sure, I'll have a cup of coffee," Luke said.

He wouldn't mind drinking some coffee right now, but mostly he accepted the offer because he thought that would make Monk leave the room. Wrong. Monk simply picked up a phone and ordered some from the kitchen downstairs.

Luke, Monk, and Susan were in an upstairs sitting room near the family living quarters. Luke knew that Susan's family didn't live here. When she was Vice President, he hadn't paid much attention to her, but he had somehow gotten the idea that she and her husband were estranged.

Luke sat back in a comfortable easy chair. "Susan, before we start, I want to tell you something. I've decided to retire, effective immediately. I'm telling you before I tell anyone else, so you can find someone else to head the SRT."

Susan didn't speak.

"Stone," Monk said, "you might as well know now. The Special Response Team is on the chopping block. It's finished. Don Morris was involved in the coup, right from the beginning. He is at least partially responsible for one of the worst atrocities to ever take place on American soil. And he created the Special Response Team. I'm sure you can understand that security, and especially the President's security, is the most important thing on our radar right now. It's not just SRT. We are investigating suspect sub-agencies within CIA, NSA, and the Pentagon, among others. We need to root out the conspirators, so nothing like this can ever happen again."

"I understand your concerns," Luke said.

And he did. The government was fragile right now, maybe as fragile as it had ever been. The Congress was mostly wiped out and a retired supermodel had been elevated to the Presidency. The United States had been shown to have feet of clay, and if there were any coup plotters still around, there was no reason why they shouldn't make another grab for power.

"If you're going to eliminate the SRT anyway, then this is a perfect time for me to leave." The more he said things like this, the more real it became to him.

It was time to put his family back together. It was time to recreate that idyllic place in his mind where he, Becca, and Gunner could be alone, away from these concerns, where even if the worst happened, it wouldn't matter all that much.

Heck, maybe he should just go home and ask Becca if she wanted to move to Costa Rica. Gunner could grow up bilingual. They could live on the beach somewhere. Becca could have an exotic garden. Luke could go surfing a couple of times a week. The west coast of Costa Rica had some of the best swells in the Americas.

Susan spoke for the first time. "It's a horrible time for you to leave. The timing couldn't be worse. Your country needs you."

He looked at her. "You know what, Susan? That's not really true. You think that because I'm the guy you happened to see in action. There are a million guys like me. There are guys more capable than me, more experienced, more level-headed. You don't seem to know this, but some people think I'm a loose cannon."

"Luke, you can't leave me here," she said. "We are teetering on the verge of disaster. I've been stuck into a role I was not... I wasn't expecting this. I don't know who to trust. I don't know who is good and who is bad. I'm half-expecting to turn a corner and catch a bullet in the head. I need my people around me. People I can put all my faith in."

"I'm one of your people?"

She looked him directly in the eyes. "You saved my life."

Richard Monk broke into the conversation. "Stone, what you don't know is the Ebola is replicable. That wasn't covered in the meeting. Wesley Drinan told us in confidence that it's possible people with the right equipment and knowledge could make more of it. The last thing we need is an unknown group of people running around with weaponized Ebola virus, trying to stockpile it."

Luke looked at Susan again.

"Take this job," Susan said. "Figure out what happened to the missing woman. Find the missing Ebola. When you come back, if you really want to retire, I will never ask you to do another thing. We started something together a few nights ago. Do this one last thing for me, and I'm ready to say the job is finished."

Her eyes never left his. She was a typical politician in many ways. When she reached for you, she found you. It was hard to say no to her.

He sighed. "I can leave in the morning."

Susan shook her head. "We've already got a plane waiting for you."

Luke's eyes widened, surprised. He took a long breath.

"OK," he finally said. "But first I need to get some people from the Special Response Team together. I'm thinking of Ed Newsam, Mark Swann, and Trudy Wellington. Newsam's on injury leave right now, but I'm pretty sure he'll come back if I ask him."

A look passed between Susan and Monk.

"We've already contacted Newsam and Swann," Monk said. "They've both agreed, and both are en route to the airport. I'm afraid that Trudy Wellington won't be possible."

Luke frowned. "She won't do it?"

Monk stared down at a yellow legal pad in his hands. He made a quick note to himself. He didn't bother to look up. "We don't know because we didn't contact her. Unfortunately, using Wellington is out of the question."

Luke turned to Susan.

"Susan?"

Now Monk looked up. He scanned back and forth between Luke and Susan. He spoke again before Susan said a word.

“Wellington is dirty. She was Don Morris’s mistress. There’s just no way she can be part of this. She’s not even going to be employed by the FBI a month from now, and she may well be up on treason charges by then.”

“She told me she didn’t know anything,” Luke said.

“And you believe her?”

Luke didn’t even bother answering that question. He didn’t know the answer. “I want her,” he said simply.

“Or?”

“I left my son staring at a striped bass on the grill tonight, a striper that we caught together. I could start my retirement from all this right now. I kind of enjoyed being a college professor. I’m looking forward to getting back to it. And I’m looking forward to watching my son grow up.”

Luke stared at Monk and Susan. They stared back at him.

“So?” he said. “What do you think?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

June 11th

2:15 a.m.

Ybor City, Tampa, Florida

It was dangerous work.

So dangerous that he did not like to go out to the laboratory floor at all.

“Yes, yes,” he said into the telephone. “We have four people on right now. We will have six when the shift turns over. By tonight? It’s possible. I don’t want to promise too much. Call me around ten a.m., and I will have a better idea.”

He listened for a moment. “Well, I would say a van would be big enough. That size can easily pull back to the loading dock. These things are smaller than the eye can see. Even trillions of them don’t take up that much space. If we had to do it, we might be able to fit it all in the trunk of a car. But if so, I would suggest two cars. One to go on the road, and one to go to the airport.”

He hung up the phone. The man’s code name was Adam. The first man, because he was the first man hired for this job. He fully understood the risks, even if the others did not. He alone knew the entire scope of the project.

He watched the floor of the small warehouse through the big office window. They were working around the clock in three shifts. The people in there now, three men and a woman, wore white laboratory gowns, goggles, ventilator masks, rubber gloves, and booties on their feet.

The workers had been selected for their ability to do simple microbiology. Their job was to grow and multiply a virus using the food medium Adam supplied, then freeze-dry the samples for later transport and aerosol transmission. It was tedious work, but not difficult. Any laboratory assistant or second year biochemistry student could do it.

The twenty-four-hour schedule meant that the stockpiles of freeze-dried virus were growing very quickly. Adam gave a report to his employers every six or eight hours, and they always expressed their pleasure with the pace. In the past day, their pleasure had begun to give way to delight. The work would soon be complete, perhaps as early as today.

Adam smiled at that. His employers were well-pleased, and they were paying him very, very well.

He sipped coffee from a Styrofoam cup and continued to watch the workers. He had lost count of the amount of coffee he had consumed in the past few days. It was a lot. The days were beginning to blur together. When he became exhausted, he would lie down on the cot in his office and sleep for a little while. He wore the same protective gear as the workers out in the lab. He hadn’t taken it off now in two and a half days.

Adam had done his best to build a makeshift laboratory in the rented warehouse. He had done his best to protect the workers and himself. They had protective clothing to wear. There was a room in which to discard the clothing after each shift, and there were showers for the workers to wash off any residue afterward.

But there were also funding and time constraints to consider. The schedule was fast, and of course there was the question of secrecy. He knew the protections were not up to the standards of the American Centers for Disease Control – if he’d had a million dollars and six months to build this place, it still wouldn’t be enough.

In the end, he had built the lab in less than two weeks. It was located in a rugged district of old, low-slung warehouses, deep inside a neighborhood that had long been a center of Cuban and other immigration to the United States.

No one would look at the place twice. There was no sign on the building, and it was elbow-to-elbow with a dozen similar buildings. The lease was paid for the next six months, even though they

only needed the facility for a very short time. It had its own small parking lot, and the workers came and went like warehouse and factory workers everywhere – in eight-hour intervals.

The workers were well-paid in cash, and few of them spoke any English. The workers knew what to do with the virus, but they didn't know exactly what they were handling or why. A police raid was unlikely.

Still, it made him nervous to be so close to the virus. He would be relieved to finish this part of the job, receive his final payment, and then evacuate this place as if he had never been here. After that, he would take a flight to the west coast. For Adam, there were two parts to this job. One here, and one... somewhere else.

And the first part would be done soon.

Today? Yes, perhaps even as early as today.

He would leave the country for a while, he had decided. After all of this was over, he would take a nice long holiday. The south coast of France sounded nice to him right now. With the money he was making, he could go anywhere he liked.

It was simple. A van, or a car, or perhaps two cars would pull into the yard. Adam would close the gates so nobody on the street could see what was happening. His workers would take a few moments loading the materials into the vehicles. He would make sure they were careful, so maybe the whole thing would require twenty minutes.

Adam smiled to himself. Soon after the loading was done, he would be on a plane to the west coast. Soon after that, the nightmare would begin. And there was nothing anyone could do to stop it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

5:40 a.m.

The Skies Over West Virginia

The six-seat Learjet shrieked across the early morning sky. The jet was dark blue with the Secret Service seal on the side. Behind it, a sliver of the rising sun just poked above the clouds.

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

He had the team back together. In the seat next to him sat big Ed Newsam, in khaki cargo pants and a long-sleeved T-shirt. He had a pair of crutches tucked to the side of his seat, just under the window.

Across from Luke and to the left, facing him, was Mark Swann. He was tall and thin, with sandy hair and glasses. He stretched his long legs out into the aisle. He wore an old pair of ripped jeans and a pair of red Chuck Taylor sneakers. He had been liberated from duty as a pedophile decoy, and he looked like he couldn't be much more pleased than he was.

Directly across from Luke sat Trudy Wellington. She had curly brown hair, was slim and attractive in a green sweater and slacks. She wore big round glasses on her face. She was very pretty, but the glasses made her look almost like an owl.

Luke felt okay, not great. He had called Becca before they left. The conversation hadn't gone well. It had barely gone at all.

"Where are you going?" she said.

"Texas. Galveston. There's been a security breach at a lab there."

"The BSL-4 lab?" she said. Becca was herself a cancer researcher. She had been working on a cure for melanoma for some years. She was part of a team, based at several different research institutions, that had been having some success killing melanoma cells by injecting the herpes virus into them.

Luke nodded. "That's right. The BSL-4 lab."

"It's dangerous," she said. "You realize that, I'm sure."

He nearly laughed. "Sweetheart, they don't call me in when it's safe."

Her voice was cold. "Well, please be careful. We love you, you know."

We love you.

It was an odd way to say it, as if she and Gunner as a team loved him, but not necessarily as individuals.

"I know," he said. "I love you both very much."

There was silence over the line.

"Becca?"

"Luke, I can't guarantee we're going to be here when you get back."

Now, aboard the plane, he shook his head to clear it. It was part of the job. He had to compartmentalize. He was having family problems, yes. He didn't know how to fix them. But he also couldn't bring them with him to Galveston. They would distract him from what he was doing, and that could be dangerous, for himself and everyone involved. His focus on the matter at hand had to be total.

He glanced out the window. The jet streaked across the sky, moving fast. Below them, white clouds skidded by. He took a deep breath.

"All right, Trudy," he said. "What do you have for us?"

Trudy held up her computer tablet for everyone's inspection. She positively beamed. "They gave me your old tablet back. Thanks, boss."

He shook his head and smiled just a touch. "Luke is fine. Now give it to us. Please."

"I'm going to assume no prior knowledge."

Luke nodded. "Fair enough."

"Okay. We are on our way to the Galveston National Laboratory, in Galveston, Texas. It is one of only four known Biosafety Level 4 facilities in the United States. These are the highest security microbiology research facilities, with the most extensive safety protocols for workers. These facilities deal with some of the most lethal and infectious viruses and bacteria known to science."

Swann raised a hand from out of his slump. "You say one of four known facilities. Are there unknown facilities?"

Trudy shrugged. "Certain life sciences corporations, especially ones that are closely held, could have BSL-4 facilities without the government knowing about it. Yeah. It's possible."

Swann nodded.

"The thing that's different about this facility in Galveston is the other three BSL-4 facilities are located on highly secure government installations. Galveston is the only one on an academic campus, a fact which was repeatedly raised as a security concern before the facility first opened in 2006."

"What did they do about it?" Ed Newsam said.

Trudy smiled again. "They promised they'd be extra careful."

"Terrific," Ed said.

"Let's get to the meat of it," Luke said.

Trudy nodded. "Okay. Three nights ago, a power failure occurred."

Luke drifted just a bit as Trudy went through the material the lab director covered with Susan and her staff the night before. The night guard, the woman, the vial of Ebola. He heard these things, but he was barely listening.

An image of Becca and Gunner on the patio as he was leaving flashed in his mind. He tried to squash it, but it lingered on. For a long second, all he saw was Gunner staring down dejectedly at a striped bass on the grill.

"It sure sounds like sabotage," Newsam said.

"It most likely was," Trudy said. "The system was built for redundancy, and not only did the primary power source fail, the redundancy also failed. That just doesn't happen very often unless someone helps it happen."

"What do we know about the woman who was inside at the time?" Luke said. "What is her name? Anything new on her?"

"I did some looking into her. Aabha Rushdie, twenty-nine years old. She's still missing. She has an exemplary record as a junior scientist. Doctorate in Microbiology. Highest honors at King's College, London. Advanced training in BSL-3 and BSL-4 protocols, including certification to work solo in the lab, which is not a place everyone reaches.

"She's been at Galveston for three years, and has worked on a number of important programs, including the weapons program we're concerned with."

"Okay," Swann said. "This is a weapons program?"

Trudy raised a hand. "I'll get to that in a minute. Let me finish with Aabha. The most interesting thing about her is she died in 1990."

Everyone stared at Trudy.

"Aabha Rushdie died in a car crash in Delhi, India, when she was four years old. Her parents moved to London soon after. Later, they divorced and Aabha's mother moved back to India. Her father died of a heart attack seven years ago. And five years ago, Aabha suddenly came back to life, with a life story, schools attended, jobs, and glowing recommendations from college professors in India, all just in time to study for her doctorate in England."

"She's a ghost," Luke said.

"It would seem so."

"But why is she Indian?"

Trudy glanced at her notes. “There are about a billion people in India, but no is really sure of the total figure. The country is far behind the Western world in computerizing birth and death records. There’s widespread corruption in the civil services there, so it’s pretty straightforward to buy the identity of someone who is dead. India is a major global source of fake people.”

“Yeah,” Swann said, “but then you have to hire an Indian ghost.”

Trudy raised a finger. “Not necessarily. To Westerners, there’s very little difference in the appearance of people from northern India, where Delhi is, and people from Pakistan, which is right nearby. In fact, to Indians and Pakistanis themselves there isn’t much difference. So I’m going to go out on a limb here and guess that Aabha Rushdie is actually a Pakistani, and most likely a Muslim. She might be an agent of the intelligence services there, or worse, a member of a conservative Sunni or Wahhabi sect.”

Ed Newsam audibly groaned.

Luke’s heart did a lazy belly flop somewhere inside his chest. Of all the analysts he had worked with, Trudy’s intel was always at the highest level. Her scenario-spinning ability might well be the best of the bunch. If she was correct in this case, then a Sunni from Pakistan had just stolen a vial of Ebola virus.

Good morning. Rise and shine.

He looked around at the four of them. His eyes landed on Trudy.

“Give us all of it,” he said.

“Okay, here comes the worst part,” Trudy said.

“It gets worse?” Swann said. “I thought we just heard the worst part. How does it get any worse than that?”

“First, the heads of the Galveston facility spent the first forty-eight hours after they realized a theft had occurred covering it up. Well, I don’t want to say they covered it up. They did their own internal investigation, which bore no fruit at all. They sent people to look for Aabha Rushdie, although she was probably already long gone. They could not initially believe that Aabha had stolen a virus. The people I talked to late last night still can’t believe it. Everyone there loved her, apparently, though no one knew much about her.”

“You mean, like they didn’t know she’s been dead for twenty-five years?” Swann said.

Trudy went on. “So they interviewed all of the lab technicians, to see if anyone had taken the vial by accident. No one confessed, and there was no reason to suspect anyone. They checked their inventory records, and of course, the vial had been inventoried as secured just a few hours before the lights went out.”

“Why do you suppose they delayed?”

“That’s the second thing, and probably the worst part of all of this. The vial taken isn’t just the Ebola virus. It’s a weaponized version of the Ebola virus. Three years ago, the lab received a large grant from the United States Centers for Disease Control, and match funding from the National Institutes of Health, and the Department of Homeland Security. The funding was to find ways to modify the virus, making it even more virulent than it already was – increasing the ease with which it could be transmitted from person to person, the speed with which the Ebola disease would onset, and the percentage of infected people the virus would kill.”

“Why the hell would they do that?” Swann said.

“The idea was to weaponize the virus before any terrorists could, then study its properties, identify its vulnerabilities, and find ways to cure people who might one day become infected by it. The lab scientists succeeded with the first part of this task – weaponization – beyond anyone’s wildest dreams. Using a gene therapy technique known as insertion, the researchers were able to create a number of mutations to the original Ebola virus.

“The new virus can be introduced into a population through an aerosol spray. Once infected, a person will become contagious within an hour, and will show onset of symptoms within at most

two to three hours. In other words, an infected person could begin to infect others *before* symptoms of the disease appear.

“This is important. It’s a radical departure from the virus in its natural state. The progression of Ebola in human populations is normally stopped when victims are quarantined in a hospital before, or very soon after, they become contagious. To stop this virus, an entire geographic area, sick people and healthy people, would have to be quarantined together. You wouldn’t know right away who had the virus and who didn’t. That means road closures, checkpoints, and barricades.”

“Martial law,” Ed Newsam said.

“Exactly. And even worse, this virus can pass from person to person through tiny droplets in the air, and the illness usually presents with a violent cough. So no exposure to blood, vomit, or excrement is necessary, another radical departure from the original.”

“Anything else?” Luke said. He felt like he had already heard enough.

“Yes. The absolute worst part, as far as I’m concerned. The virus is highly virulent and very deadly. The lethality of the hemorrhagic illness it brings on is estimated at about ninety-four percent without medical intervention. This is the rate at which it killed off a colony of three hundred rhesus monkeys at a secure research facility in San Antonio two months ago. The virus was deliberately introduced into the colony, and within forty-eight hours, two hundred eighty-two of the monkeys were dead. More than half died within the first six hours. Of the eighteen who survived, three never contracted the illness, and fifteen recovered on their own over the next few weeks.

“The disease presents a nightmare scenario in which organs fail, blood vessels collapse, and the victim becomes completely debilitated and basically bleeds out, often in spectacular fashion. We’re talking about blood from the mouth, the ears, the eyes, the anus, and vagina, basically any bodily orifice, sometimes including the pores of the skin.”

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