

JACK MARS

A LUKE STONE THRILLER--BOOK #2

OATH
OF
OFFICE





Jack Mars

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

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BOOKS BY JACK MARS

LUKE STONE THRILLER SERIES

ANY MEANS NECESSARY (Book #1)

OATH OF OFFICE (Book #2)

SITUATION ROOM (Book #3)

CONTENTS

[CHAPTER ONE](#)
[CHAPTER TWO](#)
[CHAPTER THREE](#)
[CHAPTER FOUR](#)
[CHAPTER FIVE](#)
[CHAPTER SIX](#)
[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)
[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)
[CHAPTER NINE](#)
[CHAPTER TEN](#)
[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)
[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)
[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)
[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)
[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)
[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)
[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)
[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY ONE](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY TWO](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY THREE](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY SIX](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY NINE](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY ONE](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY TWO](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY THREE](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY SIX](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY NINE](#)
[CHAPTER FORTY](#)
[CHAPTER FORTY ONE](#)
[CHAPTER FORTY TWO](#)
[CHAPTER FORTY THREE](#)
[CHAPTER FORTY FOUR](#)
[CHAPTER FORTY FIVE](#)
[CHAPTER FORTY SIX](#)

CHAPTER ONE

June 6th

3:47 p.m.

Dewey Beach, Delaware

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

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

Go time was in thirteen minutes.

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

He shook his head to clear it.

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

It hadn't worked.

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

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

Ed Newsam was big, black, and rippling muscle. He looked like a linebacker in the NFL. There was no softness

to him anywhere. He wore a close-cropped beard and a flat-top haircut. His massive arms were dark with tattoos.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Luke nodded. "I know."

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

Luke had seen these things unfold a hundred times. A Verizon FIOS van was parked down at the end of the block. That had to be FBI. A fishing boat was anchored about a hundred yards out in the bay. Also feds. In a few minutes, at 4 p.m., that boat would make a sudden run right at the safe house dock.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It wasn't an option.

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

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

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

Luke nodded. "Me too."

*

The man was a ghost.

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

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

"Yes," she said.

"Gunner?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yesterday morning, somebody blew up the White House. The President and Vice President escaped to the bunker at Mount Weather, with about half the civilian government.

Last night, somebody blew up Mount Weather with all the kiddies still inside. A couple hours later, a new President took the stage, the former Vice President. Nice.

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

Brown waited up to see what happened next.

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

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

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

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

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

It was excitement.

"What's the problem?" Brown said.

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

Brown nodded. "I know."

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

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

Brown was with them. Even before this happened, if the FBI found out his real identity, he was looking at multiple life sentences. Now? Forget it. It might take months for them to identify him, and in the meantime he would sit in a county jail somewhere, surrounded by low-rent hoodlums. And the way things were right now, he couldn't bank on an angel to step in and make it all go away.

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

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

True enough.

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

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

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

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

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

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

*

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

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

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

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

"Amen," Ed said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're going to get me in."

Ed took the gun in his large hands. "Beautiful."

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

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

"Nice," Ed said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was no room for feelings right now.

He looked down at Ed. Ed sat in his wheelchair, grenade launcher on his lap. Ed's face was hard. His eyes were cold

steel. Ed was a man who lived his values, Luke knew. Those values included loyalty, honor, courage, and the application of overwhelming force on the side of what was good, and right. Ed was not a monster. But at this moment, he may as well be.

“You ready?” Luke said.

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

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

He slipped the smooth black helmet over his head, and Ed did the same with his. Luke pulled his visor down.

“Intercoms on,” he said.

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

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

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

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

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

“Please,” Luke said to the cloud.

A moment later, the shooting started.

CHAPTER TWO

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brown sighed. He supposed the right thing to do would be to raise these cops on the radio and tell them he knew

what they were doing. He could bring the woman and boy downstairs, and stand them up right in front of the sliding glass door so everybody could see what was on offer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's the van doing?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Smith opened up from the skies above.

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

The power of the gunshots made the floorboards vibrate.

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

"Excellent, Mr. Smith," Brown said into the Motorola.

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

"You've got one on the ground still coming! I want him out of the game."

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

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

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

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

"Affirmative," someone said.

The invaders took up positions on the dock. They carried heavy armored ballistic shields and got low behind them. A man popped up and raised a tear gas gun. Brown reached for his own mask and watched the projectile fly

toward the house. It hit the glass door and punched through into the main room.

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

"Status downstairs?" Brown said. A few seconds passed.

"Status!"

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

"Fire when ready," Brown said.

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

"Good shooting, boys," he said into the walkie-talkie.

"Be sure to sink their boat while you're at it."

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

*

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

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

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

"Ed, how's your look on that upstairs shooter?"

"I can put one right down his throat. Pretty sure he doesn't see me over here."

Luke nodded. "Let's do that first. It's getting messy out here."

"You sure you want that?" Ed said.

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

"I'm still banking they're in that room with no windows," he said.

Please.

"Just say the word," Ed said.

"Go."

Luke heard the distinctive hollow report of the grenade launcher.

Doonk!

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

BANG.

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

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

"What do you say?" Ed said.

"Pretty please."

Luke raced around and ducked behind a car.

Doonk!

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

Luke nearly jumped up.

"Hold on," Ed said. "One more on its way."

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

Luke climbed to his feet and started running.

*

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

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

"Mr. Smith?" Brown said. "Mr. Smith, are you there?"

No answer.

"Anybody see where that came from?"

"You're the eyes, Yank," came a voice.

They had trouble.

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

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

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

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

"I can't see!" the man screamed. "I can't see!"

His eyes were wide open.

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

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

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

Brown turned and stormed up the stairs.

*

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

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

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

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

Luke went right. Instinctively, he ran to the room at the far end of the hall. He dropped his Uzi in the hallway. He

took the pump shotgun off his shoulder and dropped that, too. He slid his Glock from its holster.

He turned left and into the room.

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

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

Was it worth it?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Luke could picture the man's face from the moment before he ducked behind Becca. He had a thick scar across

his left cheek. He had a flat-top haircut. He had the sharp features of someone who had spent his life in the military.

"Who wants to know?" Luke said.

"They call me Brown."

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

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

"What options do you see?" Brown said.

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

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

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

"And you'll be dead one second later."

"True," Brown said. "Or I could do this."

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

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

Becca screamed.

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

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

BOOOOOOM!

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

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

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

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

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

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

Either way, the man called Brown was gone.

CHAPTER THREE

9:03 p.m.

Bethesda Navy Medical Center - Bethesda, Maryland

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her resume thus far was impressive. It included teenage supermodel, young wife of a technology billionaire,

mom, United States Senator from California, Vice President, and now, suddenly, President. The former President, Thomas Hayes, had died in a fiery underground inferno, and Susan herself was lucky to be alive.

Luke had saved her life yesterday, twice.

He undid the mute feature on his computer.

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

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

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

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

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

Now the crowd exploded.

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

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