A LUKE STONE THRILLER--BOOK #1

ANY MEANS NECESSARY

JACK MARS

A Luke Stone Thriller

Джек Марс

Any Means Necessary

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2015

Марс Д.

Any Means Necessary / Д. Марс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», 2015 — (A Luke Stone Thriller)

When nuclear waste is stolen by jihadists in the middle of the night from an unguarded New York City hospital, the police, in a frantic race against time, call in the FBI. Luke Stone, head of an elite, secretive, department within the FBI, is the only man they can turn to. Luke realizes right away that the terrorists' aim is to create a dirty bomb, that they seek a high-value target, and that they will hit it within 48 hours.A cat and mouse chase follows, pitting the world's most savvy government agents versus its most sophisticated terrorists. As Agent Stone peels back layer after layer, he soon realizes he is up against a vast conspiracy, and that the target is even more high value than he could have imagined – leading all the way to the President of the United States.With Luke framed for the crime, his team threatened and his own family in danger, the stakes could not be higher. But as a former special forces commando, Luke has been in tough positions before, and he will not give up until he finds a way to stop them – using any means necessary.Twist follows twist as one man finds himself up against an army of obstacles and conspiracies, pushing even the limits of what he can handle, and culminating in a shocking climax.A political thriller with heart-pounding action, dramatic international settings, and non-stop suspense, "Any Means Necessary" marks the debut of an explosive new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

© Марс Д., 2015
© Lukeman Literary Management Ltd, 2015

Содержание

Jack Mars 6
Part One 7
Chapter 1 7
Chapter 2 10
Chapter 3 14
Chapter 4 15
Chapter 5 18
Chapter 6 20
Chapter 7 22
Chapter 8 25
Chapter 9 28
Chapter 10 33
Chapter 11 35
Chapter 12 39
Chapter 13 43
Chapter 14 44
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 45

Jack Mars
Any Means Necessary

Copyright © 2015 by Jack Mars. All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior permission of the author. This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Jacket image Copyright wavebreakmedia and Michael Rosskothen, used under license from Shutterstock.com.

Jack Mars

Jack Mars is an avid reader and lifelong fan of the thriller genre. ANY MEANS NECESSARY is Jack's debut thriller. 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!

Part One

Chapter 1

June 5th, 1:15 a.m.
Fairfax County, Virginia – Suburbs of Washington, DC

The phone rang.

Luke Stone lay somewhere between asleep and awake. Images flashed in his mind. It was night on an empty rain-swept highway. Someone was injured. A car wreck. In the distance, an ambulance approached, moving fast. The siren wailed.

He opened his eyes. Next to him on the bed table, in the dark of their bedroom, the phone was ringing. A digital clock sat on the table next to the phone. He glanced at its red numbers.

"Jesus," he whispered. He had been asleep for maybe half an hour.

His wife Rebecca's voice, thick with sleep: "Don't answer it."

A tuft of her blonde hair poked out from under the blankets. Soft blue light filtered into the room from a nightlight in the bathroom.

He picked up the phone.

"Luke," a voice said. The voice was deep and gruff, with the slightest hint of a Southern twang. Luke knew the voice all too well. It was Don Morris, his old boss at the Special Response Team.

Luke ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah?"

"Did I wake you?" Don said.

"What do you think?"

"I wouldn't have called you at home. But your cell phone was off."

Luke grunted. "That's because I turned it off."

"We got trouble, Luke. I need you on this one."

"Tell me," Luke said.

He listened as the voice spoke. Soon, he had that feeling he used to get – the feeling that his stomach was in an elevator rapidly descending fifty stories. Perhaps this was why he had quit the job. Not because of too many close calls, not because his son was growing up so fast, but because he didn't like this feeling in his stomach.

It was the knowing that made him sick. The knowing was too much. He thought of the millions of people out there, living their happy lives, blissfully unaware of what was going on. Luke envied them their ignorance.

"When did it happen?" he said.

"We don't know anything yet. An hour ago, maybe two. The hospital noticed the security breach about fifteen minutes ago. They have employees unaccounted for, so right now it looks like an inside job. That could change as better intel comes in. The NYPD has gone nuts, for obvious reasons. They called in two thousand extra cops, and from where I sit, it's not going to be nearly enough. Most of them won't even get in until the shift change."

"Who called NYPD?" Luke said.

"The hospital."

"Who called us?"

"The Chief of Police."

"He call anybody else?"

"No. We're it."

Luke nodded.

"Okay, good. Let's keep it that way. The cops need to lock down the crime scene and secure it. But they need to stay outside the perimeter. We don't want them stepping on it. They also need to keep this away from the media. If the newspapers get it, it's going to be a circus."

"Done and done."

Luke sighed. "Assume a two-hour head start. That's bad. They're way out ahead of us. They could be anywhere."

"I know. NYPD is watching the bridges, the tunnels, the subways, the commuter rails. They're looking at highway tollbooth data, but it's a needle in a haystack. No one has the manpower to deal with this."

"When are you going up there?" Luke said.

Don didn't hesitate. "Now. And you're coming with me."

Luke looked at the clock again. 1:23.

"I can be at the chopper pad in half an hour."

"I already sent a car," Don said. "The driver just called in. He'll be at your place in ten minutes."

Luke placed the receiver back in its cradle.

Rebecca was half awake, her head propped up on one elbow, staring at him. Her hair was long, flowing down her shoulders. Her eyes were blue, framed in thick eyelashes. Her pretty face was thinner than when they first met in college. The intervening years had lined it with care and worry.

Luke regretted that. It burned him to think that the work he did had ever caused her pain. That was another reason why he had left the job.

He remembered how she was when they were young, always laughing, always smiling. She was carefree then. A long time had passed since he had seen that part of her. He thought that maybe this time away from work would coax it to the fore again, but progress was slow. There were flashes of the real Becca, sure, but they were fleeting.

He could tell that she didn't trust the situation. She didn't trust *him*. She was waiting for that phone call in the middle of the night, the one he would have to answer. The one where he would hang up the phone, get out of bed, and leave the house.

They'd had a good night tonight. For a few hours, it had seemed almost like old times.

Now this.

"Luke…" she began. Her scowl was not friendly. It told him this was going to be a difficult conversation.

Luke got out of bed and moved fast, partly because circumstances demanded it, partly because he wanted to leave the house before Becca organized her thoughts. He slipped into the bathroom, splashed water on his face, and glanced at himself in the mirror. He felt awake but his eyes were tired. His body looked wiry and strong – one thing all this time off had meant was he was in the gym four days a week. *Thirty-nine years old*, he thought. *Not bad.*

Inside the walk-in closet, he pulled a long steel lockbox down from a high shelf. From memory, he punched in the ten-digit combination. The lid popped open. He took out his Glock nine-millimeter and slid it into a leather shoulder holster. He crouched down and strapped a tiny.25 caliber pistol to his right calf. He strapped a five-inch serrated fold-out blade to his left calf. The handle doubled as brass knuckles.

"I thought you weren't going to keep weapons in the house anymore."

He glanced up and of course Becca was there, watching him. She wore a robe pulled tight around her body. Her hair was pulled back. Her arms were folded. Her face was pinched, and her eyes were alert. Gone was the sensual woman from earlier tonight. Long gone.

Luke shook his head. "I never said that."

He stood and began to dress. He put on black cargo pants and dropped a couple extra magazines for the Glock into the pockets. He pulled on a tight dress shirt and strapped the Glock on over it. He

slid steel-toed boots onto his feet. He closed the weapon box again and slid it back onto its perch near the top of the closet.

"What if Gunner found that box?"

"It's up high, where he can't see it and he can't reach it. Even if he somehow got it down, it's locked with a digital lock. Only I know the combination."

A garment bag with two days of clothing changes hung on the rack. He grabbed it. A small bug-out bag packed with travel-size toiletries, reading glasses, a stack of energy bars, and half a dozen Dexedrine pills sat on one of the shelves. He grabbed that, too.

"Always ready, right, Luke? You've got your box with your guns and your bags with your clothes and your drugs and you're just ready to go at a moment's notice, whenever your country needs you. Am I right?"

He took a deep breath.

"I don't know what you want me to say."

"Why don't you say: *I've decided not to go. I've decided that my wife and son are more important than a job. I want my son to have a father. I don't want my wife to sit up for nights on end anymore, wondering if I'm alive or dead, or if I'm ever coming back.* Can you do that, please?"

At times like these, he felt the growing distance between them. He could almost see it. Becca was a tiny figure in a vast desert, dwindling toward the horizon. He wanted to bring her back to him. He wanted it desperately, but he couldn't see how. The job was calling.

"Is Dad going away again?"

They both turned red. There was Gunner at the top of the three steps that led to his room. For a second, Luke's breath caught in his throat at the sight of him. He looked like Christopher Robin from the *Winnie the Pooh* books. His blond hair poked up in tufts. He wore blue pajama pants covered with yellow moons and stars. He wore a *Walking Dead* T-shirt.

"Come here, monster."

Luke put his bags down, went over, and picked up his son. The boy clung to his neck.

"You're the monster, Dad. Not me."

"Okay. I'm the monster."

"Where are you going?"

"I need to go away for work. Maybe a day, maybe two. But I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Is Mom going to leave you like she said?"

Luke held Gunner out at arm's length. The boy was getting big and Luke realized that one day soon he wouldn't be able to hold him like this anymore. But that day hadn't come yet.

"Listen to me. Mom isn't going to leave me, and we're all going to be together for a long, long time. Okay?"

"Okay, Dad."

He disappeared up the steps and toward his room.

When he was gone, the two of them stared across at each other. The distance seemed smaller now. Gunner was the bridge between them.

"Luke…"

He held up his hands. "Before you speak, I want to say something. I love you, and I love Gunner, more than anything in this world. I want to be with you both, every day, now and forever. I'm not leaving because I feel like it. I don't feel like it. I hate it. But that call tonight… people's lives are at stake. In all the years I've been doing this, the times that I've left in the middle of the night like this? The situation was a Level Two threat exactly twice. Most of the time, it was Level Three."

Becca's face had softened the tiniest amount.

"What threat level is this?" she asked.

"Level One."

Chapter 2

1:57 am
McLean, Virginia – Headquarters of the Special Response Team

"Sir?" someone said. "Sir, we're here."

Luke snapped awake. He sat up. They were parked at the gate of the helipad. A light rain was falling. He looked at the driver. It was a young guy with a crew cut, probably just out of the military. The kid was smiling.

"You dozed off, sir."

"Right," Luke said. The weight of the job settled on him again. He wanted to be home in bed with Becca, but he was here instead. He wanted to live in a world where murderers didn't steal radioactive materials. He wanted to sleep and dream of pleasant things. At the moment, he couldn't even imagine what those pleasant things might be. His sleep was poisoned by knowing too much.

He climbed out of the car with his bags, showed the guard his identification, and stepped through the scanner.

A sleek black helicopter, a big Bell 430, sat on the pad, rotors turning. Luke crossed the wet tarmac, ducking low. As he approached, the chopper's engine kicked into another gear. They were ready to leave. The door to the passenger compartment slid open and Luke climbed inside.

There were six people already on board, four in the passenger cabin, two up front in the cockpit. Don Morris sat next to the closest window. The seat facing him was empty. Don gestured to it.

"Glad you could come, Luke. Have a seat. Join the party."

Luke strapped into the bucket seat as the chopper lurched toward the sky. He looked at Don. Don was old now, his flat-top hair gone gray. The stubble of his beard was gray. Even his eyebrows were gray. But he still looked like the Delta Force commander he once was. His body was hard and his face was like a granite bluff – all rocky promontories and sharp drop-offs. His eyes were twin lasers. He held an unlit cigar in one of his stone hands. He hadn't lit one in ten years.

As the helicopter gained altitude, Don gestured at the other people in the passenger cabin. He quickly made the introductions. "Luke, you're at the disadvantage, because everybody here already knows who you are, but you might not know them. You do know Trudy Wellington, science and intel officer."

Luke nodded to the pretty young woman with the dark hair and the big round glasses. He had worked with her many times. "Hi, Trudy."

"Hi, Luke."

"Okay, lovebirds, that's enough. Luke, over here is Mark Swann, our tech officer on this job. And with him is Ed Newsam, weapons and tactics."

Luke nodded to the men. Swann was a white guy, sandy hair and glasses, could be thirty-five, could be forty. Luke had met him once or twice before. Newsam was a black guy Luke had never seen, probably early-thirties, bald, close-cropped beard, stacked and chiseled, broad chest, tattooed twenty-four-inch pythons bulging from a white T-shirt. He looked like he'd be hell in a gunfight, and even worse in a street fight. When Don said "weapons and tactics," what he meant was "muscle."

The helicopter had reached cruising altitude; Luke guessed about ten thousand feet. It leveled off and started moving. These things tapped out at about 150 miles per hour. At that speed, they were looking at a solid hour and a half to New York City.

"Okay, Trudy," Don said. "What do you got for us?"

The smartpad in her hands glowed in the darkness of the cabin. She stared into it. It gave her face an eerie quality, like a demon.

"I'm going to assume no prior knowledge," she said.

"Fair enough."

She began. "Less than an hour ago, we were contacted by the New York Police Department counter-terrorism unit. There is a large hospital on the upper east side of Manhattan called Center Medical Center. They store a great deal of radioactive materials onsite, in a containment vault six stories below street level. Mostly, the materials are waste products from radiation therapy for cancer patients, but they also stem from other uses, including radiographic imaging. Sometime in the last few hours, unknown persons infiltrated the hospital, breached the security system, and removed the radioactive waste housed there."

"Do we know how much they got?" Luke said.

Trudy consulted her pad. "Every four weeks, the materials are removed by truck and are transported to a radioactive containment facility in western Pennsylvania jointly controlled by the Department of Homeland Security and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection. The next delivery was scheduled for two days from now."

"So about twenty-six days of radioactive waste," Don said. "How much is that?"

"The hospital doesn't know," Trudy said.

"They don't *know*?"

"They inventory the waste and track it in a database. The database was accessed and erased by whoever stole the material. The amounts differ from month to month, based on treatment schedules. They can recreate the inventory from treatment records, but it's going to take several hours."

"They don't back up that database?" said Swann, the tech guy.

"They do back it up, but the backup was also wiped clean. In fact, records for the past year were wiped."

"So someone knows what they're doing," Swann said.

Luke spoke up. "How do we know this is an emergency if we don't even know what was taken?"

"Several reasons," Trudy said. "This was more than a theft. It was a well-coordinated and planned attack. The video surveillance cameras in strategic parts of the hospital were turned off. This includes several entrances and exits, stairwells and freight elevators, the containment vault, and the parking garage."

"Did anyone talk to the security guards?" Luke said.

"The two security guards who manned the video console were both found dead inside a locked equipment closet. They were Nathan Gold, fifty-seven-year-old white male, divorced, three children, no known ties to organized crime or extremist organizations. Also Kitty Faulkner, thirty-three-year-old black female, unmarried, one child, no known ties to organized crime or extremist organizations. Gold worked at the hospital for twenty-three years. Faulkner worked there eight years. The corpses were undressed, their uniforms missing. They were both strangled, with obvious facial discoloration, swelling, neck trauma, and ligature marks associated with death by garroting or similar technique. I have photos if you want to take a look."

Luke held up a hand. "That's okay. But let's assume for the moment that it was men who did this. Does a man kill a female security guard and then put on her uniform?"

"Faulkner was tall for a woman," Trudy said. "She was five foot ten, and heavyset. A man could easily fit into her uniform."

"Is that all we have?"

Trudy went on. "No. There's a hospital employee who was on shift and is currently unaccounted for. That employee is a custodial staff member named Ken Bryant. He's a twenty-nine-year-old black male who spent a year in pre-trial detention on Rikers Island, and then thirty months at Clinton Correctional Center in Dannemora, New York. He was convicted of robbery and simple assault. Upon release, he completed a six-month jail diversion and job training course. He's worked at the hospital for nearly four years, and has a good record. No attendance issues, no disciplinary issues.

"As a custodian, he has access to the hazardous waste containment vault, and may have knowledge of hospital security practices and personnel. He once had ties to drug traffickers and to an African-American prison gang called the Black Gangster Family. The drug traffickers were low-level street dealers in the neighborhood where he grew up. He probably affiliated himself with the prison gang for personal protection."

"You think a prison gang, or a street gang, was behind this?"

She shook her head. "Absolutely not. I mention Bryant's affiliations because he's still a loose end. To access and erase a database, as well as hijack a video surveillance system, requires technical expertise not generally associated with street or prison gangs. We're thinking the level of sophistication and the materials stolen suggest a terrorist sleeper cell."

"What can they do with the chemicals?" Don said.

"It has radiological dispersion device written all over it," Trudy said.

"Dirty bomb," Luke said.

"Bingo. There's no other reason to steal radioactive waste. The hospital doesn't know the amounts that were taken, but they know what the stuff was. The chemicals include quantities of iridium-192, caesium-137, tritium, and fluorine. Iridium is highly radioactive, and concentrated exposure can cause burns and radiation sickness within minutes or hours. Experiments have shown that a tiny dose of caesium-137 will kill a forty-pound dog within three weeks. Fluorine is a caustic gas dangerous to soft tissue like the eyes, skin, and lungs. At very low concentrations, it makes eyes water. At very high concentrations, it inflicts massive lung damage, causing respiratory arrest and death within minutes."

"Wonderful," Don said.

"The important takeaway here," Trudy said, "is high concentrations. If you're a terrorist, for this to work, you don't want a wide dispersal area. That would limit exposure. You want to pack a bomb with the radioactive material and a conventional explosive like dynamite, and you want to set it off in an enclosed space, preferably with a lot of people around. A crowded subway train or subway station at rush hour. Commuter hubs like Grand Central Terminal or Penn Station. A large bus terminal or airport. A tourist attraction like the Statue of Liberty. The enclosed space maximizes radiation concentrations."

Luke pictured the narrow, claustrophobic stairwell that climbed to the top of the Statue of Liberty. On any given day, it was mobbed with people, often school children on field trips. In his mind's eye he saw Liberty Island filled with ten thousand tourists, the ferries jammed with even more people, like refugee boats from Haiti.

Then he saw the subway platforms of Grand Central Terminal at 7:30 a.m., so crowded with commuters that there was nowhere to stand. A hundred people would be lined up on the stairs, waiting for a train to come in and the platform to clear so the next group of people could descend. He pictured a bomb going off amongst that crowd.

And then the lights going out.

A wave of revulsion passed through him. More people would die in the panic, in the crush of bodies, than in the initial explosion.

Trudy went on. "The problem we face is there are too many attractive targets to watch them all, and the attack doesn't have to take place in New York. If the theft happened as long as three hours ago, then we're already looking at a possible operations radius of at least a hundred fifty miles. That includes all of New York City and its suburbs, Philadelphia, and major cities in New Jersey like Newark, Jersey City, and Trenton. If the thieves remain at large for another hour, you can expand that radius to include Boston and Baltimore. The whole region is a population center. In a radius that large, we could be looking at as many as ten thousand possible soft targets. Even if they stick with high-profile, big-name targets, we're still talking about hundreds of places."

"Okay, Trudy," Luke said. "You gave us the facts. Now what's your gut?"

Trudy shrugged. “I think we can assume this is a dirty bomb attack, and that it’s sponsored by a foreign country, or possibly an independent terrorist group like ISIS or Al-Qaeda. There may be Americans or Canadians involved, but operational control is elsewhere. It’s definitely not a homegrown domestic group, like environmentalists or white supremacists.”

“Why? Why not domestic?” Luke said. He already knew why, but it was important to air it, to take things one step at a time, to not overlook anything.

“The leftists burn down Hummer dealerships in the middle of the night. They spike logging forests, and then paint the spiked trees so no one gets hurt. They have zero history of attacking populated areas or murdering anyone, and they hate radioactivity. The right-wingers are more violent, and Oklahoma City demonstrated they will attack civilian populations as well as symbols of government. But neither group likely has the training for this. And there’s another good reason why it probably isn’t them.”

“Which is?” Luke said.

“Iridium has a very short half-life,” Trudy said. “It’ll be mostly useless in a couple of days. Also, whoever stole these chemicals needs to act fast before they get radiation sickness themselves. The Muslim holy month of Ramadan begins tonight at sunset. So I think we have an attack designed to coincide with the start of Ramadan.”

Luke nearly breathed a sigh of relief. He had known and worked with Trudy for a few years. Her intel was always good, and her ability to spin scenarios was exceptional. She was right far more often than she was wrong.

He looked at his watch. It was 3:15. Sunset was probably around eight o’clock tonight. He did a quick calculation in his head. “So you think we have more than sixteen hours to track these people down?”

Sixteen hours. Looking for a needle in a haystack was one thing. But having sixteen hours to do it, with the most advanced technology and the very best people, was quite another. It was almost too much to hope for.

Trudy shook her head. “No. The problem with Ramadan is it starts at sunset, but whose sunset? In Tehran, sunset tonight will be at 8:24 p.m., which is 10:54 a.m. here. But what if they pick the start of Ramadan worldwide, for example in Malaysia or Indonesia? We could be looking at something as early as 7:24 a.m., which makes some sense because that’s the start of the morning rush hour.”

Luke grunted. He stared out the window at the vast lighted megalopolis below him. He glanced at his watch again. 3:20. Up ahead, on the horizon, he could see the tall buildings of Lower Manhattan, and the twin blue lights cutting high into the sky where the World Trade Center once stood. In three hours, the subways and train stations would begin filling up with commuters.

And out there, somewhere, were people planning to make those commuters die.

Chapter 3

3:35 a.m.
East Side of Manhattan

"It looks just like rats," Ed Newsam said.

The chopper came in low over the East River. The dark water was beneath them, flowing fast, tiny swells rising and falling. Luke could see what Ed meant. The water looked like a thousand rats running under a black shimmering blanket.

They dropped slowly down to the 34th Street heliport. Luke watched the lights of the buildings to his left, a million twinkling jewels in the night. Now that they were here, a sense of urgency surged through him. His heart skipped a beat. He had stayed calm during the long flight because what else was he going to do? But the clock was ticking, and they needed to move. He could almost jump out of the helicopter before it landed.

It touched down with a bump and a shudder, and instantly everyone in the cabin unbuckled. Don wrenched the door open. "Let's go," he said.

The blast gate to the street was twenty yards from the pad. Three SUVs waited just outside the concrete barriers. A squad of New York SRT guys ran to the helicopter and off-loaded the equipment bags. A man took Luke's garment bag and his bug-out bag.

"Careful with those," Luke said. "The last time I came up here, you guys lost my bags. I'm not going to have time for a shopping trip."

Luke and Don climbed into the lead SUV, Trudy sliding in with them. The SUV was stretched to create a passenger cabin with facing seats. Luke and Don faced forward while Trudy faced backward. The SUV rolled out almost before they sat down. Within a minute they were inside the narrow canyon of FDR Drive, racing north. Yellow taxis zoomed all around them, like a swarm of bees.

No one spoke. The SUV raced along, hugging the concrete curves, passing through tunnels beneath crumbling buildings, banging hard over potholes. Luke could feel his heart beat in his chest. The driving wasn't what made his pulse race. It was the anticipation.

"It would have been nice to come up here for a little fun," Don said. "Stay in a fancy hotel, maybe see a Broadway show."

"Next time," Luke said.

Outside his window, the SUV was already exiting the highway. It was the 96th Street exit. The driver barely paused at a red light, then turned left and floored it down the empty boulevard.

Luke watched as the SUV roared into the circular driveway of the hospital. It was a quiet time of night. They pulled directly in front of the bright lights of the emergency room. A man in a three-piece suit stood waiting for them.

"Sharp dresser," Luke said.

Don poked Luke with a thick finger. "Say, Luke. We got a little treat for you tonight. When was the last time you put on a hazmat suit?"

Chapter 4

4:11 a.m.
Beneath Center Medical Center, Upper East Side

"Not too tight," Luke said around a mouthful of plastic thermometer.

Trudy had placed the sensor of a portable blood pressure monitor on Luke's wrist. The sensor squeezed his wrist hard and then harder still, then slowly released it in stages, making gasping sounds as it did so. Trudy tore back the Velcro on the wrist sensor and in almost the same motion, pulled the thermometer from his mouth.

"How does it look?" he said.

She glanced at the readouts. "Your blood pressure is up," she said. "138 over 85. Resting heart rate 97. Temperature 100.4. I'm not going to lie to you, Luke. These numbers could be better."

"I've been under a little stress lately," Luke said.

Trudy shrugged. "Don's numbers are better than yours."

"Yeah, but he takes statins."

Luke and Don sat together in their boxers and T-shirts on a wooden bench. They were in a sub-basement storage facility beneath the hospital. Heavy vinyl drapes hung all around them, closing off the area. It was cold and dank down here, and a shiver raced along Luke's spine. The breached containment vault was two stories further below them.

People milled around. There were a couple of SRT guys from the New York office. The SRT guys had set up two folding tables with a series of laptops and video displays across them. There was the guy in the three-piece suit, who was an intelligence officer from the NYPD counter-terrorism unit.

Ed Newsam, the big weapons and tactics guy Luke had met on the chopper, pushed through the vinyl curtains with two more SRT guys behind him. Each SRT man carried a sealed clear package with bright yellow material inside.

"Attention," Newsam said in a loud voice, cutting through the chatter. He pointed two fingers at his own eyes. "Don and Luke, eyes on me, please."

Newsam held a bottle of water in each hand. "I know you've both done this before, but we're going to treat it like the first time, that way there's no mistakes. These men behind me are going to inspect your suits for you, and then they're going to help you put them on. These are Level A hazmat suits, and they're solid vinyl. It's going to get hot inside of them, and that means you're going to sweat. So before we begin, I need you to start drinking these bottles of water. You will be glad you did."

"Has anyone been down there before us?" Luke said.

"Two guards went down after the security breach was discovered. The lights are knocked out. Swann has tried to bring them back on, but no luck. So it's dark down there. The guards had flashlights, but when they found the vault open and canisters and drums strewn around, they backed out in a hurry."

"They get any exposure?"

Newsam smiled. "A little. My daughters are going to use them as nightlights for a few days. They didn't have suits on, but they were only there for a minute. You're going to be down there longer."

"Will you be able to see what we see?"

"Your hoods have mounted videocams and LED lights. I'll see what you're seeing, and I'll be recording it."

It took twenty minutes to get dressed. Luke was frustrated. It was hard to move inside the suit. He was covered head to toe in vinyl, and it was already getting hot inside. His face plate kept fogging up. It seemed like time was flying past them. The thieves were far out ahead.

He and Don rode the freight elevator together. It creaked slowly downward. Don carried the Geiger counter. It looked like a small car battery with a carry handle.

"You guys hear me okay?" Newsam said. It sounded like he was inside Luke's head. The hoods had built-in speakers and microphones.

"Yeah," Luke said.

"I hear you," Don said.

"Good. I hear you both loud and clear. We're on a closed frequency. The only people on here are you guys, me, and Swann up in the video control booth. Swann has access to a digital map of the facility and those suits are outfitted with tracking devices. Swann can see you on his map, and he's going to direct you from the elevator to the vault. You with me, Swann?"

"I'm here," Swann said.

The elevator lurched to a stop.

"When the doors open, step out and turn left."

The two men moved awkwardly down a wide hallway, guided by Swann's voce. Their helmet lights played against the walls, throwing shadows in the dark. It reminded Luke of shipwreck scuba dives he had done in years past.

Within a few seconds, the Geiger counter started to click. The clicks came spaced apart at first, like a slow heartbeat.

"We have radiation," Don said.

"We see it. Don't worry. It's not bad. That's a sensitive machine you're carrying."

The clicks started to speed up and grow louder.

Swann's voice: "In a few feet, turn right, then follow that hallway maybe thirty feet. It will open into a large square chamber. The containment vault is on the other side of the chamber."

When they turned right, the Geiger counter began to click loud and fast. The clicks came in a torrent. It was hard to tell one from the next.

"Newsam?"

"Step lively, gentlemen. Let's try to do this in five minutes or less."

They moved into the chamber. The place was a mess. On the floor, canisters, boxes, and large metal drums were knocked over and left randomly. Some of them were open. Luke trained his light on the vault across the room. The heavy door was open.

"You seeing this?" Luke said. "Godzilla must have passed through here."

Newsam's voice came in again. "Don! Don! Train your light and your camera on the ground, five feet ahead. There. A few more feet. What's that on the floor?"

Luke turned toward Don and focused his light in the same place. About ten feet from him, amid the wreckage, were sprawled what looked like a pile of rags.

"It's a body," Don said. "Shit."

Luke moved over to it and trained his light on it. The person was big, wearing what looked like a security guard's uniform. Luke kneeled beside the body. There was a dark stain on the floor, like a bad motor oil leak under a car. The head was sideways, facing him. Everything above the eyes was gone, his forehead blown out in a crater. Luke reached around to the back of the head, feeling for a much smaller hole. Even through the thick chemical gloves, he found it.

"What do you have, Luke?"

"I have a large male, 18 to 30 years old, of Arab, Persian, or possibly Mediterranean descent. There's a lot of blood. He's got entry and exit wounds consistent with a gunshot to the back of the head. It looks like an execution. Could be another guard or it could be one of our subjects had an argument with his friends."

"Luke," Newsam said. "In your utility belt, you've got a small digital fingerprint scanner. See if you can dig it out and get a print off that guy."

"I don't think that's going to be possible," Luke said.

“Come on, man. The gloves are cumbersome, but I know where the scanner is. I can walk you to it.”

Luke pointed his camera at the man’s right hand. Each finger was a ragged stump, gone below the first knuckle. He glanced at the other hand. It was the same way.

“They took the fingerprints with them,” he said.

Chapter 5

Luke and Don, dressed in street clothes again, walked quickly down the hospital corridor with the sharp dresser from the NYPD counter-terrorism unit. Luke hadn't even caught the guy's name. He thought of him as Three-Piece. Luke was about to give the guy his orders. They needed things to happen, and for that they needed the city's cooperation.

Luke was taking charge, like he always tended to do. He glanced at Don, and Don nodded his assent. That's why Don brought Luke on: to take charge. Don always said that Luke was born to play quarterback.

"I want Geiger counters on every floor," Luke said. "Somewhere away from the public. We didn't hit any radiation until six levels down, but if it starts to move upward, we need everyone out, and fast."

"The hospital has patients on life support," Three-Piece said. "They're hard to move."

"Right. So start putting those logistics in place now."

"Okay."

Luke went on. "We're going to need an entire hazmat team down there. We need that body brought up, no matter how contaminated, and we need it done fast. The clean-up can wait until after we have the body."

"Got it," Three-Piece said. "We'll put it in a lead-lined casket, and bring it to the coroner in a radiation containment truck."

"Can it be done quietly?"

"Sure."

"We need a match for dental records, DNA, scars, tattoos, surgical pins, whatever we can find. Once you have the data, pass it on to Trudy Wellington on our team. She's got access to databases your people won't have."

Luke pulled out his phone and speed-dialed a number. She picked up on the first ring.

"Trudy, where are you?"

"I'm with Swann on Fifth Avenue, in the back of one of our cars, on our way down to the command center."

"Listen, I've got…" He looked at Three-Piece. "What's your name?"

"Kurt. Kurt Myerson."

"I've got Kurt Myerson from the NYPD here. He's with the counter-terrorism unit. They're going to bring the body up. I need you to connect with him for dental records, DNA, any identifiers at all. When you get the data, I want this guy's name, age, country of origin, known associates, everything. I need to know where's he been and what he's been doing for the past six months. And I need all of this yesterday."

"Got it, Luke."

"Great. Thank you. Here's Kurt, he's going to give you his direct number."

Luke handed Kurt the phone. The three men pushed through a set of double doors, barely slowing down. In a moment, Kurt handed the phone back to Luke.

"Trudy? You still with me?"

"Would I ever be anywhere else?"

Luke nodded. "Good. One more thought. The surveillance cameras are off here at the hospital, but there's got to be cameras all over this neighborhood. When you get to the command center, grab a few of our people. Have them access anything they can find within a five-block radius of this place, and pull video from, let's say, 8 p.m. until 1 a.m. I want to get a look at every commercial or delivery vehicle that came near the hospital during that time. Highest priority is small delivery vans, bread trucks, hot dog trucks, anything along those lines. Anything small, convenient, that can

carry a concealed payload. Lower priority is tractor trailers, buses, or construction vehicles, but don't overlook them. Lowest priority is RVs, pickup trucks, and SUVs. I want screen captures of license plates, and I want ownership of the vehicles tracked. If you find one that looks fishy, you search more cameras for that vehicle on an expanding radius, and find out where it went."

"Luke," she said, "I'm going to need more than a few people for that."

Luke thought about it for two seconds. "Okay. Wake up some people back home, bring them in to SRT headquarters, and forward the license plate data to them. They can track ownership down there."

"Got it."

They hung up. Luke reoriented himself to the present moment, and a new thought occurred to him. He glanced at Kurt Myerson.

"Okay, Kurt. Here's the most important thing. We need this hospital locked down. We need the employees who were on shift tonight gathered up and sequestered. People are going to talk, I understand that, but we've got to keep this out of the hands of the media for as long as we can. If this gets out, there's going to be panic, there's going to be ten thousand false leads called in to the police, and the bad guys will get to watch the entire investigation unfold on television. We can't let it happen."

They pushed through another set of double doors and into the main lobby of the hospital. The entire front face of the lobby was glass. Several security guards stood near the locked front doors.

Outside was a mob scene. A crowd of reporters pushed up against police barriers on the sidewalk. Photographers pressed against the windows, taking interior shots of the lobby. News trucks were parked ten deep on the street. As Luke watched, three different TV reporters filmed segments directly in front of the hospital.

"You were saying?"

Chapter 6

5:10 a.m.
Inside a van

Eldrick was sick.

He sat in the rear passenger seat of the van, hugging his knees, wondering what he had gotten himself into. He had seen some bad shit in prison, but nothing like this.

In front of him, Ezatullah was on the phone, shouting something in Farsi. Ezatullah had been making calls for hours now. The words didn't mean anything to Eldrick. It all sounded like gibberish. The real deal, Ezatullah had trained in London as a chemical engineer, but instead of getting a job, he had gone to war. In his early 30s, a wide scar across one cheek, to hear him tell it, he had waged jihad in half a dozen countries – and had come to America to do the same.

He screamed into the phone again and again before he got through. When he finally reached someone, he launched into the first of several shouted arguments. After a few minutes, he settled down and listened. Then he hung up.

Eldrick's face was flushed. He had a fever. He could feel it burning through his body. His heart was racing. He hadn't thrown up, but he felt like he was going to. They had waited at the rendezvous point on the South Bronx waterfront for over two hours. It was supposed to be a simple thing. Steal the materials, drive the van ten minutes, meet the contacts and walk away. But the contacts never showed.

Now they were…somewhere. Eldrick didn't know. He had passed out for a while. He was awake again, but everything seemed like a vague dream. They were on the highway. Momo was driving, so he must know where they were going. A technology expert, Momo, skinny with no muscle tone, looked the part. He was so young the smooth skin of his face didn't have a single line. He looked like he couldn't grow a beard if Allah himself depended on it.

"We have new instructions," Ezatullah said.

Eldrick groaned, wishing he was dead. He didn't know it was possible to feel this sick.

"I have to get out of this van," Eldrick said.

"Shut up, Abdul!"

Eldrick had forgotten: his name was Abdul Malik now. It felt weird to hear himself being called Abdul, he, Eldrick, a proud black man, a proud American for most of his life. Feeling as sick as he did now, he wished he'd never changed it. Converting in prison was the dumbest thing he'd ever done.

All that shit was in the back. There was a lot of it, in all kinds of canisters and boxes. Some of it had leaked out, and now it was killing them. It had killed Bibi already. The dummy had opened a canister when they still were down in the vault. He was immensely strong and he wrenched the lid off. Why did he do that? Eldrick could picture him holding the canister up. "There's nothing in here," he'd said. Then he'd held it to his nose.

Within a minute, he started coughing. He just sort of sank down to his knees. Then he was on all fours, coughing. "I have something in my lungs," he said. "I can't get it out." He started gasping for air. The sound was horrible.

Ezatullah walked up and shot him in the back of the head.

"Believe me, I did him a favor," he'd said.

Now, the van was passing through a tunnel. The tunnel was long and narrow and dark, with orange lights zooming by overhead. The lights made Eldrick dizzy.

"I have to get out of this van!" he shouted. "I have to get out of this van! I have to…"

Ezatullah turned around. His gun was out. He pointed it at Eldrick's head.

"Quiet! I'm on the phone."

Ezatullah's sliced up face was flushed red. He was sweating.

"You gonna kill me the way you did Bibi?"

"Ibrahim was my friend," Ezatullah said. "I killed him out of mercy. I will kill you just to shut you up." He pressed the muzzle of the gun against Eldrick's forehead.

"Shoot me. I don't care." Eldrick closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, Ezatullah had turned back around. They were still in the tunnel. The lights were too much. A sudden wave of nausea passed through Eldrick, and a great up-rushing spasm gripped his body. His stomach clenched and he tasted acid in his throat. He bent over and threw up on the floor between his shoes.

A few seconds passed. The stench wafted up into his face, and he wretched again.

Oh God, he begged silently. *Please let me die.*

Chapter 7

5:33 a.m.
East Harlem, Borough of Manhattan

Luke held his breath. Loud noises were not his favorite thing, and one hell of a loud noise was coming.

He stood completely still in the bleak light of a tenement building in Harlem. His gun was out, his back pressed to the wall. Behind him, Ed Newsam stood in almost the exact same pose as his. In front of them in the narrow hallway, half a dozen helmeted and flak-jacketed SWAT team members stood on either side of an apartment door.

The building was dead quiet. Dust motes hung in the air. Moments before, a small robot had slid a tiny camera scope beneath the door, looking for explosives attached to the other side. Negative. Now, the robot had retreated.

Two SWAT guys stepped up with a heavy battering ram. It was a swing-type, an officer holding the handle on each side. They didn't make a sound. The SWAT team leader held up his fist. His index finger appeared.

That was one.

Middle finger. Two.

Ring finger…

The two men reared back and swung the ram. BAM!

The door exploded inward as the rammers ducked back. The four others swarmed in, suddenly shrieking, "Down! Down! Get DOWN!"

Somewhere down the hallway, a child started crying. Doors opened, heads peeped out, then ducked back in. It was one of those things around here. Sometimes the cops came and broke down a neighbor's door.

Luke and Ed waited about thirty seconds until SWAT had secured the apartment. The body was on the floor in the living room, much as Luke suspected it might be. He barely looked at it.

"All clear?" he said to the SWAT leader. The guy glared at Luke just a little bit. There had been a brief argument when Luke commandeered this team. These guys were NYPD. They weren't chess pieces for the feds to move around on a whim. That's what they wanted Luke to know. Luke was fine with that, but a terrorist attack was hardly one man's whim.

"All clear," the team leader said. "That's probably your subject right there."

"Thank you," Luke said.

The guy shrugged and looked away.

Ed kneeled by the body. He carried a fingerprint scanner with him. He took prints from three of the fingers.

"What do you think, Ed?"

He shrugged. "I preloaded Ken Bryant's prints from the police database on here. We should know if we have a match in a few seconds. Meanwhile, you've got obvious ligature marks and swelling. The body is still somewhat warm. Rigor mortis has set in, but is not complete. The fingers are turning blue. I'd say he died the same way as the security guards at the hospital, of strangulation, roughly eight to twelve hours ago."

He looked up at Luke. There was a glint in his eyes. "If you want to take his pants down for me, I can get a rectal temperature reading, and narrow the time a little better."

Luke smiled and shook his head. "No thanks. Eight to twelve hours is fine. Just tell me: is it him?"

Ed glanced at his scanner. "Bryant? Yeah. It's him."

Luke pulled his phone and dialed Trudy. On the other end, her phone rang. Once, twice, three times. Luke glanced around at the dreary bleakness of the apartment. The living room furniture was old, with ripped upholstery, and stuffing coming out of the arms of the sofa. A threadbare rug was splayed on the floor, and empty takeout boxes and plastic utensils were strewn across the table. Heavy black curtains were tacked over the windows.

Trudy's voice came on, alert, almost musical. "Luke," she said. "What's it been? Half an hour?"

"I want to talk about the missing janitor."

"Ken Bryant," she said.

"Right. He's not missing anymore. Newsam and I are at his apartment. We have a positive ID on him. He died about eight to twelve hours ago. Strangled, like the guards."

"Okay," she said.

"I want you to access his bank accounts. He probably had direct deposit from his job at the hospital. Start with that one and work your way out from there."

"Um, I'm going to need a warrant for that."

Luke paused. He understood her hesitancy. Trudy was a good officer. She was also young and ambitious. Breaking the rules had derailed many a promising career. But not always. Sometimes breaking the rules led to fast-track promotions. It all depended on which rules you broke, and what happened as a result.

"You have Swann there with you?" he said.

"Yes."

"Then you don't need a warrant."

She didn't answer.

"Trudy?"

"I'm here."

"We don't have time to execute a warrant. There are lives at stake."

"Is Bryant a suspect in this case?"

"He is a person of interest. Anyway, he's dead. We are hardly violating his rights."

"Am I right that this is an order from you, Luke?"

"This is a direct order," he said. "This is my responsibility. If you want to take it that far, this is me telling you that your job depends on this. You do what I say, or I will initiate disciplinary proceedings. Is that understood?"

She sounded petulant, almost like a child. "Fine."

"Good. When you access his account, look for anything out of the ordinary. Money that doesn't belong there. Large deposits or large withdrawals. Wire transfers. If he has a savings account or investments linked, take a look at those. We're talking about an ex-con with a custodial job. He shouldn't have that much money. If he does, I want to know where it came from."

"Okay, Luke."

He hesitated. "How are we doing on license plates?"

"We are going as fast as we can," she said. "We accessed overnight video footage from cameras at Fifth Avenue and 96th Street, as well as Fifth Avenue and 94th Street, and a few others around the neighborhood. We are tracking a 198 vehicles, 46 of which are high priority. I should have an initial report from headquarters in about fifteen minutes."

Luke glanced at his watch. Time was getting tight. "Okay. Good work. We'll be down there as soon as we can."

"Luke?"

"Yes."

"The story is all over the news. They have three live feeds on the big board here right now. They're all leading with it."

He nodded. "I figured."

She went on. “The mayor has scheduled an announcement for 6 a.m. It sounds like he’s going to tell everyone to stay home today.”

“Everyone?”

“He wants all nonessential personnel to stay out of Manhattan. All office workers. All cleaning workers and store clerks. All school children and teachers. He is going to suggest that five million people take the day off.”

Luke put his hand to his mouth. He took a breath. “That should do a lot for morale,” he said. “When everyone in New York stays home, the terrorists just might hit Philadelphia.”

Chapter 8

5:45 a.m.
Baltimore, Maryland – South of the Fort McHenry Tunnel

Eldrick stood alone, about ten yards from the van. He had just thrown up again. It was mostly dry heaves and blood now. The blood disturbed him. He was still lightheaded, still feverish and flushed, but with nothing left in his stomach, the nausea was mostly gone. Best of all, he was finally out of the van.

Somewhere over the dirty horizon, the sky was just starting to brighten, a pale sickly yellow. Down here on the ground, it was still dark. They were parked in a desolate parking lot along a bleak waterfront. A highway overpass soared twenty stories above their heads. Nearby was an abandoned brick industrial building with twin smokestacks. Its windows were broken black holes like dead eyes. The building was surrounded by a barbed wire fence with signs posted every thirty feet: KEEP OUT. There was a visible hole in the fence. The area around the building was overgrown with bushes and tall grass.

He watched Ezatullah and Momo. Ezatullah peeled off one of the large magnetic decals that said Dun-Rite Laundry Services, carried it to the water's edge, and hurled it over the side. Then he came back and peeled off the other side. It never occurred to Eldrick that the signs came off. Meanwhile, Momo kneeled at the front of the van with a screwdriver, removing the license plate and replacing it with a different one. A moment later, he had moved to the back, doing the same with the rear plate.

Ezatullah made a gesture toward the van. "Voilà!" he said. "Totally different vehicle. Catch me now, Uncle Sam." Ezatullah's face was bright red and sweaty. He seemed to be wheezing. His eyes were bloodshot.

Eldrick glanced at their surroundings. Ezatullah's physical state had given him an idea. The idea flashed in his mind like lightning, here and gone in an instant. It was the safest way to think. People could read thoughts in your eyes.

"Where are we?" he said.

"Baltimore," Ezatullah said. "Another of your great American cities. And a pleasant place to live, I imagine. Low crime, natural beauty, and the citizens are all healthy and wealthy, the envy of people everywhere."

In the night, Eldrick had been delirious. He had passed out more than once. He had lost track of time, and of where they were. But he had no idea they had come this far.

"Baltimore? Why are we here?"

Ezatullah shrugged. "We are on our way to our new destination."

"The target is here?"

Now Ezatullah smiled. The smile seemed out of place on his radiation-poisoned face. He looked like death itself. He reached out with a trembling hand and gave Eldrick a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry I was angry with you, my brother. You've done a good job. You delivered everything you promised. If Allah wills it, I hope you are in paradise this very day. But not by my hand."

Eldrick just stared at him.

Ezatullah shook his head. "No. Not Baltimore. We are traveling south to strike a blow that will give joy to the suffering masses throughout the world. We are going to enter the lair of the Devil himself and cut off the beast's head with our own hands."

Eldrick felt a chill all over his upper body. His arms broke out in goose bumps. He noticed that his own shirt was soaked in sweat. He didn't like the sound of this. If they were headed south and they were in Baltimore, then the next city was…

"Washington," he said.

"Yes."

Ezatullah smiled again. Now the smile was glorious, that of a saint standing at the gates of heaven, ready to be granted entrance.

"Kill the head and the body will die."

Eldrick could see it in Ezatullah's eyes. The man had lost his mind. Maybe it was the sickness, or maybe it was something else, but it was obvious he wasn't thinking clearly. All along, the plan had been to steal the materials and drop off the van in the South Bronx. It was a dangerous job, very difficult to pull off, and they had done it. But whoever was in charge had changed the plan, or had lied about it since the beginning. Now they were traveling to Washington in a radioactive van.

To do what?

Ezatullah was a seasoned jihadi. He must know that what he was hinting was impossible. Whatever he thought they were going to do, Eldrick knew they weren't even going to come close. He pictured the van, riddled with bullet holes, three hundred yards from the White House or Pentagon or Capitol Building fence.

This wasn't a suicide mission. It wasn't a mission at all. It was a political statement.

"Don't worry," Ezatullah said. "Be happy. You've been chosen for the greatest honor. We will make it, even though you cannot imagine how. The method will become clear to you in time." He turned and slid open the side door of the van.

Eldrick glanced at Momo. He was finishing up the rear license plate. Momo hadn't spoken in a while. He probably wasn't feeling too well himself.

Eldrick took a step backwards. Then he took another. Ezatullah busied himself with something inside the van. His back was turned. The funny thing about this moment was another one like it might never come. Eldrick was just standing there in a vast open lot, and no one was looking at him.

Eldrick had run track in high school. He was good at it. He remembered the crowds inside the 168th Street Armory in Manhattan, the standings on the big board, the buzzer going off. He remembered that knotted up feeling in his stomach right before a race, and the crazy speed on the new track, skinny black gazelles jockeying, pushing off, elbows high, moving so fast that it seemed like a dream.

In all the years since, Eldrick had never run as fast as he did back then. But maybe, with one focused burst of energy and everything riding on it, he could match that speed right now. No sense in hesitating, or even thinking much more about it.

He turned and took off.

A second later, Momo's voice behind him:

"EZA!"

Then something in Farsi.

The abandoned building was ahead. The sickness came roaring back. He wretched, blood spurting down his shirt, but he kept going. He was already out of breath.

He heard a clack like a stapler. It echoed faintly against the walls of the building. Ezatullah was shooting, of course he was. His gun had a silencer.

A sharp sting went through Eldrick's back. He fell to the pavement, skinning his arms on the broken asphalt. A split second later, another shot echoed. Eldrick got up and kept running. The fence was right here. He turned and went for the hole.

Another sting went through him. He fell forward and clung to the fence. All the strength seemed to flow out of his legs. He hung there, supporting himself with the death grip of his fingers through the chain links.

"Move," he croaked. "Move."

He dropped to his knees, forced the ripped fence aside and crawled through the hole. He was in deep grass. He stood, stumbled along for a few steps, tripped over something he couldn't see, and

rolled down an embankment. He didn't try to stop rolling. He let his momentum carry him to the bottom.

He came to rest, breathing heavily. The pain in his back was unreal. His face was in the dirt. It was wet here, muddy, and he was right along the riverbank. He could tumble into the dark water if he wanted to. Instead, he crawled deeper into the underbrush. The sun hadn't come up yet. If he stayed here, didn't move, and didn't make a sound, it was just barely possible…

He touched a hand to his chest. His fingers came away wet with blood.

* * *

Ezatullah stood at the hole in the fence. The world spun around him. He had become dizzy just trying to run after Eldrick.

His hand held the chain link of the fence, helping him stand. He thought he might vomit. It was dark back in those bushes. They could spend an hour looking for him in there. If he made it into the big abandoned building, they might never find him.

Moahmmar stood nearby. He was bent over, hands on his knees, breathing deeply. His body was shaking. "Should we go in?" he said.

Ezatullah shook his head. "We don't have time. I shot him twice. If the sickness doesn't finish him, the bullets will. Let him die here alone. Perhaps Allah will take pity on his cowardice. I hope so. Either way, we must continue without him."

He turned and started back toward the van. It seemed like the van was parked far away. He was tired, and he was sick, but he kept putting one foot after the other. Each step brought him closer to the gates of Paradise.

Chapter 9

6:05 a.m.
Joint Counter-Terrorism Command Center – Midtown Manhattan

"Luke, the best thing to do is get your people together and go back to Washington," the man in the suit said.

Luke stood inside the swirling chaos of the command center's main room. It was already daytime, and weak light filtered in from windows two stories above the working floor. Time was passing too quickly, and the command center was a clusterfuck in progress.

Two hundred people filled the space. There were at least forty workstations, some of them with two or three people sitting at five computer screens. On the big board up front, there were twenty different television and computer screens. Screens showed digital maps of Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, live video streams of the entrances to the Holland and Lincoln Tunnels, mug shots of Arab terrorists known to be in the country.

Three of the screens currently showed Mayor DeAngelo, at six-foot-three dwarfing the aides that flanked him, standing at the microphone and telling the brave people of New York to stay home and hug their kids. He was reading from prepared remarks.

"In a worst-case scenario," the mayor said, his voice coming from speakers located around the room, "the initial explosion would kill many people and create mass panic in the immediate area. Radiation exposure would cause widespread terror throughout the region and probably the country. Many people exposed in the initial attack would become sick, and some would die. The clean-up costs would be enormous, but they would be dwarfed by the psychological and economic costs. A dirty bomb attack on a major train station in New York City would cripple transportation along the Eastern seaboard for the foreseeable future."

"Pleasant," Luke said. "I wonder who writes his material."

He scanned the room. Everyone was represented here, everyone jockeying for position. It was alphabet soup. NYPD, FBI, NSA, ATF, DEP, even CIA. Hell, the DEA was here. Luke wasn't sure how stealing radioactive waste constituted a drug crime.

Ed Newsam had gone to track down the SRT staff among the crowd.

"Luke, did you hear me?"

Luke turned back to the matter at hand. He was standing with Ron Begley of Homeland Security. Ron was a balding man in his late 50s. He had a large round gut and pudgy little fingers. Luke knew his story. He was a desk jockey, a man who had come up through the government bureaucracy. On September 11, he was at Treasury running a team analyzing tax evasion and Ponzi schemes. He slid over to counter-terrorism when Homeland Security was created. He had never made an arrest, or fired a gun in anger, in his life.

"You said you want me to go home."

"You're stepping on toes here, Luke. Kurt Myerson called his boss at NYPD and told him you were at the hospital treating people like your personal servants. And that you commandeered a SWAT team. Really? A SWAT team? Listen, this is their turf. You're supposed to follow their lead. That's how the game is played."

"Ron, the NYPD called us in. I assume that's because they felt they needed us. People know how we work."

"Cowboys," Begley said. "You work like rodeo cowboys."

"Don Morris got me out of bed to come up here. You can talk to Don…"

Begley shrugged. A ghost of a smile appeared on his face. "Don's been recalled. He caught a chopper out twenty minutes ago. I suggest you do the same."

"What?"

"That's right. He's been kicked upstairs on this one. They called him back to do a situation briefing at the Pentagon. Real high-level stuff. I guess they couldn't get an intern to do it, so they're bringing in Don."

Begley lowered his voice, though Luke could still easily hear him. "A word of advice. What does Don have, three more years before retirement? Don's a dying breed. He's a dinosaur, and so is SRT. You know it and I know it. All of these little secret agencies within an agency, they're going by the wayside. We're consolidating and centralizing, Luke. What we need now is data-driven analysis. That's how we're going to solve the crimes of the future. That's how we're going to catch these terrorists today. We don't need macho super-spies and aging former commandos rappelling down the sides of buildings anymore. We just don't. Playing hero ball is over. It's actually a little ridiculous, if you think about it."

"Great," Luke said. "I'll take that under advisement."

"I thought you were teaching college," Begley said. "History, political science, that kind of thing."

Luke nodded. "I am."

Begley put a meaty hand on Luke's arm. "You should stick with that."

Luke shook the hand off and plunged into the crowd, looking for his people.

* * *

"What do we got?" Luke said.

His team had set up camp in an outlying office. They had grabbed some empty desks and built their own little command station with laptops and satellite uplinks. Trudy and Ed Newsam were there, along with a few of the others. Swann was off in a corner by himself with three laptops.

"They called Don back," Trudy said.

"I know. Have you talked to him?"

She nodded. "Twenty minutes ago. He was just about to take off. He said keep working this case until he personally calls it off. Politely ignore anyone else."

"Sounds good. So where are we?"

Her face was serious. "We're moving fast. We've narrowed it down to six high-priority vehicles. All of them passed within a block of the hospital last night, and have details that are funky or don't match up."

"Give me an example."

"Okay. One is a food vendor truck registered to a former Russian paratrooper. We were able to follow him on surveillance cameras, and as near as we can tell, he's been cruising around Manhattan all night, selling hot dogs and Pepsi to sex workers, pimps, and johns."

"Where is he now?"

"He's parked on 11th Ave, south of the Jacob Javits Convention Center. He hasn't moved in a while. We're thinking he might be asleep."

"Okay, sounds like he just became low priority. Pass him on to NYPD, just in case. They can roust him and toss his truck, find out what else he's selling in there. Next."

Trudy ran down her list. A minivan operated as an Uber car by a disgraced former nuclear physicist. A forty-ton tractor trailer with an insurance claim that it was demolished in an accident and scrapped. A delivery van for a commercial laundry service, with license plates registered to an unrelated flooring business in Long Island. An ambulance reported stolen three years ago.

"A stolen ambulance?" Luke said. "That sounds like something."

Trudy shrugged. “Usually it’s the illegal organ trade. They harvest from newly deceased patients within minutes of death. They have to harvest the organs, pack them, and get them out of the hospital quickly. No one looks twice at an ambulance waiting around in a hospital parking lot.”

“But tonight, maybe they weren’t waiting for organs. Do we know where they are?”

She shook her head. “No. The only location we have is the Russian. This is still more of an art than a science. Surveillance cameras aren’t everywhere yet, especially once you get out of Manhattan. You see a truck pass a camera, then you might not see it again. Or you might pick it up on another camera ten blocks away, or five miles away. The tractor trailer crossed the George Washington Bridge into New Jersey before we lost it. The laundry van went over the 138th Street Bridge into the South Bronx and disappeared. Right now, we’re tracking them all down using other means. We’ve contacted the trucking company, Uber, the flooring company, and the laundry service. We should know something on those soon. And I’ve got eight people at headquarters sifting through hours of video feeds, looking for the ambulance.”

“Good. Keep me posted. What’s going on with the bank stuff?”

Trudy’s face was stone. “You should ask Swann about that.”

“Okay.” He took a step toward Swann’s little fiefdom in the corner.

“Luke?”

He stopped. “Yeah.”

Her eyes darted around the room. “Can we talk? In private?”

* * *

“You’re going to fire me because I won’t break the law for you?”

“Trudy, I’m not going to fire you. Why would you even think that?”

“It’s what you said, Luke.”

They were standing in a tiny utility room. There were two empty desks in here and one small window. The carpeting was new. The walls were white with nothing on them. There was a small video camera mounted in one corner, near the ceiling.

It looked like the room had never been used. The command center itself had been open for less than a year.

Trudy’s big eyes stared at him intently.

Luke sighed. “I was giving you an out. I thought you would understand that. If trouble comes down, you can blame it on me. All you did was what I told you to do. You were afraid you’d lose your job if you didn’t follow my orders.”

She took a step closer to him. In the confines of the room, he could smell her shampoo, and the understated cologne she often wore. The combination of scents did something to his knees. He felt them tremble the slightest amount.

“You can’t even give me a direct order, Luke. You don’t work at SRT anymore.”

“I’m on a leave of absence.”

She took another small step toward him. Her eyes were focused on him like twin lasers. There was intelligence in those eyes, and heat.

“And you left… why? Because of me?”

He shook his head. “No. I had my reasons. You weren’t one of them.”

“The Marshall brothers?”

He shrugged. “When you kill two men in one night, it’s a good time to take a pause. Maybe reassess what you’re doing.”

“Are you saying you never had any feelings for me?” she asked.

He looked at her, stunned by the question. He had always sensed Trudy flirting with him, and he had never taken the bait. There had been a few times, drunk at cocktail parties, after bad fights

with his wife, when he had come close. But thoughts of his wife and son had always pulled him back from the brink of doing something stupid.

"Trudy, we work together," he said firmly. "And I'm married."

She came even closer.

"I'm not looking for a marriage, Luke," she said softly, leaning in, inches away.

She pushed herself against him now. His arms were at his sides. He felt the heat from her, and that old uncontrollable urge when she was near, the excitement, the energy… the lust. She reached up to lay her hands on his chest, and as soon as her palms touched his shirt, he knew he had to act now or give in to her completely.

With one final act of supreme self-discipline, Luke stepped back and gently pushed her hands away.

"I'm sorry, Trudy," he said, his voice raspy. "I care about you. I really do. But this is not a good idea."

She frowned, but before she could say anything, a heavy fist banged against the wooden door.

"Luke? You in there?" It was Newsam's voice. "You should come out and look at this. Swann's got something."

They stared at each other, Luke feeling guilty as hell as he thought of his wife, even though he hadn't done anything. He peeled himself away before anything more could happen and couldn't help wondering how this would affect their working together.

He also, worst of all, couldn't help but admit, deep down, that he didn't want to leave the room.

* * *

Swann sat a long table with his three video monitors arrayed in front of him. With his thinning hair and glasses, he reminded Luke of a NASA physicist at mission control. Luke stood behind him with Newsam and Trudy, the three of them hovering over Swann's narrow shoulders.

"This one is Ken Bryant's checking account," Swann said, moving his cursor around on the center screen. Luke absorbed the details: deposits, withdrawals, total balance, a date range from April 28th to May 27th.

"How secure is this connection?" Luke said. He glanced around the room and out the door. The main room of the command center was just down the hall.

"This?" Swann said. He shrugged. "It's independent of the command center. I'm connected to our own tower and our own satellites. It's encrypted by our guys. I suppose CIA or NSA could have somebody trying to break it, but why bother? We're all on the same team, right? I wouldn't worry about that. Instead, I would focus on this bank account. Notice anything funny?"

"His balance is over $24,000," Luke said.

"Right," Swann said. "A janitor has a pretty sizeable chunk of money in his checking account. Interesting. Now let's go back a month. March 28th to April 27th. The balance goes as high as $37,000, and he starts spending it down. There are transfers here from an unnamed account, $5,000, then $4,000, then, oh well, forget the whole IRS reporting problem… give me $20,000."

"Okay," Luke said.

"Go back another month. Late February to late March. His beginning balance is $1,129. By the end of the month, it's over $9,000. Go back another month, late January to late February, and his balance never reached $2,000 the whole time. From there, if you go back three years, you see that his balance rarely went above $1,500. Here was a guy living month to month, who suddenly started getting large wire transfers in March."

"Where are they coming from?"

Swann smiled and raised a finger. “Now for the fun part. They’re coming from a small offshore bank specializing in anonymous numbered accounts. It’s called Royal Heritage Bank, and it’s based on Grand Cayman.”

“Can you hack it?” Luke said. He glanced sidelong at Trudy’s disapproving look.

“I don’t have to,” Swann said. “Royal Heritage is owned by a CIA asset named Grigor Svetlana. He’s a Ukrainian who used to be in the Red Army. He got himself in deep with the Russians twenty years ago, after some old Soviet weaponry disappeared and then turned up on the black markets in West Africa. I’m not talking about guns. I’m talking about anti-aircraft, anti-tank, plus some low-altitude cruise missiles. The Russians were ready to hang him upside down. With nowhere to turn, he turned to us. I have a friend at Langley, and the accounts at Royal Heritage Bank, far from being anonymous, are in fact an open book to the American intelligence community. Of course, this isn’t something most Royal Heritage customers are aware of.”

“So you know who owned the account making the transfers.”

“I do.”

“Okay, Swann,” Luke said. “I understand. You’re very clever. Now get to the point.”

Swann gestured at the computer screens. “Bryant himself owned the account that was making the transfers. That’s the account on my left monitor there. You can see it has about $209,000 in it right now. He was transferring a little bit here and there from the numbered account to his local checking account, probably for his own personal use. And if we scroll back a few months, you can see that Bryant’s offshore account was created on March 3rd by a $250,000 transfer from another Royal Heritage account, the one on the right monitor here.”

Luke looked at the account on the right. There was more than forty-four million dollars in it.

“Someone got a bargain hiring Bryant,” he said.

“Exactly,” Swann said.

“Who is it?”

“It’s this man.” On the screen, a photo identification card appeared. It showed a middle-aged man with dark hair fading to white. “This is Ali Nassar. Fifty-seven years old. Iranian national. Born in Tehran to an influential and wealthy family. Studied at the London School of Economics, then Harvard Law School. Went home and got another law degree, this one from the University of Tehran. As a result, he can practice law in both the United States and Iran. He’s been involved in international trade negotiations for much of his career. He lives here in New York and is currently an Iranian diplomat to the United Nations. He has full diplomatic immunity.”

Luke stroked his chin. He could feel the short stubble growing there. He was starting to get tired. “Let me get this straight. Nassar paid Ken Bryant, presumably for access to the hospital, as well as information about security measures and how to circumvent them.”

“Presumably, yes.”

“So he’s likely running a terrorist cell here in New York, he’s an accessory to the theft of hazardous materials and at least four murders, and he can’t be prosecuted under American law?”

“It certainly appears that way.”

“Okay. You’re in the account already, right? Let’s see where else he’s been sending money.”

“It’ll take me a little while.”

“That’s fine. I have an errand to run in the meantime.”

Luke glanced at Ed Newsam. Newsam’s face was hard, his eyes flat and blank.

“Say, Ed? You feel like taking a ride with me? Maybe we should go pay Mr. Ali Nassar a visit.”

Newsam smiled, looking more like a scowl.

“Sounds like fun.”

Chapter 10

6:20 a.m.
Congressional Wellness Center – Washington, DC

It was not easy to find.

Jeremy Spencer stood in front of a set of locked gray steel doors in a sub-basement of the Rayburn House Office Building. The doors were tucked away in a corner of the underground parking lot. Few people knew this place existed. Even fewer knew where it was. He felt foolish, but he knocked on the door anyway.

Someone buzzed him in. He pulled back the door, feeling that old familiar sense of uncertainty in his stomach. He knew that the Congressional Gym was off-limits to everyone but the members of the United States Congress. And yet, despite the breach of long-standing protocol, he had been invited inside.

Today was the biggest day of his young life. He had been in Washington for three years, and he was moving up.

Seven years ago, he was an upstate New York trailer park redneck. Then he was a student on a full scholarship at the State University of New York at Binghamton. Rather than kick back and enjoy the free ride, he became president of the campus Republicans and a commentator on the school newspaper. Soon he was posting on Breitbart and Drudge. Now, what seemed like a deep breath later, he was a beat reporter for Newsmax, covering the Capitol.

The gym was not fancy. There were a few cardio trainers, some mirrors, and some free weights on a rack. An old man in sweat pants and a T-shirt, with headphones on, walked on a treadmill. Jeremy entered the quiet locker room. He turned a corner, and in front of him was the man he had come to see.

The man was tall, mid-fifties, with silver hair. He stood at an open locker, so Jeremy saw him in profile. His back was straight, and his large jaw jutted forward. He wore a T-shirt and shorts, both soaked from a work-out. His shoulders, arms, chest, and legs, everything was muscular and defined. He looked like a leader of men.

The man was William Ryan, nine-term Representative from North Carolina, and Speaker of the House. Jeremy knew everything about him. His family was old money. They had owned tobacco plantations since before the Revolution. His great-great grandfather was a United States Senator during Reconstruction. He had graduated first in his class at the Citadel. He was charming, he was gracious, and he wielded power with a sense of confidence and entitlement so complete that few people in his party considered opposing him.

“Mr. Speaker, sir?”

Ryan turned, saw Jeremy there, and flashed a bright smile. His T-shirt was dark blue, with red and white letters. PROUD AMERICAN was all it said. He held out his hand for a shake. “Sorry,” he said. “Still a little sweaty.”

“No problem, sir.”

“Okay,” Ryan said. “Enough with the sirs. In private, you call me Bill. If that feels too hard, call me by my title. But I want you to know something. I requested you, and I’m giving you an exclusive. Late this afternoon, I may end up giving a press conference with all the media. I don’t know yet. But until then, all day long, my thoughts on this crisis are going to be under your byline. How does that feel?”

“It feels great,” Jeremy said. “It’s an honor. But why me?”

Ryan lowered his voice. “You’re a good kid. I’ve been following you for a long while. And I want to give you a piece of advice. Totally off the record. After today, you’re no longer an attack

dog. You're a seasoned journalist. I want you to print what I'm about to say word for word, but starting tomorrow, I want you to become slightly more… nuanced, let's say. Newsmax is great for what it is, but a year from now I see you at the *Washington Post*. That's where we need you, and it will happen. But first, people need to believe you've matured and grown into a so-called fair and balanced, mainstream reporter. Whether you have or not isn't important. It's all about perceptions. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"I think I do," Jeremy said. His blood roared in his ears. The words were exciting and terrifying all at once.

"We all need friends in high places," the Speaker said. "Including me. Now fire away."

Jeremy took out his telephone. "Recorder is on… now. Sir, are you aware of the massive theft of radioactive material that took place in New York City overnight?"

"I am more than aware," Ryan said. "Like all Americans, I am deeply concerned. My aides woke me at four a.m. with the news. We are in close contact with the intelligence community, and we are monitoring the situation closely. As you well know, I have been working to pass a Congressional Declaration of War against Iran, which the President and his party have been blocking at every turn. We are in a situation where Iran is occupying our ally, the sovereign nation of Iraq, and our own personnel have to pass through Iranian checkpoints to enter and leave our embassy there. I don't believe there has been a series of events so humiliating since the Iran hostage crisis in 1979."

"Do you believe this theft was carried out by Iran, sir?"

"First off, let's call it what it is. Whether or not a bomb goes off on a subway train, this is a terrorist attack on American soil. At least two security guards were murdered, and the great city of New York is in a state of fear. Second, we don't have enough information yet to pinpoint who the terrorists are. But we know that weakness on the world stage encourages these sorts of attacks. We need to show our true strength, and we need to come together as a country, both right and left, to defend ourselves. I invite the President to join with us."

"What do you think the President should do?"

"At the very least, he needs to declare a nationwide state of emergency. He should issue temporary special powers to law enforcement, until we track these people down. These powers should include warrant-less surveillance, as well as random search and seizure at all train stations, bus terminals, airports, schools, public squares, malls, and other hubs of activity. He also needs to act immediately to safeguard all other stockpiles of radioactive material, everywhere in the United States."

Jeremy stared into Ryan's fierce eyes. The fire there was almost enough to make him turn away.

"And here's the main thing. If the attackers do turn out to be from Iran, or sponsored by Iran, then he either needs to declare war, or step out of the way and let us do it. If this is indeed an Iranian attack, and in the face of that information, the President continues to block our efforts to protect our country and our allies in the Middle East… then what choice does he leave me? I myself will initiate the impeachment proceedings."

Chapter 11

6:43 a.m.
Seventy-Fifth Street near Park Avenue – Manhattan

Luke sat in the back of one of the agency SUVs with Ed Newsam. They were across the quiet, tree-lined street from a fancy high-rise, modern, with glass double doors and a white-gloved doorman at the entrance. As they watched, the doorman held the door open for a thin blonde woman in a white suit, who came out walking a dog. He hated buildings like this.

"Well, there's at least one person in this city who doesn't seem too worried about a terror attack," Luke said.

Ed slumped way back in his seat. He seemed half asleep. With Ed's beige cargo pants and the white T-shirt painted on to his chiseled features, his cue ball head, and his close-cropped beard, he didn't look like anyone's idea of a federal agent. He certainly didn't look like anyone this building would allow in.

As Luke thought about Ali Nassar, he was annoyed at his diplomatic immunity. He hoped that Nassar didn't try to make a big deal about it. Luke had no patience to negotiate.

Luke's phone rang. He glanced at it. He pressed the button.

"Trudy," he said. "How can I help you?"

"Luke, we just got a piece of intel," she said. "The body you and Don found in the hospital."

"Tell me."

"Thirty-one-year-old Ibrahim Abdulraman. Libyan national, born in Tripoli to a very poor family. Little if any formal education. Joined the army at eighteen. Within a short time, he was transferred to Abu Salim prison, where he worked for several years. He has been implicated in human rights violations at the prison, including torture and murder of government political opponents. In March 2011, as the regime began to collapse, he fled the country. He must have seen the writing on the wall. A year later, he turned up in London, working as a bodyguard for a young Saudi prince."

Luke's shoulders slumped. "Hmmm. A Libyan torturer working for a Saudi prince? Who then ends up dead while stealing radioactive materials in New York? Who was this guy, really?"

"He had no history of extremist ties, and doesn't seem to have had strong political beliefs. He was never an elite soldier for any military, and appears not to have undergone any advanced training. It looks to me like he was an opportunist, hired muscle. He disappeared from London ten months ago."

"Okay, give me that name again."

"Ibrahim Abdulraman. And Luke? You need to know something else."

"Tell me."

"I didn't find out this information. It's on the big board in the main room. This guy Myerson at NYPD didn't give me the identifiers when he had them, and they did their own search. They released the information to everybody without even telling us. They're boxing us out."

Luke looked at Ed and rolled his eyes. The last thing he wanted was to get involved in an interagency pissing contest. "All right, well…"

"Listen, Luke. I'm a little worried about you. You're running out of friends here, and I doubt an international incident is going to help. Why don't we pass the bank transfer details up the line, and let Homeland make this call? We can apologize for the hack, say we got overzealous. If you go see that diplomat now, you're putting yourself way out on a limb."

"Trudy, I'm already there."

"Luke – "

"Trudy, I'm hanging up now."

"I'm trying to help you," she said.

After he hung up, he looked at Ed.

"You ready?"

Ed barely moved. He gestured at the building.

"I was born to do this."

* * *

"Can I help you gentlemen?" the man said as they walked in.

A glittering chandelier hung from the ceiling in the front lobby. To the right, there was a sofa and a couple of designer chairs. There was a long counter along the left wall, with another doorman standing behind it. He had a telephone, a computer, and a bank of video screens. He also had a small TV set showing the news.

The man appeared about forty-five. His eyes were red and veiny, not necessarily bloodshot. His hair was slicked back. He looked like he had just stepped out of the shower. Luke guessed he had worked here so long, he could drink all night and do the job in his sleep. He probably knew by sight every single person who ever came in or out of this place. And he knew that Luke and Ed didn't belong.

"Ali Nassar," Luke said.

The man picked up his telephone. "Mr. Nassar. The penthouse suite. Who may I say is calling?"

Without saying a word, Ed slid over the counter and pressed the handle on the receiver, severing the man's connection. Ed was big and strong like a lion, but when he moved, he was fluid and graceful, like a gazelle.

"You may not say anyone is calling," Luke said. He showed the doorman his badge. Ed did the same. "Federal agents. We need to ask Mr. Nassar a few questions."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible at this moment. Mr. Nassar doesn't accept callers before 8 a.m."

"Then why did you pick up the telephone?" Newsam said.

Luke glanced at Ed. That was a snappy answer. Ed didn't seem like the debate team type, but he might have done well.

"You've been watching the news?" Luke said. "I'm sure you've heard about the radioactive waste that's gone missing? We have reason to believe Mr. Nassar may know something about that."

The man stared straight ahead. Luke smiled. He had just poisoned Nassar's well. This doorman was a hub of communication. By tomorrow, every single person in the building was going to know the government had come to question Nassar about his terrorist activities.

"I'm sorry, sir," the man began.

"You don't have to be sorry," Luke said. "All you have to do is grant us access to the penthouse level. If you don't, I will arrest you right now for obstruction of justice, and I will lead you away from here in handcuffs. I'm sure you don't want that, and I don't want to do it. So give us the key or the code or whatever it is, and then go on about your business. Also, know that if you tamper with the elevator once we are inside it, not only will I arrest you for obstruction, I will arrest you as an accessory after the fact to four murders, and the theft of hazardous materials. The judge will set bail at ten million dollars, and you will languish on Rikers Island awaiting trial for the next twelve months. Does that sound appealing to you…" Luke glanced at the man's nameplate.

"John?"

* * *

"Were you really going to arrest that man?" Ed said.

It was a glass elevator, which moved through a round glass tube in the southwest corner of the building. As they rose, the view of the city became breathtaking, then dizzying. Soon, they could catch a vast sweep, the Empire State Building directly across from them, the United Nations building to their left. In the distance, a line of airplanes glinted in the early morning sun on their approach to LaGuardia Airport.

Luke smiled. “Arrest him for what?”

Ed giggled. The elevator kept moving, up and up.

“Man, I’m tired. I was just going to bed when Don called me.”

“I know,” Luke said. “Me too.”

Ed shook his head. “I haven’t done this round the clock thing in a while. I don’t miss it.”

The elevator reached the top floor. A warm tone sounded, and the doors slid open.

They stepped into a wide hallway. The floor was polished stone. Directly in front of them, ten yards ahead, two men stood. They were big men in suits, dark-skinned, perhaps Persian, perhaps some other ethnicity. They were blocking a set of double doors. Luke didn’t really care.

“Looks like our doorman called ahead.”

One of the men in the hall waved his hand. “No! You must go back. You cannot come here.”

“Federal agents,” Luke said. He and Ed walked toward the men.

“No! You have no jurisdiction. We refuse your entrance.”

“I guess I’m not going to bother showing them the badge,” Luke said.

“Yeah,” Ed said. “No reason to.”

“On my go, okay?”

“Sure.”

Luke waited a beat.

“Go.”

They were five feet from the men. Luke stepped up to his man and threw the first punch. He was surprised at how slow his own fist seemed to move. The man was five inches taller than Luke. He had the wingspan of a great bird. He blocked the punch easily and grabbed Luke’s wrist. He was strong. He pulled Luke closer.

Luke raised a knee to the groin, but the man blocked it with his leg. The man put a big hand to Luke’s throat. His fingers clenched like an eagle’s talons, digging into the vulnerable flesh.

With his free hand, his left, Luke jabbed him in the eyes. Index and middle fingers, one in each eye. It wasn’t a direct hit, but it did the job. The man let go of Luke and stepped backwards. His eyes watered. He blinked and shook his head. Then he smiled.

It was going to be a fight.

Then Newsam was there, sudden, like a ghost. He grabbed the man’s head in both hands, and banged it hard against the wall. The violence of it was profound. Some people banged an opponent’s head against the wall. Ed Newsam did it like he was trying to break through the wall using the man’s head.

Bang!

The man’s face winced.

Bang!

His jaw went slack.

Bang!

His eyes rolled.

Luke raised a hand. “Ed! Okay. I think you got him. He’s done. Let him down easy. These floors look like marble.”

Luke glanced at the other guard. He was already sprawled out on the ground, eyes closed, mouth open, head leaning against the wall. Ed had made short work of them both. Luke hadn’t made a dent.

Luke pulled a couple of plastic zip ties from his pocket and kneeled by his man. He bound the man's ankles. He trussed them tight, like a prized pig. Eventually, someone would come and cut these things off. When they did, the guy probably wouldn't have any feeling in his feet for an hour.

Ed was doing the same with his man.

"You're a little rusty, Luke," he said.

"Me? Nah. I'm not even supposed to fight. They hired me for my brains." He could still feel the place on his throat where the man's hand had been. It was going to be sore tomorrow.

Ed shook his head. "I was Delta Force, same as you. I came in two years after the Stanley Combat Outpost operation in Nuristan. People were still talking about it. How they dropped you guys up there and you got overrun. In the morning, only three men were still fighting. You were one of them, right?"

Luke grunted. "I'm not aware of the existence of…"

"Don't bullshit me," Ed said. "Classified or not, I know the story."

Luke had learned to live his life in air-tight compartments. He rarely talked about the forward fire base incident. It took place a lifetime before, in a corner of eastern Afghanistan so remote that just putting some troops on the ground there was supposed to mean something. It was ancient history. His wife didn't even know about it.

But Ed was Delta, so… okay.

"Yeah," he said. "I was there. Bad intelligence put us up there, and it turned into the worst night of my life." He gestured at the two men on the floor.

"It makes this look like an episode of *Happy Days*. We lost nine good men. Just before dawn, we ran out of ammo." Luke shook his head. "It got ugly. Most of our guys were dead by then. And the three of us that made it… I don't know if we ever really came back. Martinez is paralyzed from the waist down. Last I heard, Murphy is homeless, in and out of the VA psychiatric ward."

"And you?"

"I have nightmares about it to this day."

Ed was binding the wrists of his man. "I knew a guy who was on the clean-up detail after they cleared the area. He said they counted 167 bodies on that hill, not including our guys. There were 21 enemy hand-to-hand combat deaths inside the perimeter."

Luke looked at him. "Why are you telling me this?"

Ed shrugged. "You're a little rusty. No shame in admitting that. And you might be smart. And you might be small. But you're also muscle, just like me."

Luke barked laughter. "Okay. I'm rusty. But who you calling small?" He laughed, looking up at Ed's enormous frame.

Ed laughed back. He searched the pockets of the man on the floor. In a few seconds, he found what he was looking for. It was a key card to the digital lock mounted on the wall next to the double doors.

"Shall we go inside?"

"After you," Ed said.

Chapter 12

"You can't be in here!" the man shouted. "Out! Get out of my home!"

They were standing in a wide open living area. There was a white baby grand piano in the far corner, near floor to ceiling windows with more spectacular views. Morning light streamed in. Nearby was a modern white sofa and table set, with accent chairs, clustered around a giant flat-panel TV mounted on the wall. On the opposite wall was a massive canvas, ten feet high, with crazy splotches and drips of bright color. Luke knew something about art. He guessed it was a Jackson Pollock.

"Yeah, we've been all through that with the guys out in the hall," Luke said. "We can't be here, and yet… here we are."

The man was not tall. He was thick and stubby, and wearing a white plush robe. He was holding a large rifle and sighting down the barrel at them. It looked to Luke like an old Browning safari gun, probably loading.270 Winchester rounds. That thing would take down a moose at four hundred yards.

Luke moved to the right side of the room, Ed to the left. The man swung the rifle back and forth, unsure who to target.

"Ali Nassar?"

"Who is asking?"

"I'm Luke Stone. That's Ed Newsam. We're federal agents."

Luke and Ed circled the man, moving in closer.

"I am a diplomat attached to the United Nations. You have no jurisdiction here."

"We just want to ask you a couple of questions."

"I've called the police. They will arrive in a few moments."

"In that case, why don't you put the gun down? Listen, it's an old gun. You've got a bolt action on that thing. If you fire it once, you'll never have time to chamber the next round."

"Then I will kill you and let the other one live."

He spun toward Luke. Luke kept moving along the wall. He put his hands up to show he was no threat. He'd had so many guns pointed at him in his life that he had long ago lost track of them all. Still, he didn't feel good about this one. Ali Nassar didn't look like much of a marksman, but if he did manage to get a shot off, it was going to put a big hole in something.

"If I were you, I'd kill that big man over there. Because if you kill me, there's no telling what that guy's gonna do. He likes me."

Nassar didn't waver. "No. I will kill you."

Ed was already behind the man and within ten feet. He crossed the distance in a split second. He knocked the barrel of the gun upward, just as Nassar pulled the trigger.

BOOM!

The report was loud in the confines of the apartment. The shot tore a hole through the white plaster of the ceiling.

In one move, Ed snatched the gun away, punched Nassar in the jaw, and guided him to a seat in one of the accent chairs.

"Okay, sit down. Careful, please."

Nassar was jolted by the punch. It took several seconds for his eyes to come back to center. He held a chubby hand to the red welt that was already rising on his jaw.

Ed showed Luke the rifle. "How about this thing?" It was ornate, with a pearl inlaid stock and polished barrel. It had probably been hanging on a wall somewhere a few minutes before.

Luke turned his attention to the man in the chair. He started from the beginning again.

"Ali Nassar?"

The man was pouting. He looked angry in the same way that Luke's son Gunner used to look when he was four years old.

He nodded. “Obviously.”

Luke and Ed moved quickly, wasting no time.

“You can’t do this to me,” Nassar said.

Luke glanced at his watch. It was 7 a.m. The cops could show up any minute.

They had him in an office just off the main living room. They had taken away Nassar’s robe. They had taken away his slippers. He wore tighty-whitey underwear and nothing else. His large stomach protruded. It was tight like a snare drum. They had him sitting in an armchair, his wrists zip-tied to the arms of the chair, his ankles zip-tied to the legs.

The office had a desk with an old-style tower computer and desktop monitor. The CPU was inside a thick steel box, which itself was anchored to the stone floor. There was no obvious way to open the box, no lock, no door, nothing. To get at the hard drive, a welder would have to cut the box. There wasn’t going to be any time for that.

Luke and Ed stood over Nassar.

“You have a numbered account at Royal Heritage Bank on Grand Cayman Island,” Luke said. “On March 3rd, you made a $250,000 transfer to an account held by a man named Ken Bryant. Ken Bryant was strangled to death sometime last night in an apartment in Harlem.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You are the employer of a man named Ibrahim Abdulraman, who died this morning in a sub-basement of Center Medical Center. He was killed with a gunshot to the head while he was stealing radioactive material.”

A flicker of recognition passed across Nassar’s face.

“I do not know this man.”

Luke took a deep breath. Normally, he would have hours to interview a subject like this. Today he had minutes. That meant he might have to cheat a little.

“Why is your computer bolted to the floor?”

Nassar shrugged. He was beginning to regain his confidence. Luke could almost see it come flooding back. The man believed in himself. He thought he was going to stonewall them.

“There is a great deal of confidential material in there. I have clients who are engaged in business deals involving intellectual property. I am also, as I indicated, a diplomat assigned to the United Nations. I receive communications from time to time that are… how would you call it? Classified. I am in these positions because I am known for my discretion.”

“That may be,” Luke said. “But I’m going to need you to give me the password so I can take a look for myself.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible.”

Behind Nassar, Ed laughed. It sounded like a grunt.

“You might be surprised at what’s possible,” Luke said. “The fact is, we’re going to access that computer. And you’re going to give us the password. Now, there’s an easy way to do this, and a hard way. The choice is up to you.”

“You won’t hurt me,” Nassar said. “You’re already in a great deal of trouble.”

Luke glanced at Ed. Ed moved over and kneeled by Nassar’s right side. He took Nassar’s right hand in his two powerful hands.

Luke and Ed had met for the first time late last night, but they were already starting to work together without verbal communication. It was like they were reading each other’s minds. Luke had experienced this before, usually with guys who had been in special operations units like Delta. The relationship usually took longer to develop.

“You play that piano in there?” Luke said.

Nassar nodded. “I’m classically trained. When I was young, I was a concert pianist. I still play a bit for fun.”

Luke crouched down so he was at eye level with Nassar.

"In a moment, Ed is going to start breaking your fingers. That'll make it hard to play the piano. And it's going to hurt, probably quite a bit. I'm not sure it's the kind of pain a man like you is accustomed to."

"You won't do it."

"The first time, I'm going to count to three. That will give you a last few seconds to decide what you want to do. Unlike you, we warn people before we hurt them. We don't steal radioactive material and aim to kill millions of innocent people. Hell, you'll be getting off easy compared to what you're doing to the others. But after the first time, there won't be any more warnings. I'll just look at Ed, and he'll break another finger. Do you understand?"

"I will have your job," Nassar said.

"One."

"You are a little man with no power. You will regret ever coming here."

"Two."

"Don't you dare!"

"Three."

Ed broke Nassar's pinky at the second knuckle. He did it quickly, with very little effort. Luke heard the crunch, just before Nassar screamed. The pinky bent out sideways. There was something almost obscene about the angle.

Luke put his hand under Nassar's chin and tilted his head up. Nassar's teeth were gritted. His face was flushed and his breath came in gasps. But his eyes were hard.

"That was just the pinky," Luke said. "The next one is the thumb. Thumbs hurt a lot more than pinkies. Thumbs are more important, too."

"You are animals. I will tell you nothing."

Luke glanced at Ed. Ed's face was hard. He shrugged and broke the thumb. This time it made a loud cracking sound.

Luke stood up and let the man shriek for a moment. The sound was ear-splitting. He could hear it echoing through the apartment, like something from a horror movie. Maybe they should find a hand towel in the kitchen to use as a gag.

He paced the room. He didn't enjoy this sort of thing. It was torture, he understood that. But the man's fingers would heal. If a dirty bomb went off on a subway train, many people would die. The survivors would get sick. No one would ever heal. Weighing the two, the man's fingers and dead people on a train, the decision was easy.

Nassar was crying now. Clear mucus ran from one of his nostrils. He was breathing crazily. It sounded like *huh-huh-huh-huh.*

"Look at me," Luke said.

The man did as he was told. His eyes were no longer hard.

"I see the thumb got your attention. So we'll take the left thumb next. After that, we'll start on the teeth. Ed?"

Ed moved around to the man's left.

"Kahlil Gibran," Nassar gasped.

"What's that? I didn't hear you."

"Kahlil underscore Gibran. It's the password."

"Like the author?" Luke said.

"Yes."

"*And what is it to work with love*?" Ed said, quoting Gibran.

Luke smiled. "*It is to weave the cloth with threads drawn from your own heart, even as if your beloved were to wear that cloth*. We have that on our kitchen wall at home. I love that stuff. I guess we're just three incurable romantics here."

Luke went to the computer and ran his finger across the touchpad. The password box came up. He typed in the words.

Kahlil_Gibran

The desktop screen appeared. The wallpaper was a photo of snow-capped mountains, with yellow and green meadows in the foreground.

“Looks like we’re in business. Thanks, Ali.”

Luke slipped an external hard drive he had gotten from Swann out of the thigh pocket of his cargo pants. He plugged it into a USB port. The external drive had huge capacity. It should easily swallow this man’s entire computer. They could worry later about breaking any encryption.

He started the file transfer. On the screen, an empty horizontal bar appeared. On the left hand side, the bar began to fill up with the color green. Three percent green, four percent, five. Beneath the bar, a blizzard of file names appeared and disappeared as each one was copied to the destination drive.

Eight percent. Nine percent.

Outside in the main room, there was a sudden commotion. The front doors banged open. “Police!” someone screamed. “Drop your weapons! On the ground!”

They moved through the apartment, knocking things over, blasting through doors. It sounded like there were a lot of them. They would be here any second.

“Police! Down! Down! Get down!”

Luke glanced at the horizontal bar. It seemed to be stuck on twelve percent.

Nassar stared up at Luke. His eyes were heavily lidded. Tears streamed from them. His lips trembled. His face was red, and his almost naked body had broken out in sweat. He did not look vindicated or triumphant in any way.

Chapter 13

7:05 a.m.
Baltimore, Maryland – South of the Fort McHenry Tunnel

Eldrick Thomas woke from a dream.

In the dream, he was in a small cabin high in the mountains. The air was clean and cold. He knew he was dreaming because he had never been in a cabin before. There was a stone fireplace with a fire going. The fire was warm and he held his hands to the flames. In the next room he could hear his grandmother's voice. She was singing an old church hymn. She had a beautiful voice.

He opened his eyes to daylight.

He was in a lot of pain. He touched his chest. It was tacky with blood, but the gunshots hadn't killed him. He was sick from radioactivity. He remembered that. He glanced around. He was lying in some mud and was surrounded by thick bushes. To his left was a large body of water, a river or a harbor of some sort. He could hear a highway somewhere close.

Ezatullah had chased him here. But that was… a long time ago. Ezatullah was probably gone by now.

"Come on, man," he croaked. "You gotta move."

It would be easy to just stay here. But if he did that, he was going to die. He didn't want to die. He didn't want to be a jihadi anymore. He just wanted to live. Even if he spent the rest of his life in prison, that would be all right. Prison was okay. He had been in prison a lot. It wasn't as bad as people claimed.

He tried to stand, but he couldn't feel his legs. They were just gone. He rolled onto his stomach. Pain seared through him like a jolt of electricity. He went away to a dark place. Time passed. After a while, he returned. He was still here.

He started to crawl, his hands gripping the dirt and the mud and pulling him along. He dragged himself up a long hill, the hill he had fallen down last night, the hill that had probably saved his life. He was crying from the pain, but he kept going. He didn't give a shit about pain, he was just trying to make it up this hill.

A long time passed. He was lying face down in the mud. The bushes were a little less dense here. He looked around. He was above the river now. The hole in the fence was directly in front of him. He crawled toward it.

He got caught on the bottom of the fence while pulling himself through. The pain made him scream.

Two old black men were sitting on white buckets not far away. Eldrick saw them with surreal clarity. He had never seen anyone so clearly before. They had fishing rods, tackle boxes, and a big white bucket. They had a big blue cooler on wheels. They had white paper bags and Styrofoam breakfast platters from McDonald's. Behind them was an old rusty Oldsmobile.

Their lives were paradise.

God, please let me be them.

When he screamed, the men rushed over to him.

"Don't touch me!" he said. "I'm contaminated."

Chapter 14

7:09 a.m.
The White House – Washington, DC

Thomas Hayes, President of the United States, stood in slacks and a dress shirt at the counter in the family kitchen of the White House. He peeled a banana and waited for the coffee to brew. When he was alone, he preferred to quietly come in here and make himself a simple breakfast. He hadn't even put on his tie yet. His feet were bare. And he was tormented with dark thoughts.

These people are eating me alive.

The thought was an unwelcome intruder in his mind, the kind of thing that occurred to him more and more these days. Once upon a time, he had been the most optimistic person he knew. From his earliest days, he had always been the top performer, everywhere he found himself. High school valedictorian, captain of the rowing team, president of the student body. Summa cum laude at Yale, summa cum laude at Stanford. Fulbright Scholar. President of the Pennsylvania State Senate. Governor of Pennsylvania.

He had always believed that he could find the right solution to any problem. He had always believed in the power of his leadership. What's more, he had always believed in the inherent goodness of people. Those things were no longer true. Five years in office had beaten the optimism out of him.

He could handle the long hours. He could handle the various departments and the vast bureaucracy. Until recently, he had been on decent terms with the Pentagon. He could live with the Secret Service around him twenty-four hours a day, intruding on every aspect of his life.

He could even handle the media, and the lowbrow ways they attacked him. He could live with the way they mocked his "country club upbringing," and how he was a "limousine liberal," supposedly lacking the common touch. The problem wasn't the media.

The problem was the House of Representatives. They were immature. They were moronic. They were sadistic. They were a mob of vandals, intent on dismantling him and taking him away, one piece at a time. It was as if the House was a student congress at a junior high school, but one where the children had elected the school's worst juvenile delinquents to office.

The mainstream Republicans were a rampaging horde of medieval barbarians, and the Tea Partiers were bomb-throwing anarchists. Meanwhile, closer to home, the House Minority Leader was eyeing his own future run for the Oval Office, and made it no secret that he was willing to throw the current President under the bus. The Blue Dog Democrats were two-faced traitors – glad-handing country cousins one minute, angry white men railing about Arabs and immigrants and inner-city crime the next. Every morning, Thomas Hayes woke secure in the knowledge that his pool of friends and allies was growing smaller by the hour.

"You with me, Thomas?"

Hayes looked up.

David Halstram, his chief of staff, stood across from him, fully dressed, looking like he always did – awake, energetic, fully alive, in the battle and eager for more. David was 34 years old, and he had only been in the job nine months. Give him time.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

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