

APACHE DAWN



BOOK I OF THE **WILDFIRE** SAGA

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APACHE DAWN

BOOK I OF THE WILDFIRE SAGA



For Dad.

This book could not have been written without your support and encouragement.

CHAPTER ONE

CHAD

HASLET, TEXAS

In the not too distant future...

CHAD HUNTLEY SCRAPED the last handful of cold dirt onto the fresh grave. He brushed aside a few bits of snow which had already tried to cover the crude wooden tombstone he had helped his neighbor carve that morning. The ground had been frozen for three weeks. It's what always happened in winter. Things died. The ground grew hard and inconsolable, as if feeling the same pain of love lost, lives destroyed, sacrifices wasted.

He wasn't afraid of crying. He wished to God he could cry. Crying, it seemed to him, was the appropriate thing to do when your entire family withers and dies in front of you. He just had no tears. Patting down the last bit of dry, cold earth, he paused, his hand on the crude mound that covered Mom. He watched absently as fresh snow landed on his hand and didn't immediately melt. He thought it was odd that he couldn't feel the cold anymore.

He felt nothing.

Mom didn't feel anything anymore, either. The coughing fits, the congestion, the fever, the pain. It was all over. She had lasted longer than most, he guessed.

Certainly longer than his father and sisters. That was Mom, though. The toughest woman he ever knew. He smiled and wished again that he could cry.

Chad grunted and stood up. He brushed the snow and dirt from his favorite jeans. His best boots were already under the new snow. Tilting back Dad's well-worn Stetson, he looked up into the gray nothingness above. The snow swirled and fell around him in silence. It was a wet snow. Some of it hit his face. If he couldn't cry, maybe the sky would.

"It's time we got inside. Come on, son," mumbled his neighbor, Doug Miller. The grandfatherly man struggled to hold in a cough. Chad knew his neighbor's time would be up soon.

"I know what you're thinking, son. But, I'll be damned if the young man who helped me care for Emma is gonna freeze today. I owe your folks that much."

"Miss Emma wouldn't want you to turn into an icicle, either."

The old man chuckled ruefully and Chad raised his eyes up from the grave with no expression on his face. He looked left and right at the other mounds, where his dad and sisters were already at rest in the cold ground. He looked at the sick old man that stood before him, trying not to shiver.

Mr. Miller was wrapped in two muddy blankets and had snow on his shoulders. A thick wool cap perched on top of his head provided only a little protection to the wispy silver hair that poked out in all directions. Old Man Miller stamped his boots a little in the snow to keep his feet warm. He suppressed another cough but his shoulders shook with the effort. He glared at Chad under a bushy white eyebrow with a rheumy, red-rimmed eye.

"I ain't sick, so stop worrying—but I am gettin' cold."

Chad sighed. The stubborn old man would deny he was sick until the day he died, Chad figured. Everyone was dying around him. Had been now for nearly a month, ever since the Blue Flu had arrived in town.

"Do you think my family is with Miss Emma?"

Mr. Miller stopped coughing with a start and stared incredulously at the younger man. "Son, I know you're deep in a pit of grief right now, but I'm mighty hard-pressed not to slug you and teach you some manners. Emma..." He

turned away suddenly.

Chad felt foolish and guilty. He regretted mentioning Miss Emma as soon as he said her name. He sniffed and wiped his nose. The pain was clearly still too fresh for Mr. Miller. Miss Emma, the closest thing Chad had ever had to a real grandmother, had passed only last week.

The old man straightened his shoulders. He looked back at Chad and in a quiet voice said, "The house is empty, Chad. Empty. We been married 33 years." He took in a deep, ragged breath and stared up at the falling snowflakes. "I cry myself to sleep every night in a cold, empty bed." He blew his nose into a paisley handkerchief. "A man doesn't get over that in a week, boy."

Mr. Miller sighed when Chad stepped back as if struck. "I'm sorry, Chad." He put a shaking hand on Chad's shoulder and squeezed. "It's just hard to figure what you meant. You ain't had no tears or...anything since your momma...that was no more'n a few days ago."

Chad knew instantly what the old man was talking about. He had felt it about himself and was worried something was wrong. He should be crying, sobbing, inconsolable. Not only was Mom dead, but with her passing, he was left totally alone in the world. Well, he did have family back East and a few cousins up in Montana, but since the world seemed to be ending, they might as well be on the moon.

Mr. Miller watched Chad's face and said, "Chad, to answer your question truthfully, yes. I suppose she's with your family." He looked up at the gray skies unloading their white cargo. A sad smile graced his wrinkled face. "I expect they're up there together somewhere, looking at us and shaking their heads. Two grown men standing around in the snow."

"I'm only sixteen," said Chad in a small, quiet voice.

Mr. Miller put a thin arm around Chad's shoulder. "Son, what you've had to do the last few weeks...don't you ever let anyone say you ain't a man now."

Chad turned without a word and walked slowly toward his house through the snow. Mr. Miller struggled to keep up with Chad's longer, strength-filled strides. Chad wondered again why he never caught the sickness. Most of the people in the neighborhood had gotten sick—children, men, women, even pets. Chad

never even had so much as a sniffle. Many of the houses in the subdivision had been completely emptied.

Mr. Miller sneezed rather violently just behind him and Chad turned his aching mind to that painful thought again. Why? The neighbors to the south had all died two weeks back. His mom had called for help from the police, but they'd refused to come. Half the police in the county were either dead or bedridden. Contact with all the sick and suffering people had taken its toll on the police and doctors all over the country. The small force of first responders in their little patch of north Texas had been decimated.

Chad crunched his way across his backyard in silence. The lights in the house flickered. Everything went dark for a few seconds, then came back on. Most of the houses in the little community had already gone permanently dark. There weren't many people left to care anyway.

His thoughts went back to Mom. When the Johnsons took sick during that first awful week, she went to help their young children. Before the week was out, the news—and the bird flu—had spread around. His mom didn't even pause to take precautions. She said if she was infected, it was too late to worry. She said she was going because the children needed her—everyone else was scared to go. The world was scared. Chad went with her, despite Dad's bitter protest and tears from his sisters.

Chad had ultimately been the only one who ever walked out of their home again. His childhood tendency to never get sick when his schoolmates got the chicken pox, measles, mumps, even mono or the common cold, had once been seen by everyone as a blessing. Chad looked at himself in the pale reflection of his porch door. They were wrong.

It was a curse.

His reflection did not lie. He still looked fresh-faced and healthy, despite losing just about everyone in his life. He hadn't heard from his relatives in weeks and had assumed the worse. His uncle in Montana admitted he was sick. Sue, his aunt in West Virginia, had called just before the phones went out to say she was sick and that Uncle Don had already passed. She cried to him on the phone that there was no one willing to help. She was hysterical. Uncle Don's body was still

in the house and her babies had died. A single gunshot was the last thing Chad had heard before he hung up the phone.

Mom, wrapped up in blankets and taken by the fever in bed, knew from his face what had happened to her sister. She had heard nothing from the rest of her family in Maine.

Mr. Miller stood waiting at the door, wheezing and shivering from the exertion of walking across the yard in the snow. “You gonna open the door or stand there like—” He sneezed, then wiped his nose. “I don’t know how you never got sick...”

Chad opened the door and heard his mother’s voice echo through his mind.

“My strong little man...never gets sick...” were the last words Mom had whispered to him from her cracked lips. There were tears in her bloodshot eyes, from the fever or from fear or love—Chad never knew which. He supposed it didn’t matter anymore.

Chad remembered the moment it had started.

It was when they had come back from visiting the Johnson family down the street—Mom had sneezed. Just once; a small thing, really.

Two days later, his sisters were sick. Four days after that, Dad died struggling and thrashing in bed, unable to breathe and delirious from the fever. His sister Gracie soon followed, choking on the liquid in her lungs. Chad hated the awful memory of the pink-tinged foam that had bubbled out of her nose and mouth at the end.

His baby sister, Helen, whom he had thought might be immune like himself, was walking from the bathroom and fell down on the floor without a sound. She was dead a few minutes later. At least she hadn’t suffered.

Chad shivered as remembered Mom’s scream when she first saw Helen’s face, with its blue, almost indigo coloring near the ears, eyes, and over the cheeks. That sweet face that had so many times looked up to Chad in wonder and adoration, had looked then like some sort of B-rate horror monster.

Mom had clung to life for another week of pain and misery. At last, with the dried blood caking her hair and fresh blood smeared on her face, she too, succumbed and died, wheezing and wild eyed.

He alone had survived the terrible disease unscathed. As far as he knew, he was the only person anywhere that hadn't gotten sick from what they called the Blue Flu.

Chad had dutifully helped Mom care for the sick while she could, whether they were next door or across the hall. He had spray-painted the red "X" on homes that had sick inside. He had later sprayed the black "X" on homes that had dead inside, just like the government advised.

He had helped bury the dead when the authorities wouldn't come because they were scared or sick themselves. He had helped bury the Johnsons. After Mom had gotten sick, Chad had been the only one left to care for their elderly neighbors, Doug and Emma Miller. He helped Mr. Miller bury Miss Emma. Chad was left alone then, to bury his family, one by one. He'd never even so much as sneezed.

Not once.

Guilt flooded over him. Why had he been left untouched? Why had he been spared the sickness, only to live through the mind-shattering sadness of watching his family die? He had wracked his brain for days, trying to think of some heinous act he had committed that would've offended God so mightily.

Now, looking out the open door toward the little mound of fresh snow far back in the yard, he wondered again why he wasn't there next to them. What did he do to deserve this fate? To see all those he cared for wither and die around him, without sharing in their suffering or even be able to comfort them? They all, in the end, had become angry with him. Everyone did—they were jealous of his health. All except Mom. She had been so happy to know he would live on, strong and healthy as ever.

Hell, he was even mad at himself, for not being able to cry. For not being able to feel.

Chad sighed as a snowflake tickled his nose. He shut the door and returned to the relative warmth of the empty house.

When people all over the world realized that the sickness was a real pandemic and not just another widely publicized scare, it was too late. All of the planning the government had done, all the fear it had been accused of starting

came to be justified in one little announcement.

It's real and it's here.

Not confined to faraway places like Indonesia, Hungary, Africa, or even Europe. It was in our cities, our malls, our schools, and churches. It was in our backyard.

And it was too late.

Mom had huddled with him by the fire, watching the newscasts grow less and less frequent as the media began getting sick. Anyone who came in contact with the sick, human or animal, took a great chance with their life. Some had chosen to come to work anyway and ended up paying dearly for their stubbornness.

Still, Chad could not cry. Mom had. She was terrified. His mother, the rock of his life, alone in the safety of their home, had cried for hours on Dad's shoulder at the waste of it all; the pain and suffering, the fear. When the phone rang that night and Betty Johnson had called to say her husband had died, Mom dried her own tears and fearlessly went to help. Chad had gone with her. That was Mom—her heart had always ruled her life.

Chad felt nothing. Empty. Alone. He walked to the heat register and tapped it again.

"I don't know why you bother, boy. You know just as well as I do, the propane man ain't been through here lately. We ain't getting any more."

Chad looked over his shoulder at the sick old man. Inside under the lights, his face was thin and gaunt, the skin stretched over his light frame. When the coughing seized him, his whole body shook. His eyes were runny with fever. Chad could smell death on his last friend in the world. He walked to the window and looked out through the snow to his family. The shovel was still lying next to the house. He sighed and figured he'd have to bury Mr. Miller in a few days. He glanced into his neighbor's yard and saw the little tombstone for Emma. He'd put Doug next to Emma. Miss Emma would like that.

A thought occurred to him that almost made his heart stop. His family would forever be incomplete. He wouldn't get the sickness; he knew it wouldn't hurt him.

“It’s a blessing son, a true blessing. A medical miracle!” the doctors had said, all smiles. He remembered them saying that at his annual check-up for school every summer.

He took off Dad’s hat and dropped it on the table. Snow started melting on the floor as he shrugged out of his jacket and outerwear. The temperature inside was only a bit warmer than outside, since he had run out of propane three days ago.

“You’ll catch your death too, young man, if you take that coat off,” said Mr. Miller in between coughing fits. He eased himself into a chair by the fireplace. “Aaaah,” he sighed. “I feel better already.” He was still bundled up from outside. Chad hoped the old man’s gnarled hands thawed out quickly in the heat of the naked flame.

Mr. Miller turned on the TV and listened to the latest casualty numbers. Hundreds of millions dead in Asia, and Africa. Close to 4 million in France and England alone. Estimates on fatalities were thrown about. No one really knew for sure, but most of the “experts” predicted the number of dead in America alone would top out eventually around 10 million. The big cities were graveyards on a Biblical scale.

Everything had been shut down—grocery stores, gas stations, even the local police and fire department—because there was no one left to work. Nearly everyone was sick and in bed or on the floor and the ones who weren’t, would never rise again.

It was the worst pandemic to hit mankind since the Black Death of the Middle Ages—it dwarfed even the infamous 1918 Spanish Flu. Chad thought for a second that maybe some long-distant ancestor of his had stood over a mass grave in London or Frankfurt or something, and watched the same way he had watched his little community die. The thought gave him some small comfort.

The government had labeled the blossoming pandemic a series of numbers and letters that Chad found he now couldn’t remember. Chad had to look it up online to figure out the disease sweeping the planet was an avian influenza. The press—what was left of them—were simply calling it The Blue Flu. Chad didn’t need to watch the news to know why—the dark blue of his little sister’s face had

been so unnatural, so unsettling, Chad knew straightaway he would never be able to forget the sight. They called it cyanosis. The word had been etched into Chad's memory overnight.

The two neighbors sat without a word as video images from deserted cities scrolled across the television screen. London, Madrid, New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Dallas, Frankfurt, Paris, Rome, Tokyo, Beijing. More and more bodies were seen in the major cities, just lying in the street where they fell, now bloated and stiff. Most cities had riots of one sort or another as the system broke down under the strain of so many deaths. All that was left was trash and empty cars or overturned buses and dead bodies. The violence and looting died off as soon as the people who started it began to die.

In Asia, where it had started, the survivors were only then beginning to crawl out from the unimaginable wreckage into the light. New estimates of close to a billion people dead between Europe and the Pacific Ocean were simply beyond comprehension.

It felt like it was the end of the world.

"Don't know when this damn bug'll ever burn itself out..." said Mr. Miller. He coughed, a wet, deep, pitiful sound. "I don't think I'll be around to see the rebuilding, though..."

Chad said nothing. What could he say? He knew he would be around, and it made his heart ache. If Mom had only been able to stay healthy for another couple weeks, maybe she would have made it.

He idly wondered if there were any other people out there like him. When the Blue Flu had finally spent its fury and went away...would he be the only person left alive?

"At least we don't have to live through that," the Old Man said, pointing a weak hand at the screen depicting rioting in Phoenix and Mexico City. People broke into retail stores and carried loot in all directions. The sickness was only now beginning to slither its way through the American Southwest from South America.

"Enjoy your TVs and sneakers, you lousy—" Mr. Miller sneezed again. "You won't live long enough to play with that shit you're stealing!"

“I’ll try to get us something to eat. You need your strength,” Chad said. He knew the worst for Mr. Miller was just around the corner. He had seen the sickness take its toll on too many people. He looked at the mostly empty pantry. When everything went bad, the truckers had stopped delivering food to the stores. Sometimes, the government just took the food. Where they took it, no one knew. Others stole it too, but when the government did it, it hurt more.

Soup. Again. That was all that was left. Chad hadn’t thought about what he’d do when his last dozen cans of various soups were gone. They had a little bread left, and some emergency foodstuffs left over from tornado season, but that was it. Chad paused, his hand still on the can of soup, half in, half out of the cupboard. They. He caught himself thinking that word again. Not ‘they’ anymore. No more family left. Just him.

THREE DAYS LATER, on a clear, frigid day, Chad buried Mr. Miller next to Miss Emma. As he climbed over the horse fence back into his own yard, Chad saw how deserted the neighborhood was. Every house save a half dozen or so, had either a red 'X' or a black 'X' on the front door. Chad could remember every single one he had sprayed.

Stu Masters, three streets up the road, had stopped by the day before and said he had heard from one of the other few haggard people left behind that the National Guard was going through the rural parts of the county looking for survivors, now that the sickness appeared to have peaked. And now, those left alive in their own neighborhood were planning on hooking up with the Guard and leaving. They were all running out of food and water and had nowhere else to turn. Many were out of propane, like Chad. Would he go too?

“Don’t know, sir,” Chad had said, scanning the empty streets and empty yards and empty houses beyond his own front door. The neighborhood had died.

“C’mon, son, you can’t stay here,” said Mr. Masters, rubbing his arms in the frigid morning air. His breath puffed around him in vapor clouds. “You’ll die, like the rest. There’s only a handful of us left.” He coughed.

A worried look passed the older man's face for a moment. He glanced around nervously. "Look, we're all leaving together. The government is coming to take us to Fort Worth, I hear."

"What will you do when you get there?" asked Chad, looking right through Dad's friend.

Die, most likely.

He kept that thought to himself.

"Does it matter? Look, my own kids died a few weeks back," Mr. Masters said, his face a mask of grief. Chad remembered. Stu's children were among the first to fall to the deadly sickness in their community. He and his wife had taken ill, yet hung on and survived, albeit weakened. "Nancy and I are going. So are the Lightways—and we're taking the Caleb boys, since their parents died. There's a few more people we're trying to reach at the other end of the neighborhood, but that's pretty much everyone who hasn't already died or left town. We're all leaving; Chad, son, you can't stay here by yourself."

"Why not?"

He sighed. "Chad, I know that look in your eyes. My dad told me about it when he came back from the First Gulf War. You've seen too much, buddy." Quietly, he said, "I know." He crossed his arms and looked at Chad with a fatherly gaze of disapproval. "You think your momma would be happy to see you sit here in the dark, all alone and starving to death?"

Chad didn't respond.

"Chad...you can't give up. Don't do that to your folks, son. They made you immune to this shit somehow. Don't waste that gift. Earn it. You've got to live, if not for you, then for them."

"I'm sorry," said Chad.

"Look..." said Mr. Masters. "We'll make sure to stop by on the way out before we leave. Okay? One last chance. Think about it." He clapped Chad on the shoulder awkwardly and turned away.

When the National Guard Humvee rolled to a stop in front of Chad's house with a charter bus right behind it, three days later, he was waiting at the end of the driveway with two bags. One of clothes, the other of all the memories of his

family, photos, albums, and scrapbooks. Mr. Masters helped Chad load his bags into the storage area on the bus, then they climbed aboard. It was half-empty.

They had just picked up the survivors from the next town down the road, Mr. Masters explained as Chad found a seat. The Caleb boys, Edgar and John, were crying about leaving their home and their parents behind. Nancy Masters cried at leaving her own babies in the ground. Almost all of the people on the bus had been sick but survived, barely. Three others apparently hadn't been exposed and wore masks and clean-suits.

Chad was the only one, the examining doctor explained, who she'd heard of who hadn't taken ill despite the above-average exposure to the sickness. She and her assistant were very excited to talk to Chad, but he ignored them and found a seat near Mr. Masters, next to a window.

"Hey doc, take it easy. He buried his mother a few days ago. The rest of his family last week," said Mr. Masters in a warning tone.

The doctor looked at her clipboard of information through her spacesuit-like outfit and relented. "I suppose there'll be plenty of time for questions when we get to the survivor processing facility in Fort Worth."

Chad watched as his house receded into the distance. He looked at the little mounds in the backyard with the crude tombstone. In his hands, Chad held a wrinkled picture of Mom, taken by the pool the previous summer, when all was right with the world, and pandemics were just for paranoid people.

She had her sunglasses pushed up on her head, her large blue eyes were smiling and her chestnut-colored hair pulled back, tumbling over one shoulder. The smile on her face as she looked at her husband's camera showed nothing but health and happiness. Chad suddenly felt the warmth of tears rolling down his face as he gently held the picture of Mom.

When he did cry, it was for her, and her alone.

CHAPTER TWO

BARRON

TEN YEARS LATER...

Washington, D.C.

The Naval Observatory

Office of the Vice President of the United States

“AND YOU’RE sure this is the only way?”

“If you want what we’re offering, yes,” said the cultured voice on the other end of the secure line.

The Vice President of the United States sighed. “Of course I want what you’re offering. But the price is...steep.” He tried once again to place the very slight accent of the voice. It almost sounded like New England, but had more of a neutral, Mid-Atlantic pronunciation of vowels.

“Nothing of value comes cheaply. You of all people should know that, Mr. Vice President. What have you sacrificed—what have you lost in order to attain the office you sit in at this very moment?”

A chill went down the Vice President’s spine as he listened to the voice on the phone. He barely resisted the urge to look around for a hidden camera. He

couldn't shake the feeling of someone standing just over his shoulder. He sighed again. "Let me think about it."

There was an uncomfortable pause on the other end. "Think fast. This offer will not last forever and my employers are very impatient people."

Arrogance started to rear its head inside the Vice President, shrouded cleverly in the form of political indignation. "Now you listen to me, Reginald. I am the Vice President of the—"

"You have 24 hours to decide, Mr. Vice President," the calm, confident, almost smug voice said. "The President is setting himself up to fall this very week. Our plans must move forward. It would be positively shameful to let this opportunity pass."

"I, uh, I never really agreed to this..." the Vice President said weakly. He looked at his desk calendar. Monday. Why must bad news always come on a Monday? The President was a close friend of his. Their wives played tennis together every weekend.

"I understand your reluctance, Mr. Vice President. Honestly, I do. But you must remember we have other options..."

"But—wait just a minute," the Vice President said, painfully aware that fear had crept into his voice. "We agreed you'd leave my family out of this!"

"That was before you decided to change the terms of our agreement. Do you, or do you not have the—how do I say it? Ah, yes, the testicular fortitude—to continue? Answer the question and roll the dice, Harry."

The line went dead with a soft beep.

"Dammit!" he growled and slammed the secure-link cell phone down on the wide executive desk. The polished glossy surface of the desk occupied most of his austere office at the Naval Observatory. He leaned back in the plush leather chair and steepled his fingers, lost in thought. It was hard to focus.

The proposition put forward by the man he knew only as "Reginald"—and the Vice President had serious doubts that was the young man's real name—was as sweeping and terrifying as it was tempting.

He drummed his manicured fingers on the desk that had been used for close to 50 years by his predecessors. It was not nearly as nice nor as famous as its

bigger, older, more prestigious cousin in the Oval Office. He frowned. That was a fact he regretted every time he sat down to work. But then again, he was the Vice President.

Harold James Barron, Esquire, had spent his entire adult life gaining entrance and ingratiating himself into the tattered American political landscape. He had clawed his way in as an outsider during the heady days of his youth when big government had stretched itself too far and rode the coattails of the progressive movement into office. First at the state level, then the national. At 38, he was the second youngest Vice President to serve the office and was all set to get the nod to be President after faithfully serving as the understudy.

After all, the President had been pretty popular in the first few years of the first term. He had been swept into office on promises that most people knew he couldn't keep, but they had liked him anyway. The electorate had given him and his dashing young running mate a chance to reform the out-of-control government the current generation of voters had inherited.

Then the reality of Washington politics had set in. The lobbyists arrived, toting bags of money, promises, loans, cars, vacations, plane trips, anything and everything they could get their hands onto bribe the new powers-that-be to lean one way or the other on certain issues. The good-ol'-boy network of incumbency began to entwine with the new-blood administration and suddenly, all those aspirations and promises seemed like just so many words. But still he had held out—he had been the shining beacon of hope and reform the people had so desperately wanted.

It had taken two whole years for him to fall from his lofty ideals into the mire and filth that was the status-quo of national politics. Part of him would forever be ashamed of that fact. The other part reveled in the perks while trying to remain proud that he had lasted as long as he had.

One night on the campaign trail, at a grassroots fundraiser to show support for the little people who still believed they could help elect him, he'd been approached by a young woman straight out of a lingerie catalog. She had been drop-dead gorgeous with amazingly blue eyes and hair of liquid gold. She had that nubile, innocent co-ed look about her that hinted she was fresh out of

college.

This alluring girl had been flashing her eyes at just the right moment and leaning over just when he happened to glance her way so he could see heaven itself down her shirt. She had flirted so hard, he felt like a college kid again himself. Just when he'd started to become nervous a reporter might get an improper photo for the next gaffe, he'd blacked out.

He awoke in his hotel room the next day and found her naked and tangled in the sheets on the floor, snuggled warmly against his side. He slowly reached out and touched her perfectly smooth, unblemished, creamy skin.

She proved just as beautiful and willing as he'd quasi-remembered from the night before. He soon discovered she was even more talented in the bedroom than she had been at snagging his attention at the fundraiser. His heart raced every time he remembered what she'd begged him to do to her and what she did to him. But, every fiber of his being knew it was wrong.

Harold Barron loved his wife, Alice, dearly. After all, she was the beloved mother of his children, the constant campaign companion, and his rock of stability at the end of a day shaking hands and kissing babies. His graceful, regal Alice had been the debutante queen when they'd met and fallen in love so many years before. They had survived The Great Pandemic together and the destruction of her family. They had been woven together by fate and love. And not once had he ever so much as wondered about another woman in all the years they had been married. He was happy and his star was rising. Why ruin a good thing?

He had been on the road campaigning alone for his running mate, Senator Denton, who would be elected president a few months later. He had missed his eldest son's birthday for that little campaign stop where he first broke his sacred vows of matrimony. It was an eternal source of shame for his soul that he feared he would never fully erase. And he tried very hard every day to bury that stain and forget it.

His wife would never know what that wonderfully flexible girl had promised him in a husky voice, if he would only do a few things for her employers after he was elected to office. He still remembered laughing at the sexy co-ed while he

tried to avoid her grasp. Their team was 27 points behind in the polls, he had told her. The Democratic Party hadn't been popular then. There was no way they'd win the election, so blackmail would never work.

Yet nevertheless, he'd slept with that beautiful, beguiling woman. When the press found out, he knew he'd be finished, along with the ticket's chance at victory. It would be the final scandal. He began to resign himself to his fate when a thought occurred to him, cast out from his subconscious like a life preserver on an angry ocean. His one chance at salvation.

He had been drugged. *That's it! Drugged!* She merely smiled and *mmmm-hmmmed* in response as she crept closer like a tiger stalking its prey, her cobalt blue eyes never leaving his, her blonde hair cascading down around her bare, smooth shoulders like a river of golden sunlight. What they were doing, did, going to do—it was all wrong, he had cried out. He had pleaded with her to stop—not really, because what she did had felt so good—but he had at least *tried* to get her to stop. He could still tell himself he had put up a valiant defense, but she was just...

His breath came faster as he leaned forward onto his polished desk and remembered that distant morning. He could still picture it like it had happened just hours ago. The way she'd smiled at him with those half-closed brilliant blue eyes. He remembered those full, pouting lips as she'd slowly, seductively crawled to him across their rumpled bed. The gentle sway of her bare, snow-white breasts as she crawled to him had taken his breath away. The smell of her flowery perfume wafting on the air currents from the bed to his nose mixed with the tangy smell of their lovemaking the night before, nearly driving him wild with renewed lust.

He shuddered, eyes closed. She had been perfect. Perfect in every way. The perfect, pliable, willing sex slave, and she'd loved every second of it and begged for more. She was there whenever he needed her: for release, just for fun, or to relieve the boredom of office. Once—he grinned at the memory—he had just wanted to look at her naked body by firelight while he drank himself into oblivion.

She had—and he was sure the mysterious Reginald had been involved—

somehow found a way to get a job in his very house, on his personal staff. Right under the nose of his wife and the Secret Service who were always underfoot. And no one was the wiser.

Jayne Renolds. Her name was seared in his soul. His greatest passion, his greatest disgrace.

The Vice President's fingers slowly inched toward the phone to call her into his office. Something stopped him. A blurry thought, a warning from deep inside the increasingly small part of his mind that was still revolted by her touch.

She was the one who'd started this whole mess that now threatened to swallow his family and his career, his legacy, and even the country in an atrocious scandal. She'd somehow managed, through her shadowy "employer," to overcome a 27-point deficit at the polls, several costly gaffes by both himself and his running mate at the last minute, and still get them into the White House. He was sure something underhanded had taken place for everything to have worked out the way it did, but there was never even a whiff of it from the media. The Democrats' victory had been declared a model for future underdogs. 'Never believe the polls' became the mantra of the President-elect.

True to his word, Vice President Barron had voted in favor of Jayne's employer's wishes on a few minor issues when certain funding bills were deadlocked in the Senate. He had laughed his way to the podium on those votes.

At the time, he'd thought that Jayne had attempted to blackmail him over some useless appropriation bills for farm subsidies. The opposition in the House had been stiff—both Democrats and Republicans had balked at signing off on the bills because of some claims of illegal funneling of money to black-ops programs involved with the NSA, CIA, or some other alphabet-soup agency. Harold Barron could not have cared less. The bills were harmless as far as he knew, and voting the way Jayne told him kept her between his sheets and his secret safe. It was a win-win situation.

And his sweet Jayne had kept her word the last few years; she'd never told a soul of his dalliance with her, never threatened again, and was always ready to wrap her legs around him and purr like a kitten.

Now he smiled, thinking of her swaying hips as she'd walked away from him

earlier that morning, adjusting her blouse with a sly smile after his hand went free-range roaming. He'd been on a routine arms-reduction call with his counterpart in Russia, mostly listening to scientists read numbers over the line.

He suddenly frowned. She'd put him in contact with "Reginald," the voice on the odd phone calls he'd been receiving over the past few years. His head felt thick, like he was in a dense fog. He tried to remember. At first, the calls had been rather innocuous. The well-mannered young man on the other end had explained that he represented Jayne's employers, and he was merely checking up on their "investment." Over time, it became obvious that her employers really wanted him helping them from within the Oval Office someday. They wanted a pet president.

Reginald had called every few months, checking up on the newly elected Vice President, asking after his needs or wants, ensuring that Jayne had been keeping him well satisfied, always asking after his wife and children. It had been very cloak-and-dagger in the beginning, but then after the two farm bills had been passed—thanks to the tie-breaking vote by the President of the Senate, namely, Harold Barron—the phone calls had become more of an annoyance. Reginald had been satisfied and had not asked for any other favors. He'd just wanted to talk, it seemed, about nothing and then again, everything. Endless, time-consuming, random conversations that Harold had felt compelled somehow to sit through. Of course, Jayne's persuasion hadn't hurt...

Apparently, as far as the debt owed for getting elected was concerned, Harold was free and clear. He got to "keep" Jayne as a perk of office. And what a perk she was. Harold sighed contentedly. The woman was insatiable.

That had all changed this past year, though. He frowned again, his mind coming up for air in a fog of images and memories of Jayne. He found it increasingly hard to concentrate on anything else anymore. Reginald constantly floated ideas to him. Numerous "what-if" scenarios were presented to him during their phone conversations, many of which seemed strange at the time, only to be forgotten. Weeks later, when he was doing something completely unrelated, those ideas would flash through his mind unbidden, like shooting stars. It was as if Reginald had planted them in his mind and sat back to wait for

the seeds of thought to germinate.

Lately, he'd been thinking more and more about those innocent little conversations he'd been having with Reginald. What if, indeed...

Something in his core told him to be careful, that he was treading a dangerous line. He just couldn't put his finger on what was so dangerous.

Then, finally, the full-court press. Jayne had seduced him every single chance she could get him alone during the past month. He'd been so physically drained lately that he could hardly think straight. That was when Reginald's ideas finally started to make sense. That was when Harold started to get scared.

And now, he realized, he was in checkmate. To renounce Jayne and sever his ties to Reginald would be...unthinkable. Leaving aside the fact that she would expose all their dirty laundry to the press, ruin his career and family, she would take her sweet, sweet body away from him forever.

He could lose power, he could almost bring himself to believe he could lose his family, for he felt confident they would forgive him in time. But he could not, would not, deprive himself of the joy Jayne brought to his physical being.

But to agree to Reginald's plan, to follow through...would...would be...what? Treason was too light a word. He would replace Benedict Arnold as the most infamous American turncoat. The people would see him hang, or they would tear apart D.C. looking for him.

Although, a little voice nagged within him, if it worked...and if things happened as Reginald predicted...then I would only be a temporary traitor. When the people realized what his swift, courageous actions meant, how he'd almost single-handedly saved the country from ruin...He would be hailed as the next George Washington. The people would clamor for him to lead them to a brighter, more prosperous future, he was sure of it. The allure that ambitious future held was almost palpable.

And wasn't he grooming himself to be president anyway? That's what the party bosses had been pumping in his ear the past four years. *Just help the President get re-elected and play it safe in the second term*, they said. *We'll make you the next president*, they said. *Trust us*, they said.

He got up and walked over to the side table, under a portrait of a frowning

John C. Breckenridge, youngest man ever to be elected to the Vice Presidency. A dour-looking 36 year old, if ever there was one. Harold poured a scotch on the rocks and sipped the single-malt slowly, while he considered the sour-faced 19th-century politician.

President Barron. He rather liked the sound of that. Yes indeed, he liked the sound of that a great deal. Feeling a familiar warmth in the pit of his stomach, he smiled and walked over to the phone on his desk, typed in a certain code and sat on the edge of the desk to wait. He sipped his drink and thought of the future and what promise it held. There would be a lot of suffering at first, but in the end, the future would be...glorious. He'd made his decision. He toasted the portrait of frowning Breckenridge.

"Alea jacta est, brother," he said, glass held high.

As he finished his drink, the door to his office opened and Jayne Renolds flowed into the room like a force of nature. "I got your call, sir," she announced formally with a wry smile. She turned and locked the door behind her, casting a coy glance over her shoulder. His eyes drank in her body. Her eyes locked on his as she removed her glasses and unfastened the bun on the back of her head, letting the sunshine she held back there tumble down to her shoulders and beyond.

"You look like you've come to a decision, Mr. Vice President."

Harold grinned at her sultry voice. "Why yes, yes I have." He cleared his throat and tried to strike a regal pose on the corner of his desk. He adjusted his tie rakishly. He was young, athletic, in the best shape of his life. He puffed his chest out. "Does that please you?"

"Very much so," she purred as she unbuttoned her tight blouse and revealed her own majestic chest to him. She paused to let him admire and then took two graceful, hip-swaying, heart-racing steps closer. He could smell her familiar perfume and felt that intoxicated feeling thunder over him again. Being around her was such a rush. He couldn't explain it and didn't care at the moment why he always felt this way around her. She let herself be swooped up in his arms with a tiny squeal and nibbled on his ear.

As his hands found purchase on her warm, bare skin, she whispered

breathlessly, “Now it’s my turn to please you...*Mr. President.*”

Vice President of the United States Harold Barron shed the last of his doubts along with his pants and gave into inevitability. Yes, he decided as she wrapped herself around him, he’d made the right decision. After all, it was for the good of the country...

CHAPTER THREE

DENNY

SALMON FALLS, IDAHO

DENOYAN TECUMSEH PULLED his flat gray 1996 Ford 150 4x4 into the driveway of his small ranch house and parked the old truck. It had close to 200,000 miles on it, but was in pretty good shape despite its age. He turned the key and sat patiently as the engine fell silent. Denny got out of the cab and grabbed his worn messenger bag that served as a briefcase of sorts and strolled to his front porch.

Standing there at his front door, he admired the darkness in which his world had been enveloped with the setting of the sun. It was only the end of September and he could smell the cold wind of winter just around the corner. The warmth of the summer sun had faded fast this year. He savored the sounds of the newborn evening, the insects frantically singing their eternal love songs, and the birds settling in for the night in their communal roosts among the lofty pines that lined the mountain town's streets.

He took a deep, long, calming breath of cool autumn air, held it, then released and felt calm for the first time that day. He relished the tangy smell of someone in the subdivision burning wood in a fireplace. Denny glanced up the street from his house at the end of the cul-de-sac. No lights glowed in windows. He sighed. Another quiet night.

It'd been the same every night since the year of the H5N1. The Bird Flu, the Bloody Flu, the Brisbane Flu—it had been given many names, but the biological nightmare that had toppled the 1918 Spanish Flu from the top of the “most killed” record was known officially as The Great Pandemic.

He snorted in derision, exhaling a small puff of vapor into the chilly evening air. The Great Pandemic. There had been nothing *great* about it—other than the staggering number of its victims. In his mind, it would always be the Blue Flu, the disease that starved its victims of oxygen.

Denny looked around the gloomy cul-de-sac. Most everyone in his neighborhood had been affected by the Blue Flu when it swept through town like an avenging angel a decade ago. For such a small, isolated town, Salmon Falls, Idaho had been hit especially hard. Entire families had been wiped out of the hundred-house subdivision. On his street alone, about two-thirds of the houses had lost at least one or two people in those first few terrifying weeks. The survivors lingered on and eventually moved away to start over or join what little family they had left elsewhere in the country.

Eventually, the banks that had survived the flu-triggered global economic catastrophe had reclaimed most of the neighborhood. But there weren't enough people willing to buy in a ghost town, so the neighborhood had sat empty, year after year.

Then the Mormons came.

An entire ward's worth of survivors had moved up from Utah over the course of a year and put down roots in Salmon Falls. They bought up a whole block of houses down the first cross-street from Denny's place. The house next to his had been bought just two years ago by John and Ruth Anderton, an older couple with grown children of their own.

Denny welcomed more people on his street. Nearly every house was still for sale, except his and his neighbor's. The rest stood empty and neglected, silent witnesses to the wrath of H5N1.

He sighed and put the key in his front door, chiding himself for thinking of his neighbors solely in terms of their religion. They were quiet, kept to themselves, and were decent people. They genuinely cared for him and even

tried to set him up with a few women from their congregation. He smiled and shook his head at the thought of the last date. The poor woman must have been thinking she was sitting across from *Geronimo*, by the way she reacted to his appearance.

He flipped on the hall light switch and caught his reflection in the small mirror there. He was handsome enough, he thought. At 43, he still held the strength of youth and was starting to gain the wisdom of age. As far as he was concerned, it was the best of both worlds. He was trim, inheriting a naturally high metabolism from his ancestors. He also had the high cheekbones of his people, glossy-black shoulder-length hair that he kept in a ponytail to comply with the dress code of Salmon Falls High School. The brown eyes that looked back at him from the mirror were so dark, they looked like coal. His skin was a copper-tan that during the summer drew looks of envy from most Anglos he met.

He rubbed the smooth skin of his strong chin and grinned. He'd never shaved in his life and didn't miss having facial hair. His colleagues at school mostly wore goatees or beards and were forever scratching at the hair on their neck, or complaining about how their wives nagged them to keep it trimmed.

He dropped the keys next to his mail into Emily's little ceramic bowl on the side table in the hall and headed into the living room. He was a creature of habit and after a long day at school, he needed to unwind. He flopped into the Lazyboy recliner that had been Emily's favorite spot to relax. Denny swore he could smell her soft, sweet fragrance, even after all these years. He looked to the mantel and saw their wedding picture in a silver frame. The dark-skinned Shawnee and the snow-white Anglo with flame-red hair.

He grinned, thinking about how Grandfather had reacted when he'd announced his marriage to an Anglo. The old man had nearly had a coronary, carrying on about how Denny, scion of the house of the blessed Tecumseh himself, could *not* mix his blood with a mere *Anglo* woman. It would be blasphemy! But then, he had not yet met Emily.

Denny closed his eyes and smiled, remembering the sunny day when Emily stepped into Grandfather's house in Oklahoma, on the "Reservation" as the old folks often called it. Red Eagle was stiffly polite at first, but when he realized

that Emily was a Native American historian and part Cherokee herself—granted, a very, very *small* part—it was like she was already part of the family. When she started a conversation in Red Eagle’s native Shawnee tongue, Denny thought Grandfather would try to marry Emily himself. Grandfather had become fiercely protective of Emily and for the rest of his life, if anyone mentioned anything against Emily, they had to deal with old Red Eagle himself.

Denny let his eyes wander over to the portrait of his wife on the wall next to the fireplace. They’d come together over his ancestry. She’d been attracted by his looks and lineage. Outside of her passion for Native American history and culture, they’d been complete opposites in everything in life.

He smiled again, remembering his wife. She had been Lutheran; he was a not-uncommon blend of Christian and tribal custom. He was just as apt to mumble a prayer to Jesus as he was to listen to the wind or patiently wait for a grove of pines to give him a message from *Mishe Moneto*, the Great Spirit. She liked to travel to the big cities like Chicago, New York, or Dallas, and dreamed of visiting London and Paris. He, on the other hand, would have liked nothing more than to grab a sleeping bag and head out under the stars and commune by the fire with *Kokumthena*, his people’s mythical Grandmother.

Emily had not really liked and indeed, preferred to avoid most things to do with the outdoors. Denny loved every second he could spend hunting, camping, fishing, or hiking. His family, for generations, had grown up deep in the plains of Oklahoma on land they owned but still referred to as The Reservation. The tribe had been cut off from the forests and hills and streams of their past for over 150 years. As a hotheaded youth, Denny had sworn to old Red Eagle that one day he would lead his people back to the land of their ancestors, where they belonged, away from the dry, dead flatland of their communal imprisonment.

Grandfather Red Eagle had smiled and placed his bronzed, wrinkled hand on Denny’s shoulder. His face had been genially crinkled with mirth and age. Grandfather never spoke at length—as was proper for the clan chief—for he listened much. In that way, Red Eagle had earned the respect of his people. But that day, he had told a very young Denny that he believed him and would ask *Mishe Moneto* to send him assistance on his quest. He had said the ancestors

would be proud.

Denny shook his head to clear such morose thoughts from his mind. He turned on the TV and reluctantly got out of his chair to get some well-earned dinner. A local news channel came on, the three anchors chatting about the weekend's upcoming football games.

He smiled, thinking of how his students had been bragging about taking on the neighboring team after school on Friday. Two days, they'd told him, two days and they would break their best record for a season wide open.

He chuckled as he put a sandwich together with cold cuts and grabbed a beer from the fridge. Here it was only 4 weeks into the season and the team was pumped up about going to 3-1 on the year like they were already state champs.

"...reports from Idaho State Health officials seem to indicate a higher-than-normal number of influenza cases this year. That does not bode well for the coming winter, warns the doctor in charge of..." The report floated into the kitchen as he took the first bite of his roast beef and Swiss sandwich.

Denny froze, mid-chew. *The flu*. Every year, like clockwork, the seasonal disease came to harass and claim a few souls from humanity's diminished stock. The Blue Flu, that modern Black Death, had wiped out hundreds of millions of people worldwide ten years ago; now every time he heard *the flu*, it made him anxious.

The flu had been what the authorities had naively called the global pandemic—before it became known as the avian flu, or the bird flu...before it was called the Brisbane Flu or the Blue Flu, or simply *The Pandemic*. After the dust had settled and the final body count tallied, the little bug had been re-named *The Great Pandemic*. He listened to the pretty reporter for any indication that there were fatalities involved.

"...claim, however, there are only a handful of deaths related to this season's flu; healthcare professionals are cautiously optimistic that while we may see higher infection rates, this year may actually be less deadly to the elderly and very young."

He closed his eyes in relief and said a silent prayer of thanks heavenward, not really caring who was there to hear it, as long as Someone was. Denny

finished his bite and, with a newfound appetite, attacked the rest of the sandwich and beer.

“...conflicts with the unusually high number of cases reported in Los Angeles and San Francisco...”

Denny paused, hand on the faucet, empty plate in the sink. He turned slowly to face the doorway to the kitchen, where the darkened living room flickered with the glow from the TV.

“The CDC earlier today confirmed that New York City is also experiencing a spike in flu cases; however, due to the comparatively mild flu season the Northeast had last year, those numbers at least, are not out of the ordinary.”

“What about Los Angeles and San Francisco? How bad is it?” asked Denny to the unhearing TV as he walked into the living room, the dishes in the sink completely forgotten. He stood in front of the flickering screen, hands dripping water onto the carpet, the rest of his evening also forgotten. His attention was held tightly by the dramatic graphic on the screen, showing tiny red dots scattered across California and Oregon with the title “Flu Cases since Sept 1.”

There were an awful lot of red dots along the coast.

“Nationwide, however, cases are still below last year, and while the Centers for Disease Control admits they are watching closely, we’ve been assured there is nothing to worry about yet,” said the male anchor with a grim but reassuring face.

“Turning to a happier topic, at least for some, is the weather. Right, Todd?” asked the pretty co-anchor with a smile, looking grateful to be moving onto other topics.

“Well, don’t blame me for the snow that’s coming, I’m just the messenger, remember?” said the short meteorologist, to the canned laughter of his co-anchors. “We’ve got a pretty significant early season clipper system moving south out of Canada in the next few days,” he said, stepping in front of a map of the region. He pointed with one hand toward the Canadian border.

“While the brunt of the snow should fall in Montana and Wyoming, Idaho will see at least a few inches of the white stuff, especially in higher elevations. It’s a pretty big storm, folks. For those of you not ready for summer to end, just

be thankful you're not on the other side of the Rockies!"

Denny switched to a 24-hour news channel in disgust. Unfortunately, they were fixated on the upcoming election and how President Denton enjoyed a slight lead over his challenger. Denny could care less about politics. He tried to calm himself. "Unexpected," and "high numbers of cases" made him very wary. Memories of his personal hell during the height of the Blue Flu crisis washed through his mind unbidden, despite his best efforts to block them.

He could see Emily, happily going about her housework on a snowy winter's day and he struggled to keep the memory repressed. It was the last time he saw his young bride healthy and happy. He closed his eyes and put a hand to his face, slowly sinking to his knees. The memories would not stop tormenting him: Emily leaning on a chair, coughing, her lungs filling with fluid. He remembered her in a hospital bed, a mere hollow husk of her beautiful former self, the skin of her hands and face so blue it was almost black. The tubes and plastic drip-lines snaking from her body had merely enhanced the macabre scene.

He stifled a sob, growling at himself to stop. Then he remembered her as he last saw her, in the casket dressed in her Sunday best, hands folded calmly on her withered chest. Then he saw things from his perspective, coughing into a handkerchief in front of his neighbors and running out of the room in terror. He remembered lying in bed while Sally Michaels, his neighbor, tried to lower his fever. Denny woke in a hospital a week later to a nurse with a bio-hazard suit on explaining the world as he knew it was gone. His wife, his friends, his neighbors, everyone died or moved away trying to escape the wrath of God.

He opened his eyes and looked up in surprise at the fathomless heavens above him. Denny had no memory of walking outside, but the sight of the Milky Way—a giant, undulating river of stars flowing serenely across the sky—calmed his wounded spirit and chased away the painful memories. Stars too numerous to count glittered like so many diamonds scattered across black velvet. He felt calm returning to his frayed nerves, memories of the Blue Flu quickly fading as he inhaled the sweet scent of a fireplace in the distance. The light breeze cooled his warm skin. Somewhere up there, he was sure, Emily was looking down on him and smiling.

At that moment, Denny had the distinct impression that Grandfather was looking at him too, only frowning. Denny squinted his eyes at the silent sentinels of the sky. He looked around himself, standing in his front yard and blinked like an owl in the noon-day sun.

“How the hell did I get out *here*?” he asked himself.

“*Little Spear...*”

Denny spun around expecting to see Grandfather there with a smile. That was what Grandfather had called him in his youth, a name he cherished. There was no one there. He turned around in a slow circle, eyes and ears straining in the dark to detect anyone.

“Hello?” he asked. A wave of foolishness swept over him. Grandfather had died years ago, shortly after he and Emily had married. He was at peace and had never known the terror of the Blue Flu. A thought scratched the back of his mind with persistence: *I heard him*.

A gust of wind tickled the pine trees that separated his house from the Andertons’. He closed his eyes and opened his soul to listen, the way Grandfather had taught him. He presented himself not just to the breeze making a gentle exhale through the pines, but to Grandfather. The old man was speaking through the trees, Denny was sure of it, yet he would never know how to explain it.

“What is it, Grandfather?” Denny asked in his people’s native tongue. He waited for an answer but heard only the breeze. “Grandfather, I’m listening...” he mumbled, feeling himself slip easily into the trance Red Eagle had taught him in his youth. It helped to focus the mind and hear what needed to be heard. He waited and waited, until he thought he must surely be going crazy. Just as he was about to open his eyes, he heard it again.

“*Run...*”

Denny’s eyes snapped open and he dropped onto a crouch, spinning around looking for a threat. He looked farther up the street. *Still* nothing. No movement, no cars, no lights.

No lights.

He realized the Andertons should have been home by now—especially Ruth.

She rarely left their house, yet their home was dark. Denny trotted across the drive and through the shared side lawn to their front porch. They had a small ranch house; a three-bedroom model, just like he did. Enough for their meager possessions and enough space for the children to visit. They needed little else.

As Denny grabbed the railing for the little set of stairs to the front porch, he remembered how John had come over to his house about a year ago and asked for help with a very special project. Red Eagle had long ago drilled into Denny's head that Shawnee should always help and support neighbors, for in doing so they helped themselves and would honor *Mishe Moneto*. Denny had readily agreed. It was only after John had placed the roll of blueprints on his kitchen table that Denny started to understand the scope of the project.

John had been excavating under his house, adjacent to his already well-stocked basement. Denny had whistled at the impressive layout: three sleeping quarters, a self-contained bathroom, a separate shower, space for a year's worth of food and water. Water collection cisterns with pipes that led up to the surface, radio gear, the works. Then he noticed the thick concrete walls.

"Is this a fallout shelter?"

"Well," John had laughed, "it's hard for my generation to forget old habits." He explained a few of the special features he'd designed into the shelter and smiled when Denny expressed how impressed he was with the whole idea. "Naturally, if you'll help me, we'll have space in there for you as well, if something happens," John offered easily.

Truth be told, Denny would have done it for the experience, if nothing else. He had grown up in Oklahoma, in an area of the country where basements were just not practical. After the Blue Flu, there had been some part of him that was determined to be better prepared for the next catastrophe, but he just had no idea how to do so. It'd taken him months to get to the point where he even *wanted* to survive the next disaster.

Denny had always been firmly rooted in the outdoors. If something happened again, he would head for the mountains, leave civilization and return to his heritage. The Andertons had the opposite idea: they would bury themselves in the ground with food, water, supplies and stay locked away like *skutelawe*, the

turtle, hiding in his shell until the danger passed.

Now, as Denny peered in the darkened windows of the Andertons' home, he saw nothing but blackness. He knocked on the door, tried the doorbell. No response. He glanced at his watch. 6:30 p.m. He suddenly felt very foolish. They were likely just in town for dinner. He took a deep breath to calm down and then walked back to his house, chuckling at himself.

When he stepped onto his own front porch again, he could hear the phone ringing inside. He ran to the kitchen and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Good grief, Denny, when are you going to get an answering machine?"

"Sorry, Phyllis," he said to the school's administrative assistant.

"Oh, it's okay," the older woman sighed. "You're the last on my list to call anyway."

"What's up?" he asked as he reached for the remote to mute the TV.

"Bob is closing school for tomorrow."

"Why?" Denny said, finally reaching the remote. The TV went silent, displaying a picture of the President and a graphic of his planned campaign stops in California.

"Where have you been, Denny? At least a third of the students are out sick."

"Well, there were a *few* in my classes that were absent today, but I hardly noticed a *third* of the students gone..." he said absently, trying to puzzle out why the President's campaign stops were sticking in his mind.

"Okay, so maybe it wasn't a third *today*, but the sophomore class just got back from their field trip to Sacramento on Monday and half of *them* won't be in school tomorrow. I've talked to the parents calling in—they all claim it's a stomach bug or the flu. Lot of them are starting to get scared. We haven't had this many people come down with something since..." Her voice trailed off.

Two little words. *The flu*.

His conscious mind, if blissfully unaware of the other factors swirling about his head, would've merely nodded and been excited to go fishing the next day. But there were too many factors for his subconscious to ignore.

Denny's pulse quickened and he felt his hands go clammy. He gripped the

phone tight, muscles tensing for activity: fight or flight. “Y-you...” He cleared his throat; then, more confident sounding, said, “You said, the *flu*?”

“Yeah,” exhaled Phyllis in a tired sigh. “Bob’s just nervous about it spreading. He’d rather we lose a few snow days than have it passing around the entire student body again like last year...Between you and me,” she lowered her voice conspiratorially, “I think it’s just ‘cause he doesn’t want the football team getting sick. Gotta beat that record on Friday night, right?” she half-chuckled, half-cackled in the way of old women.

“But honestly, I can’t say I don’t have a touch of it myself, you know?” She coughed quietly off to the side. “Back of my throat’s been ticklin’ me since yesterday.” Phyllis loudly cleared her throat.

“Anyway, I just wanted to let you know we’re out tomorrow. Go have fun fishing, will ya?” she said. He could almost see the smile on her face. Phyllis had always liked him.

“Thanks, Phyll,” he muttered.

“You betcha! Okay then, bye-bye, now.”

Denny slowly hung up the receiver and stared at the blank wall for a few moments, processing his fears and trying to rationalize everything.

“*Run...*” echoed through his mind, in Grandfather’s voice.

He looked out the kitchen window at the Andertons’ place. Still no lights on. “Okay, okay, *enough*,” he told himself, hands firmly planted on either side of the sink. “Get it together, Denoyan!” He tried mightily to tamp down the fear that was bubbling up inside him.

He glanced at the mantel over the fireplace in his living room. The picture of his grandfather decked out in the full council outfit, complete with headdress, seemed to watch him. His wedding photo was there next to the chief, reminding him of all that he had—and lost—because of the Blue Flu. The old man seemed to defy him to do better this time around.

“There is no *this time*, Grandfather. It’s *not* the Blue Flu.” He walked through the room, heading for the basement door. He turned back to the mantel. “It’s *not*. Besides, you weren’t even there to see what happened. You never saw—*Christ*,” he said shaking his head. “I’m talking to pictures, now.”

Try as he might, he couldn't shake the growing feeling that Grandfather was right. Sighing, he resolved to go dig out his hunting gear and get everything in order. *Just in case*. He hoped going through the motions of preparing would at least calm his jitters enough to let him get some sleep. He was trying to convince himself that tomorrow he would wake up, watch the news and all this nonsense would make him laugh. Maybe he'd take John out to the river to fish.

He turned on the light in the basement and started digging through the plastic totes that held all his camping and hunting gear during the off-season. He realized he would've done this in a few weeks, anyway, for the start of deer season. He looked around behind him, trying to shake the feeling that someone was watching him. *Again*.

"I need to get out more..." he muttered as he carried a few of the plastic bins back upstairs.

CHAPTER FOUR

BRENDA

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

BRENDA ALSTON SAT in her old clunker of a car, barely edging forward along the parking lot the locals called I-10. She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel and checked the rearview mirror for the thousandth time. She *hated* the first day of work. No matter the work, be it the summer job she got in high school as a lifeguard, or the first day of boot camp, the first day of *any* occupation she had ever attempted *always* sucked. It was a curse. She was sure of it.

This time would be no different: new hospital, new staff, new doctors to learn, new boss, new *everything*. Not to mention it was her first civilian job since college. She went through her mental checklist once more: find the supply room, get scrubs, nametag, pens, notepads, phone numbers, beeper numbers...the list seemed endless.

The DJ on the radio made some lame joke about morning commutes on Fridays and launched into a predictable TGIF monologue. She tuned the radio to another station, hoping that it actually played music.

“...my dog tooooooooo,” crooned a singer with a pronounced drawl. Country was not her first choice, but it was music and it took her mind off sitting in traffic. She looked up at the sign that proclaimed she was on the Santa Monica

Freeway.

I could walk faster than this. Brenda checked the dashboard clock again and prayed that she wouldn't be late on her first day.

The next song came on, something about jilted love under a pine tree in the rain, in Georgia. She rolled her eyes and decided she'd had enough. "Okay, I'm going to change this one more time and stick with whatever comes on." Better to listen to garbage than rear-end someone on the way to her first day at work.

She clicked the radio and went back to drumming her fingers on the steering wheel and trying not to check the rearview mirror *again*. Instead of the pop rock she was expecting, she heard the hourly news blurb.

"...dozen thankfully mild cases of the deadly H5N1 flu virus have been confirmed in the Chicago area. Stringent quarantine procedures, created after The Great Pandemic, have been put in place and the CDC is monitoring the situation carefully. Dr. Paul Kreen, virologist with Loyola University Medical Center, says last week alone, 21 patients tested positive for Influenza A. Thankfully, all but one of those cases were the pre-Pandemic H1N1 swine flu variant..."

Brenda turned up the volume a little. The reporter continued the story, "Dr. Kreen cautions, however, that many people may have developed a false sense of security over the last couple of flu seasons, which were comparatively mild."

The doctor's voice then replaced the reporter's melodramatic tone, "We honestly don't know why it's emerging right now, but the fact that it is unusual and has caught the attention of the Centers for Disease Control is—I believe—significant."

She only half-listened to the rest of the news snippet, dealing with the usual CDC caveat to get the annual flu shot. When the reporter began to talk about what to do to prevent the spread of illness as the peak flu season approached, she felt her heart rate quicken. Her hands gripped the faux-leather-wrapped steering wheel in a white-knuckled embrace. Memories of ten years ago flashed across her mind like lightning.

The sickness, the death—the senselessness of it all. Dad dying, her cousins, and her neighbors dying. Mom sick and then her brother sick, then getting sick

herself. The pain—her shoulders twitched with the memory of that searing pain in her bones that had left her bedridden for a week.

Months later, after she'd fully recovered from the Blue Flu, she'd joined the Army. She told her brother it was because she wanted to help the nation heal and as a survivor, she felt she owed it to all those who had died to make something of her life. She never told anyone that the real reason she had joined was simply to get away from the death and emptiness her life had become thanks to the Blue Flu. Her entire family had been sentenced to death by the microscopic terrorist known as influenza—all save Derek, her brother, an Army Ranger fresh out of boot.

She'd been sailing through her first year in medical school when she was struck down like so many, many others in The Pandemic. After her long, painful recovery from the point of death, she'd chosen to finish medical school in the Army Reserves while she gained real-world experience and helped her country at the same time. She liked to think her father, an Army colonel, would've been proud.

Brenda was processed, commissioned as a lieutenant, and sent to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio to complete her expedited training. It was there she'd learned that the intense pain caused by The Pandemic was actually a response of her own body to the viral assault on her immune system. Her body had been creating such a massive amount of ammunition to use against the virus that her bones—the body's gunpowder mills—went into a production frenzy of T-cells. Just breathing had caused her to cry out in agony.

The fever she had survived relatively easy, but the delirious terror she had experienced as a result of the H5N1 virus coursing through her veins—*that* had been the absolute worst. She had seen demons in her room, salivating with anticipation at feasting on her corpse. They had been as real as Derek's concerned face leaning over her from time to time. Ten years later, when she had nightmares, it was those viral demons that caused her to wake up screaming in the middle of the night.

Around the time she'd enlisted, the Great Recovery had kicked off—along with the small-scale wars which had flared up around the globe. Surviving

leaders had blamed each other for starting hostilities as they jockeyed to take advantage of their potential rivals' weaknesses. Chaos had erupted around the world, even as most countries were struggling for survival against The Pandemic. The press aptly dubbed the anarchy The Aftermath. She grunted; the name fit.

By the time she pulled herself out of her waking nightmare, she realized that the DJ was back on the air, wrapping up his feelings about the flu and starting in on the next song. She saw her exit approaching and smoothly exited the freeway, heading down toward street level and her new job. Slowly, her pulse began to return to normal.

The DJ cut in as the song ended, "And by the way, Angelenos, in case you haven't heard, our fearless leader, President Denton, is coming to our fair state this afternoon to kick off a round of campaign rallies." He let the music play a few more beats before interrupting again. "If anyone needs to go to San Diego today, take my advice...don't!" Brenda tuned out the political garbage and switched the radio off as she descended down the freeway ramp and tried to get her bearings.

At last she found the hospital after navigating a warren of side streets and one-way alleys, and pulled into the visitor's lot at All Saint's Memorial Hospital. She added getting a lot pass to her mental list of first-day chores. One deep breath and she was out of her old Mustang and into the pleasantly warm air she came to California to find. She closed her eyes for a moment and enjoyed the kiss of the sun on her cheek before heading toward the walk-in entrance to the Emergency Department.

Remember, you're in the Reserves now—you're a civilian. Oh God, don't let me salute my new boss...Sure are a lot of people out here today...

Brenda caught her reflection in the mirrored outer doors to the ED waiting area and quickly flipped an errant lock of auburn hair off her forehead. With a whoosh, the rotating doors cycled around and immersed her in the refreshingly cool air from inside the building. Brenda took a last, calming breath and with a smile to the guard, walked into chaos.

Her first sight was shocking. There were people *everywhere*. Not a single

chair in the ED waiting area was empty. Children squalled, a few older ones ran by chasing each other, and parents and grandparents huddled together in little clumps. There must've been at least fifty people crowded into the room.

She worked her way through a line of people, most of whom were coughing and bundled up in coats and blankets. More than one started to try and stop her from cutting in line. She brushed them off, gently but firmly, in order to make her way toward the front desk.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry but you'll have to get in line," said the nurse in a tired voice, clipboard in hand. Brenda glanced at her watch idly. It wasn't even 0800 yet, and the poor nurse looked frazzled already. She had bags under eyes and an expression that brooked no argument. Brenda recognized the look of someone who was about to go home after a long shift but was pressed into working a double.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Brenda said, elbowing past the elderly Asian woman who looked to be on her deathbed at the head of the line. "I'm Brenda Alston, I'm supposed to start work here today—"

"You're the new emergency medicine resident?" said the suddenly interested nurse.

"Well—" Brenda started, trying to look apologetic to the old woman who was muttering in between wet coughs. "Yes, I just—"

"Great—we need all the help we can get. Helluva day to start. Here, take this corridor down to the right, then go through the first double doors you see." She pointed over her shoulder and started to write on her clipboard.

"But—"

"Here's a visitor pass that will get you in as far as you need. You'll have to find Nancy Goodson, she's Charge Nurse this week." The nurse, thus disposed of her receptionist duties, turned back to the frowning elderly woman. "Ma'am, I'm *terribly* sorry about that...could you give me your name again, please?"

"Oh...okay," said Brenda, looping the visitor pass lanyard over her head and starting off in the direction suggested. She turned and called out, "Thank you!" and got a nonchalant wave in return.

"Okay, down the hall, through the double doors," Brenda mumbled to herself

as she walked around a few people slumped against the walls in the corridor. It probably wasn't an epidemic, but whatever was going around sure had plenty of people sick for a Friday morning. She remembered the DJ talking about the flu during the drive to work and angrily forced the thought from her mind.

Focus, Alston, you need to focus.

A door to her right flew open, surprising her. She spun instinctively to the left, just like she had learned in the forward medical bases in Iran. When a door opened unexpectedly, it was either an attack or an incoming patient. Either way, the best and safest bet was to juke and get out of the way.

Unfortunately, as she was smiling at her battlefield nimbleness, she slammed into a white-smocked older doctor carrying a clipboard and a cup of coffee, just as he turned into the corridor from an adjacent hallway. The clipboard flipped up onto his chest, flattening the paper cup that he'd been holding to his lips. The hot coffee splashed his face and chest and he was dumped unceremoniously on his ass. The three younger doctors in light-blue scrubs and white coats behind him rushed to help the man on the floor.

The elderly man sat there in a puddle of steaming coffee, shaking his hands to fling the hot liquid off. He glared at Brenda but said nothing.

She stood there dumbstruck, staring at the older olive-skinned man as he shrugged off assistance with a gruff voice and staggered to his feet spitting mad. He glared at her through bushy, gray eyebrows. His dark eyes bored straight through her burning face. She glanced down at the name stitched in blue cursive script onto the front of his coffee-soaked lab coat: *George L. Honeycutt, MD, Chief of Emergency Medicine.*

Brenda closed her eyes. First days *suck*.

"What the hell are you doing back here?" barked a red-haired doctor with a narrow face as he held Honeycutt's clipboard while the old man brushed off the last of the coffee.

"I—" said Brenda. She stammered a few nonsensical words, in total shock at body-checking her new boss on her very first day. *At least I didn't salute him...*

"Look," said the second doctor, as he waved a hand to cut her off. He stole a glance at her visitor pass and his eyes narrowed. "Visitors aren't allowed back

here—”

“Oh—” she said, looking at his nametag. “But—I work here, Dr. Wu.” She drew herself up and stuck out her right hand. “I’m Brenda Alston, the new EM resident transfer.”

“Wait a minute,” the snippy, red-haired doctor said. A wicked smile spilled across his face and he looked at the other two. “You’re the new resident?”

“You’re *late*,” muttered the third doctor, a tall, lanky black man with horn-rimmed glasses and an academic look about him. He managed to look stern and supremely amused at the same time.

“Oh, this is *perfect*,” said the first doctor, a smile spreading like an oil-slick across his pinched face.

“Jesus, Stan, give it a *rest*,” said the older man. He ignored Brenda’s outstretched hand and flipped through the limp, wet sheets on his clipboard. “Anybody seen Nancy? Someone needs to inform her the new kid is here,” he said. He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw the mass of people in the receiving area over Brenda’s shoulder.

“What the *hell* is going on here?”

The pinched-face doctor cleared his throat and spoke up. “George, this is what I was telling you about—”

“Don’t give me that ‘George’ bullshit, Stanley. You said there was ‘a handful’ of inbounds—that’s what you told me. A *handful*. I see more like *fifty*!”

Accident forgotten, the Chief of Emergency Medicine bulled past Brenda and marched down the hall, the three doctors on his heels. Brenda was about to go looking for Nurse Goodson when she heard her named called.

“Dr. Alston, with me, if you please.”

“Here we go...” Brenda muttered to herself. She straightened her shoulder bag and did an about-face out of habit before marching to her fate. The long steps it took her to make it down the hall and catch up with Dr. Honeycutt gave her plenty of time to chastise herself for the great first impression she had just made. She grimaced at the trail of coffee on the floor.

The chief and his court stood there at the edge of the group of people seeking help.

A raven-haired nurse in blue scrubs came around the corner, pulling off disposable gloves. She had a stethoscope around her neck and a clipboard under her left arm. She walked purposefully and without hesitation straight to the Chief of Emergency Medicine.

“*There* you are, Dr. Honeycutt. I’m going to need all the PAs we can spare. We’re getting swamped out here.”

Brenda read the name badge hanging around the nurse’s neck: Nancy Goodson, RN. The clear plastic sleeve holding her ID had a big red stripe at the bottom. Plastered over that stripe in bold, white letters were the words CHARGE NURSE.

“What is it?” asked Dr. Honeycutt. He motioned for Dr. Wu to handle the Charge Nurse’s request. Dr. Wu nodded and retreated from the group.

“It’s presenting with typical flu-like symptoms: aches, pains, fever, and nausea. But it’s only taking a few *hours* to bring people to their knees—and loved ones are bringing them *here*.” She wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her left hand. “They’re coming in faster than we can process them.”

A commotion by the main entrance to the emergency department caught Nurse Goodson’s eye. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this, George,” Nurse Goodson said in a tired voice. “This is bringing back some awful bad memories.” She noticed Brenda for the first time. “Who’s this?”

“I’m Brenda Alston, the new EM resident—”

“All right, Dr. Alston, you’ve got some experience with situations like this, if I remember your file correctly. I know Colonel Seager from our residency years, and he gave you a glowing recommendation. If *that* ornery bastard likes you, I want to see what you can do.”

“Yes, sir,” Brenda said, voice neutral. Nurse Goodson raised an eyebrow and waited patiently, but the corner of her mouth curled up mischievously.

Brenda’s eyes swept over what looked like at least 50 to 75 people in various states of distress, standing, sitting, and laying down. Coughing, wheezing, crying, moaning—the sounds alone were sickening. And the smell...More than one person had vomited on the floor and several of the younger children appeared to be suffering from diarrhea. Brenda tried desperately to calm the

nerves bound her up inside like coiled springs, quivering with unreleased energy.

“‘Chief’ will do,” said the older man without a smile. He folded his arms across his damp chest. The man looked to be in his mid-50s but was built like a bear. “What are your recommendations?” He arched one of the gray caterpillars above his eyes and watched her intently. Nurse Goodson checked her watch.

Summoning all of her willpower, Brenda clamped down hard on her memories of The Pandemic as they nibbled away at the edge of her mind. She slowly eyed the area and ignored the three doctors behind her. She could feel the sneers directed at the back of her head.

She closed her eyes and was back in the forward medical base in Iran where she'd spent so much time after med-school. The Reserves had been called up just as she was ready to start her second year of med school, when Iran had attacked Israel. When the United States invaded Iran, she too went to war. As a result, Brenda had spent more time in field hospitals than classrooms. Her invaluable military training now took over as she assessed the situation. She opened her eyes and took in the entire scene.

“We’re going to need triage tents in the parking lot, to quickly examine and get the worst of them inside. Treat and release the walkers,” she said. “Right now everyone is mixed together—we could have cross-infections and just spread...*whatever* it is...even more. Plus it’s a real Charlie-Foxtrot in here. We need space to work.”

She glanced at the number of chairs in the large entryway and continued, “We need to scan for communicables and weed those out as well. Walkers that make it *this* far are the worst and need to be treated—like, *yesterday*. We need to be collecting names and info all the way up to here and *here*,” she said, pointing out workstations at strategic points in the waiting area. “I recommend we clear some space for visitors and well-patient walkers so they can get inside without contracting anything—better yet, until we get a handle on this, family and visitors need to stay outside.”

“What’s a *Charlie-Foxtrot*?” whispered someone behind her.

The chief looked at Nurse Goodson and received a nod. He scanned the room. “Good ideas. What else?”

“What about—” started the red-haired doctor.

The chief raised his hand and got silence. He nodded to Brenda, a look in his eye that looked vaguely familiar to her. She last saw that look from the colonel back in Afghanistan when he was testing her. He’d become sort of surrogate father to her and she desperately wished he were here now.

“I like what I’m hearing. Go on, Dr. Alston.”

“Well,” she said, and cleared her throat. Her old battlefield confidence returned as she continued, “I don’t know the day-to-day routines around here, but where *I’m* from, this would be considered a *significant* number of people you got here. There’s something going on. Is it just beginning? How long have they been coming in? Is it localized? Can we expect more? I heard on the radio the flu is making a comeback. Is *that* what we’re dealing with? For that matter, how is the department set—did some event happen that will dump a lot of traumas on us, too—a big accident or train wreck or something?”

“I like her,” said Nurse Goodson with a smile. “I guess you can stay.”

“Nurse Goodson!” someone called out near the main entrance where a man was thrashing about on the floor. Two nurses struggled to hold him still.

“Duty calls,” she said and shook Brenda’s hand. “Welcome aboard, Dr. Alston. I look forward to working with you.”

“Excellent,” the chief said as the Charge Nurse worked her way towards the disturbance. He turned to the two doctors behind him. “Dr. Alston is our newest 4th year resident. A *resident*, gentlemen. Yet, she thinks like one of us. Why? Because she has real-world experience—battlefield experience. Dr. Alston was with the Army in Iran during The Aftermath.”

“*Hooah*, sir,” she said smartly. “Iran for two years, then Active Reserves stateside for five at Walter Reed. Uncle Sam put me through med-school. I’m inactive, as of last week.”

“Very good. I’m sure we’ll all get to know each other soon. Right now, we have sick people that need our help.” He clapped his hands again. “All right, Lewis, I want you to put her suggestions in place. Nancy will be taking the lead on this, find out what she needs and coordinate with the nurses.” Dr. Fletcher nodded and scribbled some notes on his clipboard.

“And Stanley, make sure Henry gets those PAs. Pull ‘em off all noncritical cases.”

Before the pinched-face doctor could protest, he turned to Brenda. “Good thinking, Alston. I’m setting you up at a desk with a phone.” He raised his right hand. “I know, you want to help and jump in there with the rest of us. But you picked a hell of a day to start.” He frowned, as if disappointed with his own speech.

“We need to know what we’re facing here. I want you to find out from the area hospitals if this is localized, spreading or...” He paused and looked back into the room. “Okay?”

“Yes, sir,” she said.

“Didn’t I say ‘Chief’ was fine?” He flashed a grin that was gone in a heartbeat. “Welcome aboard, Dr. Alston.” Dr. Honeycutt pointed toward the front reception desk. “You’ll find phones and directories over there. Get to it and let me know what you find out. I need to go find some clean scrubs.”

Brenda picked up the phone at the front desk. A clipboard held the phone numbers to all local hospitals. There was a map taped to the back of a clipboard, displaying their locations. She picked up the phone and dialed the first number on the list.

Maybe this is for knocking him down, she thought miserably.

Brenda felt a tug on her sleeve and turned just in time for an elderly man to vomit on her shoes. After he’d finished emptying his stomach, the wrinkled old man looked up at Brenda with rheumy eyes and smiled. Brenda sighed.

First days *suck*.

CHAPTER FIVE

COOPER

CHULA VISTA, CALIFORNIA

MASTER CHIEF PETTY OFFICER, Cooper Braaten, lay by the pool in his teammate's backyard and felt truly relaxed for the first time in what felt like a lifetime. He could hear Charlie's wife and young son splashing in the shallow end, playing with an innocence that was more comforting than anything he could imagine. He could feel a delicious stretch in his arms and back that made him instantly sleepy.

Cooper stretched out on a lounge chair, arms behind his head, eyes closed, and exhaled a sigh of contentment as he basked in the warm, early autumn sun. Winter was not that far off, but in sunny SoCal, the snow-blasted memories of his youth in Michigan melted peacefully away.

Cooper sighed at the realization that he would be mustered out of the service on Monday, now that the final surgery to reconstruct his knee was complete and rehab had all but wrapped up. Honestly, he was sad to leave SEAL Team 9, but he was looking forward to starting a lucrative new career in the private-sector with Oakrock Security. A six-figure salary out the gate—they had made an offer he couldn't possibly refuse.

Stranger things have happened. The soon-to-be retired Master Chief felt a smile split his face.

“Look at you, only a few days till you’re out and you’re already going soft.”

Cooper cracked his eyes at the voice and waited for them to adjust to the sunlight.

“Laying around in a lounge chair at 1400 hours—on a *weekday*—grinning like a damn *civilian*. And the shame of it is, just last week you were in command of a first-rate, lean, mean, terrorist killing SEAL fireteam,” said his longtime second-in-command, Charlie Marshal.

“Hey, I ain’t dead, yet. I’m still in charge,” Cooper objected, still smiling.

“In charge of a *wheelchair*, yeah,” laughed Charlie. “Here, gimpy, have a beer.”

Cooper grinned and sipped the ice-cold brew. He turned his head and shielded his eyes with a hand to see Charlie standing over him, hands on hips, his tanned physique marred with the calling cards of their shared profession: bullet wounds, knife scars, and imperfections caused by the chafing of gear or heat of fire. His chest and back were crisscrossed with the story of his career. Anyone with experience in the field knew right away, he wasn’t just a soldier or sailor, he was an *operator*. Cooper grinned. A younger version of himself.

“How’s the knee?” Charlie asked with mock concern and smacked Cooper playfully as he sat like a coiled spring in the next chair.

“*Shit*, knock it off!” hissed Cooper with a wince. He gingerly flexed the pink, new skin around the incision points where the surgeon had reconstructed his butchered right knee. “Damn *bullet* didn’t hurt half as much as that surgery did...”

“Man, you already turning into a wuss? Here I thought you were a *SEAL*.”

Cooper drained the beer and turned the bottle upside down as proof. “This helps. C’mon *Master Chief*, reload me.”

“Easy there, Hoss,” said Charlie with his hands up defensively. “So,” he said, passing Cooper another beer, “what’s up with Oakwood?”

“Oakrock,” replied Cooper after the first gulp. “They’re legit, man. Straight-up spooks and operators, only. They pay top-shelf, have the best toys you can get outside of...I was about to say ‘us,’ but I guess I should say ‘you guys,’ now.”

Charlie nodded. “I know, I checked ‘em out too. VIP security, foreign

dignitaries, a little dirty work over in the Sandbox...”

“You spying on me, Master Chief?”

“Wipe that grin of your face—hell yes, I been spyin’ on you. Besides, LT asked me to. And...” Charlie said before swallowing a mouthful of cold beer. He raised his finger. “For the record, *you* taught me everything I know about raising hell and saving the day. I feel, y’know, *obligated* to make sure they don’t just put you out to pasture...now that you’re an old fart and all.”

“Well,” Cooper started to say, then saw a blur of motion out of the corner of his eye. Acting on instinct, his right hand whipped out and the beer flew from his hands to intersect the football aimed at Charlie’s head. “Head’s up!”

Charlie sputtered a curse through the beer foam that exploded in his face. “What the *hell*, man!”

“Now, who’s looking out for who?” laughed Cooper. “‘*Old fart*,’ my ass. I’m 38 and I got the reflexes of a 20 year old.”

“You ruined a perfect spiral, Coop!” complained the athletic young man coming through the pool gate on the other side of the backyard oasis. Charlie’s little boy squealed at him from in the pool. He waved to the mother and child in the water. “I should be playin’ for the 49ers! You see that, little man? Perfect spiral!” The boy’s reply was unintelligible but enthusiastic.

“Hi Jax, come on in,” said Aliana Marshal with a smile.

“Hey Allie, how you—”

“Jax! You son of a—” bellowed Cooper with a wide smile on his face. What was supposed to be just a quiet afternoon was turning into a surprise retirement party.

“Hey, watch the mouth, sailors,” warned Aliana from the pool. Her voice was stern but a smile lit her face.

Cooper felt his cheeks flush. “Sorry, ma’am.” When he got up from the chair, he was instantly enveloped in a bear hug.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, handing Jax a beer.

“Well, we didn’t really get a proper send-off, now did we?” Petty Officer First Class Jackson Miller said over the top of his beer.

Cooper turned to look at Charlie with a raised eyebrow. “Hey, you never said

we couldn't throw you a retirement party, and *I'm* the Master Chief now..."

"In *three days* you are. What about the others?"

"Oh, they'll be along. They got some more supplies to round up," replied Jax.

"Steaks, beer, strippers, you know," said Charlie in a deadpan voice.

Cooper laughed out loud and nodded toward Aliana. "Did *you* know about this?"

The pretty grin he got in reply was all the answer he needed.

"Man, lemme see that scratch you got," said Jax, bending low to examine the healing knee of his teammate. "Hmmm," he said in a deep rumble, finger on his chin as if he were an inspecting doctor. He looked up and flashed a wide grin. "Does it still hurt? 'Cause the last time I saw you, you were screaming like a teenaged girl at a boy-band concert," Jax said in his Texan drawl and slapped the knee in question.

Cooper yelped. "Is *everyone* gonna do that? Christ..."

"Let that be a lesson to you, old man, never abandon your command on sick-leave. We *will* get our revenge!"

The shared laughter was interrupted by a screeching female vocal set to house music, with a heavy bass back-beat.

"Hey, who stepped on the cat?" asked Jax, looking around innocently.

"Hush!" called Aliana as she walked over with Charlie, Jr. on her hip. She paused to look at the male faces ogling her.

"Really, guys?" she asked in a tired voice. She handed her son over to Charlie, who traded her a towel and the squawking cell phone.

"Hello?" she asked, wringing the water from her hair.

"You are one lucky, S-O-B, Master Chief," whispered Jax with a slow drawl straight out of west Texas.

"Don't get any ideas. Allie—and her sisters—are above your pay-grade, sailor," said Charlie.

Jax waved off Charlie's comment and squatted next to Cooper. "When you gonna find yourself a good white girl and settle down, Chief?"

Cooper sighed. "Maybe never. I don't think I'm the marryin' type." He

grinned and punched Jax on the arm. “That was for Dashiqi. She says you’re her ‘baby daddy.’”

Jax laughed. “Nice...” He grew serious and rubbed his chin. “I haven’t seen her since...hey, when was the last time I went out with your mom?”

“Burn!” hooted Charlie. He high-fived Jax.

Cooper stopped laughing when he saw Allie turn around slowly and walk over to Charlie. She looked confused. Cooper sensed immediately something was wrong.

“Um...it’s Kevin. He’s at work and wants to talk to *you*.”

“Your brother?” asked Charlie, arms full with a wet, squirming two year old. “What’s he want me for?”

She traded the phone for the giggling toddler. “I don’t know, but he’s really scared. And now I am too. Something has him spooked.” She put on a smile for her son then glanced at the clock mounted to a post by the pool. “It’s *somebody’s* nap time! Yes it *is*, mister cranky-pants...” She looked at her husband and the smile vanished. “I’ll go put him down. Let me know what’s up.”

“Sure, babe,” said Charlie. He put the phone to his ear. “Kevin? Hey, what’s up, man? Everything—” He stopped mid-sentence. After a moment, he looked at Cooper and Jax. “Okay. Whoa, whoa, hold up man, *slow down*. One at a time. What are you talking about?” He pulled the phone away from his head and hit the speaker button.

“—what I was telling you last Christmas? At the party?” The voice on the phone was scratchy due to the connection, but the stress was palpable.

Cooper glanced at Jax, who shrugged.

“About the flu bugs those guys in Europe were tinkering around with?”

“Oh...ah, yeah, *yeah*—you said something about they were trying to test to see how many mutations it would take for the pig flu or something to be...uh...easily spread from human to human. That was right before I spilled the eggnog on you...right?”

Cooper and Jax sipped their beers and tried not to laugh.

“Right,” the voice said, dripping with scorn. “And all that not even a decade after the Blue Flu. Crazy bastards. We knew it was a bad idea. We even got the

administration to put some pressure on over there to stop them from publishing results. Again. That limp-wristed response we put out the first time seemed to do the trick, but none of us here actually thought they stopped the research. I think we were right. And now...well, I think something *really* bad is happening.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Charlie, his face taking on the visage of the veteran operator: a face of stone-cold determination. Charlie the husband, the playful father, was gone. Cooper put his beer down and lowered his sunglasses to look at the phone.

There was some static and a double click on the line, then some noises like Kevin was shuffling papers. “Look, I don’t think I have much time. They’re trying to round up as many H5N1 vaccines as possible. We don’t really have all that much left, so we’re going to recall our guy in Montana. He’s the Source. With what’s happening out west, I *gotta* believe this consolidation is connected. I’ll send you some info. You still got that Gmail address?” Two more clicks sounded over the line.

“Yeah, it’s still there. But what’s happening out west? What guy—what do you mean, *the source*?” asked Charlie. He raised an eyebrow to Jax who nodded and walked across the pool deck to the outdoor TV, his flip-flops slapping the wet concrete. Cooper rolled on his side and pulled a tablet out of his bag. While Jax selected one of the 24-hour news channels, Cooper did a quick internet search.

“Look, you can put it all together, just like I did, okay? You’re a smart guy and this line isn’t secure. I know we haven’t been the best of friends and all...”

“Oh, hey, Kevin, about last month, I—”

“Listen, Charlie, would you just *forget* about that? Jesus, this is *serious*! Just...just do me a favor, okay? Watch out for my sister.”

Charlie was taken aback. “Of course, man, she’s my wife!”

“I know—I didn’t mean...oh, hang on.” There was some noise in the background and a barely audible murmur, but the tone was unmistakably insistent. “Oh, my God—”

The phone shrieked, a high-pitched squeal, and the line went dead. Charlie looked at the phone in irritation. *Signal lost* blinked on the display.

“Okay, *that* was weird,” said Charlie as he shut off the pink, jewel-encrusted cell phone. He placed it on the table as if it were week-old roadkill.

“Hey, check it out, guys...I found something,” called Jax from across the pool in a shaded part of the porch that contained the outdoor entertainment center. Charlie and Cooper walked over to join him and removed their sunglasses. “Look at *that!*” he said, pointing the remote at the TV.

The screen showed a hospital in downtown Los Angeles and lines of people that snaked through the parking lot. Tents emblazoned with red crosses had been set up throughout the lot, but the crowd spilled across the grass to the circle driveway by the emergency room entrance. The terra-cotta colored, arrow-shaped hospital was surrounded by cars parked haphazardly on the nearby streets, like they had been abandoned. Police cars and fire trucks added flashing lights to the scene as emergency personnel scurried here and there.

“...*Scene at area hospitals reminds many of the early days of The Pandemic, ten years ago...*” scrolled across the bottom of the screen.

“Where is this?” asked Charlie. He tapped the screen. “Are those bodies on the ground?” There were clusters of people gathering around them.

“...*All Saints Memorial Hospital reports 327 cases of mystery Influenza-like illness in the last three days, 73 of those in the last 24 hours...*”

Cooper frowned. “It’s not just L.A...*look,*” he said. He turned the tablet around for his brothers-in-arms to see. “That’s an article from the *Seattle Times*. Flu-like cases three-times above normal for September. I just did a search for spikes in flu cases and found this from Boston: over a hundred in the last 48 hours, seven fatalities.” He scrolled down and said, “Here’s an article that just broke last night, out of Dallas.” He whistled. “Listen to *this*, guys.” Cooper tapped a video embedded in the article and turned up the tablet’s speakers.

A female voice reported, “The investigation into a mysterious illness in Tarrant County is expanding, as other hospitals and doctors report similar cases. The new case files are being reviewed for similarity to eight people currently at the Baylor Medical Center in Fort Worth, which prompted a Tarrant County Health Department investigation. Four of those eight patients died, and two are still fighting for their lives. A doctor, speaking on condition of anonymity told

CBS-11, ‘We don't currently have a diagnosis for what has caused those illnesses, other than influenza.’”

Cooper looked up when the clip ended. “That doesn’t sound too good.”

“Okay, so there’s a handful of people in Texas and a little group in L.A.,” started Charlie.

“Little?” asked Jax. “That didn’t look little to me, man...”

“In a city of how many *millions* of people? Yeah, I think less than a few thousand is ‘little,’” said Charlie, folding thick arms across his chest in skeptical defiance.

“They’re calling this thing an influenza-like illness,” said Cooper, looking down at the tablet again.

All three men looked back at the TV. Scrolling across the bottom of the screen, “...*Influenza-like illness shows unusually high infection rate in areas along the coasts...*”

Cooper turned back to the tablet. “Still, Charlie’s probably right, guys. It may not be anything to get all worked up over, since there’s been...looks like 197 ILI cases in Fort Worth this month. It’s just these eight that are different. Looks like they all tested negative for standard strains of seasonal flu, which is weird. I *guess*. Hell, I don’t know, guys.” Cooper turned the tablet off. “I’m no doctor. The Navy pays me to kill bad guys, not heal people.”

“Hooyah, Master Chief,” said Jax, a fresh beer raised in salute.

“Well, Danielle, you can see by these dramatic images that hospitals in Los Angeles are being swamped with flu or ILI cases. It appears, according to the CDC, that an unusually cool, wet summer has created *ideal* conditions for the flu,” said the anchorman with slicked-back hair. He looked at his papers and continued, “Los Angeles County officials assure us that the situation will be contained within a day or so, as stockpiles of antibiotics and flu medicine are being shipped in from unaffected areas of the state.”

Charlie rolled his eyes. “Pass me a cold one, Jax.”

“Jim, the question I think our viewers want to hear,” the camera pulled back to focus on an elegantly dressed Hispanic woman casually leaning over the anchor desk, “and I hate to even suggest it but...is this a repeat of The

Pandemic? I mean, if you look at those pictures—Dale, can we bring back the view of L.A.? Yeah, there you go—does that ring a bell for anyone out there? I know *I* remember seeing views like this at the beginning of the H5N1 Pandemic.” She shook her dark tresses in sadness.

File footage of bodies lining the streets during The Pandemic appeared on the screen. TEN YEARS AGO flashed across the bottom of the image.

“The big worry about a situation like this, Danielle,” replied her smooth-voiced co-anchor, “is that according to what State Health officials told us early this morning, this particular ILI could certainly be one of a dozen different viruses, but it might not. It might very well be H5N1 and I quote, ‘*That is the big concern.*’”

“Well, there are at least a few things our viewers can do, no matter *what* strain it is, right?” asked the eye-candy. She cocked her head as a list appeared on the screen next to her air-brushed face. “The Centers for Disease Control reminds everyone to stay calm and do their part to prevent any of these mystery illnesses from spreading: wash your hands frequently; cover your cough but don't cough into your hands; stay home if you're sick; and get to the doctor within the first 24 hours of illness. Common symptoms include...”

All three turned when they heard a gasp come from behind them. Aliana stood in the doorway to the house, hands at her mouth, staring at the TV. She started to shake her head and took a step back, eyes tearing up.

“Ooops,” exhaled Cooper.

Charlie rushed to his wife’s side. “Allie, look at me, honey. It’s *okay*,” he said when she turned her watery eyes on him. He held her shoulders firmly, but gently. “It’s just some people in L.A. getting sick.”

“But, Coop said—” She pointed. “I *heard* him, he said it was in *Texas*, too. A-a-and Boston.”

“I know, but...” He looked over his shoulder at the TV. Jax moved to block her view.

“It’s *back*,” she whispered. “The Blue Flu. It’s *back*...I *knew* it would come back...”

“Honey, we don’t know that—look, if that thing really has come back, they’d

know it,” he said, jerking a thumb at the muted image of a man in a lab coat in front of a hospital in Washington, D.C. “The docs would *know* it, honey. They wouldn’t be screwing around like they did back then. We know better how to fight it now, right? They have a *vaccine* for it! Hey—*look* at me—we’d be getting called back to base, wouldn’t we, if there was some emergency?” He pulled the secure, special-issue cell phone from his pocket and held it in front of her. “See?” he said gently. “No calls.”

She nodded, eyeing the government-issue plastic in his hand. She shook her head. “I can’t go through that again...” she whispered, wiping the tears out of her eyes with the back of her hands. She sniffed loudly. “Not with little Charlie...” She suddenly looked at her husband.

“*This* is what Kevin called you about, isn’t it?” Aliana said and pointed an accusing finger at the TV. “He works at the goddamn CDC...*he* would know if that...*thing*...came back.” She watched some more footage of the helicopter over the hospital in Los Angeles. The camera zoomed in on a couple figures laying prone on the pavement outside the hospital. A group of people crowded around the bodies. “Oh my God.”

“Honey...” Charlie looked over his shoulder at the TV. “I know it looks bad. But all this is just...look, it’s the media trying to hype things up for the election. Right, guys? It’s just—”

“Just *what*, Charlie? The beginning of another plague?” she cried. She burst into tears and wrenched herself away from Charlie and made for the house.

“No—it’s just speculation! It’s starting to get close to flu season...this happens every year...” The patio door shut and she was gone.

“Smooth, Master Chief, real smooth,” said Cooper with a rueful grin.

“Stow it, civilian,” retorted Charlie with a glare that would have withered mere mortals. He sat down in a chair and sighed, a hand to his forehead. “Allie lost her parents to the Blue Flu. It was pretty rough on her. Her sisters and Kevin, they’re all she has left in the world now. Her whole extended family got wiped out.”

“*Jesus*,” said Jax.

“You never mentioned *that* before,” said Cooper in a quiet voice. He sat

down next to Charlie. “Sorry, man.”

“Yeah, well...not exactly a good conversation to have over beers, is it?” said Charlie with a dismissive wave of his hand. He unmuted the TV.

“—would say politics has no business in this situation, but apparently, the President is not going to change his campaign schedule for anything,” the anchorman’s voice squawked behind them. “So it seems the question of the day is, if the President isn’t concerned, should we be?”

“Now you say it,” Charlie groaned. “Asshole. Allie needed to hear that thirty seconds ago...”

“That’s right,” said Danielle, the co-anchor. “President Denton landed in San Diego earlier today.” The image onscreen switched to a shot of Air Force One gliding into a perfect landing at a deserted-looking airstrip.

“He’s scheduled to make stops in Los Angeles, Sacramento, and San Francisco over the next week, and many political insiders now suspect he will try to get some photo-ops to appeal to his base by lending a helping hand at area hospitals...”

As the reporters bantered about the wisdom of political moves, Charlie shook his head. “That ain’t right, man. I know he’s the boss, but damn, that’s *low*. I need a drink.”

“Someone say something about beer?” called a voice around the corner. A short man with a crew cut of jet black hair carrying an overflowing cooler with one arm strolled around the corner. He wore red flip-flops, Hawaiian-style swim trunks, a towel around his neck, and aviator glasses perched on his aquiline nose. He tilted his head down to see over the rims of the mirrored glasses and grinned, revealing a prominent gap in his front teeth.

“You ladies watching the soaps?”

“Hey, Beaver,” said Cooper with a grin.

“Master Ch—ah...hey, Coop,” replied Michael Holliday. Charlie got a nod.

“Yeah, yeah, it’ll take me time to get used to it, too. Don’t worry about it,” replied Cooper with a wave of his hand. *Damn, it really is going to take some time. Retirement. Ain’t that some shit.*

“Mike!” called a woman’s voice. “Can you get the gate?”

The dutiful husband put the cooler down and glanced at the TV on his way around the corner. “We heard about all that flu stuff going down in San Francisco,” he called out.

“Yeah?” shouted Jax. “It’s in L.A., too, man.”

Re-appearing with his comfortably plump wife in a one-piece black swimsuit and teenaged daughter, Jessica, Mike set down a bundle of towels and toys for the pool.

His wife waved casually at the others in the shade by the TV, looking past them at the open door. “Hello, boys,” she said with a smile most moms reserve for their children.

“Hi, Joan,” they called out in unison like students greeting a teacher.

“Yeah,” Mike continued, removing his sunglasses. “We heard a little on the radio. They keep talking about how it’s just the seasonal thing. No big deal. Oh, hey, Jax—Swede and Tank just pulled up. If you want to make sure you can get out of here before midnight, you better move your truck.”

“Why you think I need to get out by midnight?”

“Uh, ‘cause you’re such a lightweight?” asked the short, wide-shouldered, well-muscled SEAL.

“Man, I benchpress more than you *weigh*.”

“All right, guys.” Charlie stood up. “Can you help get the rest of the beer unloaded? Hey Joan, can I borrow you for a second to check on Allie?”

Cooper limped behind Jax and Mike, elbowing each other around the corner when he happened to glance at the TV. He froze.

“...*BREAKING NEWS*...” flashed across the screen in big, bold flashing letters, designed to gather attention.

“What’s wrong?” Joan asked behind him, sudden concern blossoming in her voice. Cooper noticed her back was to the TV. She peeled off her own sunglasses as she moved into the shade.

“Oh, with all the news about the flu in L.A., Allie’s convinced the Blue Flu is coming back,” Charlie said, ushering Joan toward the house.

“Oh, the poor dear,” she said sadly.

“Yeah, I tried to tell her that if there really was another pandemic, we’d all be

called back, you know?”

Cooper turned back to the screen. His heart skipped a beat.

“Well, of course, I can—” Joan’s response was cut short by Cooper’s gasp.

“I’m not the only one seeing this, am I?” He turned up the volume.

“...interrupt, but I’m being told there’s a...Wait. Chuck, are you serious?”

The anchor put his hand to his ear, listening to someone off-camera. The box in the corner of the screen showed something that looked pretty amateurish. A shaking image of grass, rotating to trees and sky, before finding buildings.

“There’s a mushroom cloud over Atlanta? You’ve got to be kidding me... Oh...oh my God,” the suddenly pale-faced anchor said.

The small preview image on the screen expanded from the corner. Now it was clear that the shaky, grainy image came from someone’s camcorder. They had been looking at a city skyline in the distance. A mushroom cloud, lit from within to a burning, orange glow, loomed over the city as it clawed its way into the sky. The shockwave had passed, but dust and debris still expanded out from what looked like the downtown district.

Across the bottom of the screen scrolled, “...sensors in Savannah, Georgia measuring spikes in radiation...*BREAKING NEWS*...beachgoers in Florida report seeing missile launch offshore...*BREAKING NEWS*...”

“Jesus H...” muttered Charlie. “A sub off the coast of Florida...”

“Did he say Atlanta just got *nuked*?” asked Cooper.

“Say *what*?” asked Jax. He and Mike had arrived carrying cases of beer and bags of ice.

Mike slowly removed his aviator glasses. “Son of a bitch.” He cracked a beer and drained it in two gulps. Eyes still locked on the screen, he belched and dropped the can to the ground, missing the trashcan a foot away.

“I...I’m going to go check on Allie. Jess! Come with me, sweetie.”

Mike watched his rebellious daughter follow his wife with a scared look on her face, eyes on the TV. “Well, all it took was a major city getting whacked for her to listen to her mom...” he muttered.

A shrill, desperate ringing sounded from Cooper’s pocket. He frowned and looked at Charlie. Cooper checked the number after he fished the whining phone

out of his pocket. It was their deep-shit emergency line. It meant he needed to get his ass back to base, *now*.

Three more phones added their noise to the first.

“I’d say our shore leave just got canceled with extreme prejudice...”
muttered Charlie.

The SEALs looked at each other, then at Cooper.

Cooper frowned. “Screw the retirement party, boys. We’ve got work to do.”

“Hooyah, Master Chief,” replied Jax softly.

CHAPTER SIX

BARRON

Washington, D.C.

U.S. Naval Observatory

Vice Presidential Emergency Operations Center

THE VICE PRESIDENT pushed past his Secret Service bodyguard and slammed the door to his private suite in the bunker. Alone at last. He looked toward the ceiling of the oak-paneled briefing room. Above him, there was a hundred or more feet of earth and a veritable labyrinth of rooms and tunnels. He may not occupy the White House yet, but the Vice President's nuclear bunker was pretty close to anything the White House offered.

He strolled into the expansive kitchen area and tore open the large stainless steel fridge to find it fully stocked with his favorite beer and wine. He grabbed a cold Stella Artois and savored the first cold, crisp taste. In two swallows, he had downed half the bottle.

It had been a hell of a day.

Out of habit, he stalked over to the far wall in the living area, expecting to rip the curtains back and see a window. He'd spent so many nights in hotel rooms across the country and around the world in the last four years, he almost felt more at home gazing through a window overlooking a foreign city than staring

at his own backyard in Ohio. Yet, when he flung the curtains open, he saw only a large black screen embedded flush in the wall.

He sighed and took another swallow of the cold beer. He chuckled, looking at the fancy European label and remembered how the Prime Minister of England had laughed when he had seen the Vice President's beer of choice.

"Surely you jest, old boy," the stodgy Brit had said over the rims of his Ben Franklin glasses.

"Nope. Love it," he'd told the British leader, while smiling at another dignitary across the room.

After he stopped laughing, the PM gave the visiting VP the hairy eyeball. "You do realize, of course, that particular beverage you are enjoying so earnestly right now is considered the...ah...*wife beater* of beers?" He'd burst out laughing again, a deep, throaty guffaw.

Barron had grinned and saluted the PM with his gold-rimmed pint glass. "Cheers, mate!"

Returning to reality, the Vice President belched and turned on the large TV screen, immediately seeing the classified reports privy only to the upper echelon of the U.S. Government. One channel had an up-to-date map of reported cases of the mysterious H5N1-variant strain across the country. He could clearly see the angry red welts on the map in California, up the West Coast and into Canada. Vancouver looked like one big red blob—they were taking it on the chin pretty hard up there.

New York appeared like a red cancer. A chain of dots stretched to Boston in the north and Philly in the south. Washington was surrounded by a small army of red dots. The cases thinned out the farther south on the map his eyes traveled, but he swore there were a hell of a lot more dots on the screen—representing 100 cases as marked on the map legend—than there were just *two hours* earlier.

Guilt washed over him. He knew. He alone in the whole country knew the truth of where and how this massive epidemic had started. It was *his* fault. The deaths of all those Americans rested on his shoulders, threatening to crush him with remorse.

He, Harold J. Barron, Vice President of the United States, had authorized the

release of the North Korean-made bio-weapon based on an especially deadly strain of flu last seen during The Great Pandemic. He had committed High Treason. When he had given his soul to Jayne and Reginald, he had given them certain codes to gain access to American security grids, protocols, and agencies.

Days. It had only taken *days* for Reginald's employers to wreak havoc on the country. Reginald was one very well-connected man. A sickening thought occurred to him: how long had Reginald's employers plotted and waited for the right moment to strike? Months? Years? How many political victories had he racked up because of the unseen hand of Reginald's employers? How long had they owned him?

The Vice President hadn't given the actual command to launch the attack, and of course he had taken no physical part in it, but he had *allowed* it. He had enabled it. Guilt crashed against his psyche again and again, like waves that pummeled a crumbling shoreline. He stared at the red dots on the map. All those Americans were sick because of him. So many would die because of him. So many *had* died, because of the frailties of *his* flesh.

Jayne. All of this, the nuclear strike, the weaponized-flu—it had all started in that hotel room with Jayne.

Jayne had forced him to receive what she called “the only known” vaccine last week, so he wasn't worried for himself, or even his family. He'd made sure his family had secretly received the vaccine as well. He stared at the dots and finished the rest of the bottle. He purposely avoided looking at the angry black and red bullseye over Atlanta.

“Jesus...God, forgive me,” he muttered, tears welling up in his eyes again. Anger fought with guilt to control his emotional rollercoaster. He threw the beer bottle toward the wall in frustration. It exploded on impact and showered the carpet with glass.

James Conway, his permanently assigned Secret Service agent, threw open the door and scared the Vice President half to death. He thought he'd locked the damn door.

“I'm *fine!*” he called as the agent stormed the room, pistol in hand. “I just...” The Vice President looked at the broken glass on the floor by the far wall and

shrugged. “It’s been a rough day...”

James relaxed with a barely perceptible dip of his shoulders. The gun vanished inside his coat in a well-practiced flash of movement. He nodded and took one more look around the room.

After he shut the door behind him, the Vice President turned to face the screen again and loosened his tie angrily. He ripped his jacket off and threw it on the floor in impotent rage. Reginald was behind this, he was sure of it.

“You never said *anything* about nuking an American city,” he hissed under his breath, glaring at the bullseye over Atlanta. The casualty figures on the right side of the map continued to rise. The last official count was 326,987 killed, and another 273,432 missing and suspected dead.

He reached out a finger and touched the angry bullseye. The screen flickered and was split into four quadrants. The upper-left screen showed a live feed from Atlanta, just outside the radiation zone on the south side. Crumpled buildings, illuminated by the countless fires that burned, uncontrolled, in the deepening night, reached up from the ground like the charred fingers of a corpse. It was a ghoulish nightmare scene.

The upper-right screen showed a replay loop of the footage the NSA had obtained from a man filming clouds the instant the bomb went off. The Vice President had seen it over and over again already, but could not stop watching.

The camera zoomed in on one of the dark-bellied cumulous clouds, then the screen went white. Slowly, the image faded back into view but it shook violently. The camera swung all over place, from the grass to the trees, as the man ran up a slight hill to see where the flash had come from. The Vice President noticed that everything had a white-pink tint to it, an after-effect he had been told, of the nuclear blast on the camera’s imaging sensor.

At the crest of the hill, the camera panned around shakily before settling on the skyline of Atlanta, a few miles to the north. There it was. Growing upwards on a twisted, writhing column of smoke not unlike some demonic bean plant, a mushroom cloud was rising and expanding, glowing a sullen orange from the inside.

It was the most unsettling, obscenely *beautiful* yet haunting thing he had ever

seen in his entire life. The image trembled as the shockwave blasted its way through Atlanta in the distance. He could actually *see* skyscrapers as they collapsed into a cloud of debris billowing in the wake of the nuclear inferno. The image froze. It was the last thing the cameraman recorded—he turned and ran for his life at that point.

The Vice President ran a hand through his dark hair and sighed as he looked at the lower-left side of the screen, showing a detailed aerial map of Atlanta. Damage estimates and fatalities were highlighted in garish shades of red and orange.

Two-thirds of the city was just flattened rubble now, glowing with atomic heat that would take decades to dissipate. The damage, he noticed, seemed to be worse in the northeast corner of the downtown district.

“Fuck *me*,” he whispered in disbelief. Right there, before his eyes, there was an actual *crater* on the image from a passing satellite. Someone had used a *damn* big nuke.

On the lower-right screen, he saw a home movie from another part of the country, almost as scary as the one from Atlanta. The scene was a peaceful beach on the Atlantic coast of Florida, just north of Daytona. Someone was filming their kids playing in the surf. Then off in the distance, a splash of white on the horizon heralded something unusual had happened.

The sharp-eyed cameraman then had zoomed in instantly to catch a long, black-and-white-striped missile rise majestically from the frothing ocean. There was a puff of smoke and the missile rose on a column of smoke and fire. It headed straight up at first, then arched back to the northwest over the beach.

The camera panned down to witness people on the beach pause in their frolicking and late summer sunbathing to shield eyes and stare up at the missile that was soaring high overhead. When the camera went back to the mysterious rocket, it was already shrinking to a mere point of light on a long finger of smoke, racing toward some unknown destination.

Harold put a hand to his face and rubbed away the tears that threatened to escape his eyes. His secure phone chirped in his pocket. He recognized the tune. It was Reginald.

He ripped the phone from his pocket and put it to his ear. “What the *fuck* did you do?” he asked in an urgent whisper.

There was a long silence before the neutral-accented, supremely confident voice of Reginald came on the line. “We did what *had* to be done for the plan to succeed. You are quite welcome, by the way.”

“Don’t you *dare* tell me that, you *son of a bitch*, you murdered hundreds of thousands of innocent Americans!”

There was a polite chuckle. “Mr. Vice President, I did no such thing. Not even my countrymen did this deed. No, if any one person is responsible for this deed, it is you.”

“Me? Screw you—”

“If calling me names will make you feel better, then by all means, curse away, Mr. Vice President. But remember, it was the codes that *you* gave me—”

“That was for getting your people inside the country, so you could release your damn flu. The *flu*, Reginald! I *never* agreed to...to...*Jesus*,” the Vice President said, watching the mushroom cloud spread over Atlanta again.

“On the contrary, you did *precisely* that. We used the codes you gave us to... ah...gain entry, so to speak, to certain number of your defense institutions. It wasn’t as big a window as we would have liked, but it will suffice. A few messages here, a few instructions there. When your own submarine went rogue and launched a nuclear missile—”

“What are you talking about? Nobody went *rogue*. That missile couldn’t have come from an American sub.” His mind raced with possibilities. Had a sub captain been turned by Reginald, too? “It’s impossible,” he said again, less convinced than ever.

“Well, *I* certainly did not launch it. Did you receive warning that a foreign submarine had entered your territorial waters? I hear you have quite the state-of-the-art fleet protecting your shores these days. The reports I’m seeing on the news seem to indicate it was an American Trident-class missile, so the experts say...”

An American sub launched a missile that destroyed Atlanta? How the hell could *that* have happened? There was *no way* a sub captain would willingly

destroy an American city like that. It couldn't possibly happen. Reginald had to have tricked the sub into launching...but he would need—the *codes*.

Oh my God. If they can do that...

“Remember, Mr. Vice President, this was *necessary* for the good of—”

“*What?* You think destroying an American city and killing half a million innocent people—” The room started spinning. When would the next missile fly? Who would be the target? Did he just start World War Three? The room started to spin around him faster.

“Oh my God,” he said in a shaky voice. He quietly threw up all over the carpet.

“Mr. Vice President?” asked Reginald’s voice from the discarded cell phone on the carpet next to the weeping Vice President. “Remember, this is the only way for you to achieve your goals, for you to save your country. Half a million died today, a million will die tomorrow, ten million next week. It doesn’t matter, because nearly 250 million will survive to see the future. Because of you. You knew this was the cost—the cost for saving your country.”

The Vice President moaned softly, his mind reeling. *Oh God...250 million people? That’s only half the country’s population!*

“Too high,” he muttered, blindly groping for the phone. He lay on his back, eyes closed, and put the phone to his head again. “I can’t do this...” he whispered, hands shaking.

Reginald laughed, a hollow, soulless sound that sent chills down the Vice President’s spine. “My dear man, you are in too deep now to be getting cold feet. There is no turning back. Remember, you are saving your country this day. Saving it.” There was a pregnant pause. “Do not make me regret my choice in you, Mr. Vice President. You are not the only one with a lot on the line.” The thinly veiled threat pierced the Vice President’s melancholy like a lightning bolt splitting a dark night. “I would hate to see your children suffer...”

Harold Barron opened his red eyes and stared at the ceiling, seeing his little girl’s face before him. “What have I done?” he asked the empty room.

“You have done all we asked. You have done all that was required of you. And now, you need to focus on running your country.”

“What are you *talking* about? I’m in my bunker.” He looked around, nearly delirious with guilt. The plush carpet, the paintings, the books with gilded edges, the alcohol. People were going to start dying. People had already died. *His* people.

“The President is still in charge. I’m just—”

“The President will be dead by Monday.”

Harold sat up, for the first time smelling the vomit that smeared his shirt. “That wasn’t supposed to—”

“I know. It’s shocking. The virus strain that was released has proven to be a bit more...aggressive...than even my employers expected. Believe you me, it put a crimp in our plans, too. But, that is to be expected in situations such as this, is it not? Sadly our friend the President chose to continue his campaign stops in California this week and has come down with the flu. Quite tragic.”

“Oh my God,” breathed Harold. “How do you know?”

Reginald chuckled. “I have my sources. The President is only a matter of minutes from being admitted to a hospital in Los Angeles.”

“But, surely they’d fly him to Andrews or some other base—”

“Sadly, the President’s condition is too critical for transport. His inner circle is trying to get him stabilized first. I believe he will not leave that hospital. As I said the last time we spoke, the President has set himself up quite nicely. So! Our timeline is stepped forward. This time next week, you will likely be the President of the United States. Your economy will begin to collapse and my friends at the United Nations will invite themselves to your country to stabilize the global financial network. You must be ready to welcome them with open arms in the cause of peace.”

“I...this can’t be happening...*no*...”

“Relax, my friend. There is nothing to worry about. We just discovered some information that may complicate things, but it will be handled.”

“What? *Complicated*? How much more fucking *complicated* can this all get?” asked the Vice President, fear suddenly making his heart hammer in his chest. What city was next? New York? How many millions more would die because of him?

“I should not tell you this...” Reginald paused. “But you are nervous and rattled, and I am sympathetic. Perhaps I am too friendly with you. Some of my colleagues tell me, ‘Reginald, you care too much.’ But that is me. All heart.”

The Vice President frowned but held his tongue. He nearly broke the phone in a death grip. The arrogance of this little—

“This information will hopefully renew your somewhat shaken confidence as you come to understand the depth of our reach. A mid-level scientist at the now-defunct CDC may have figured out what we are about. He contacted a certain man that, thanks to the codes you provided, we have determined to be a part of your elite special forces. I believe you call them SEALs. Such a silly name, for a highly overrated military force,” Reginald chuckled.

“This SEAL and his comrades will be dealt with, as will your president. Do not worry. Whatever he knows will die with him. And as for your president...my employers will handle him if the flu doesn’t.”

“If someone knows about *this*...if they find out I had anything...oh my God...” The world was closing in on him. A sudden tightening in his chest was restricting his breathing. “What...what are you going to do?”

“Mr. Vice President. Calm yourself,” Reginald crooned smoothly. “The situation will be handled. By the time you go to bed tomorrow, you will be the President of the United States. I want you to relax, Mr. Vice President—I can still hear your breathing. My colleagues covered their tracks. No one will ever be able to trace the codes used to bring such ruin on your country back to you. I assure you, the only people who know the truth are my employers and yourself. Now, I know just what you need. Go and clean yourself up—”

The Vice President looked around in a panic. How did Reginald know he had thrown up? There *had* to be a camera in here. How damn far did Reginald’s influence go? He got up, not listening to the man who controlled his destiny anymore. He pulled some books off a bookshelf and tossed them on the floor, searching.

“When you have finished wasting your time looking for a camera, I think you will be pleasantly surprised by what you actually find...”

“What?” he asked. The Vice President noticed a faint but achingly familiar

scent was circulating within the recycled air of his bunker under the Naval Observatory. The phone forgotten, he inhaled deeply, soaking up the fragrance.

Jayne.

The Vice President turned, as if in a dream, feeling his pulse quicken. Everything became a little brighter, a little louder. He was pulled by her scent toward the bathroom. He could see a glow coming from the marble tiled room he hadn't noticed before. As he walked in, he caught himself in the mirror.

His dark hair was disheveled about his head, mired with sweat and traces of the vomit that was also smeared his chin and shirt. His eyes looked haunted, his pupils dilated. His skin had a glossy sheen to it. He looked a proper mess. Movement in the mirror to his right caused him to look upon a vision that could only have escaped out of heaven itself.

In the massive whirlpool tub, overflowing with bubbles, she waited for him with a bottle of champagne. She was surrounded by perhaps fifty candles. Her tanned, soft skin seemed to glow.

Jayne slowly got up on her knees in the tub, the bubbles caressing her body to the bottom of her perfect breasts, dripping with lather. The white bubbles contrasted with her perfectly tanned skin and reflected the candlelight in the room. Her golden hair had been pulled into a ragged bun behind her head, the dim light of the candles that surrounded the tub caused her blue eyes to shine with an almost unearthly, angelic light.

His breath came ragged now, his heart thundering in his ears. His mouth was suddenly dry as his pulse quickened and his senses became heightened and focused on Jayne. Every fiber of his being directed him to tear his clothes off and launch himself at her. He started to disrobe, watching her watch him with those sultry half-closed eyes. Atlanta, Reginald, the flu attack, all those dead Americans, the guilt...everything simply drained away and disappeared. There was only Jayne.

Yet, somewhere in the deep, dark, secret place of his mind that she had not yet conquered, a voice whispered, *How did she get in here? The bunker is under lockdown...*

As he stooped to remove his pants, he watched her delicately pour the

expensive bubbly over the gilded rim of the crystal champagne glass etched with the logo of the Oval Office.

She held a glass of champagne in salute and purred, “Care to join me, *Mr. President?*”

CHAPTER SEVEN

BRENDA

Los Angeles, California
All Saint's Hospital

BRENDA WOKE with a start in the doctor's lounge. She hadn't meant to actually fall sleep and angrily checked her watch. It displayed 0430 hours. She added switching to 12-hour format to her mental list of things to do now that she was out of the Army.

I've been asleep for two hours! Brenda rubbed her stiff, sore neck while she came to grips with the fact that she'd slept with her head on the table for the past two hours like a rook straight out of boot camp. She was surprised the muted roar of noise coming from the hallway hadn't woken her sooner.

People cried, nurses and physician assistants rushed back and forth from patient to patient—the sheer number of people seeking help at the hospital was incredible and it was still growing. To think this scene was being repeated all over the area boggled the mind.

“Asleep on the job. *Another* great way to make an impression,” she muttered while trying to smooth out her brand-new, freshly wrinkled teal-blue scrubs. The fabric was stubborn, so she sighed and gave up in favor of a jaw-cracking yawn.

“Oh I wouldn't worry about that,” replied the sleepy voice of Dr. Lewis

Fletcher, the hospital's thoracic specialist who seemed to be amused by her first-day performance with the Chief of Emergency Medicine.

She looked over against the far wall in the semi-darkened room to see a form stir on the long couch. He stretched and yawned, then put a set of horn-rimmed glasses back on his ebony face. "Don't worry, I couldn't sleep anyway. And, for the record, you're okay with the chief." Brenda could hear the smile in his voice.

Dr. Fletcher yawned again. "You pulled a double on your first day...even if you did knock him on his ass by way of saying 'hello.'" He laughed and stood up, joints cracking. Brenda noticed his dark-blue scrubs were even more wrinkled than hers. "God, I need some coffee..." he muttered, shuffling to the counter and the ancient coffeemaker with its hours-old murky contents.

Brenda groaned and rubbed her eyes. "Has it slowed down any?" she asked.

"I wish I could say yes." He took a sip of the coffee he'd just poured and made a face. "I only came in about a half hour ago, but we were still getting new cases by the truckload. This is awful. Want some?"

"It just doesn't make any sense," she said, frowning at the cold cup of tea in front of her. "No thanks, I have this," she said, tapping the cup. "Was it this bad during..." She closed her eyes, forcing the memories from ten years ago down into a hole in her heart. She relied on her Army training to remove her emotions and sight in on the target. This mysterious flu was her target, and she was going to destroy it come hell or high water.

"Did it get like this during the early days of...?" She just couldn't bring herself to say its name, as if speaking it aloud would make it real again.

Dr. Fletcher sighed as he watched the steam rise from his cup of stale coffee. "Honestly...*no*," he said, nodding toward the door to the room. "It's just...too fast, this time. We had two people die before I came in here. The first ones so far. Their families explained that they only started presenting symptoms yesterday." He shook his head. "Even during the peak of The Pandemic, it was at *least* two days before people started dying from initial exposure. Whatever this is, it's definitely more aggressive." He shook his head again. "The chief is going to order us to break out the PPEs and suit up. Personally, I think he should have done it hours ago. Might already be too late." His second sip of coffee produced

a face similar to the first. “This is like motor oil. Blech.”

Brenda sighed again. *PPEs*. She hated the bio-hazard personal protection equipment suits that made you look like something out of a science-fiction movie. They were great for protecting doctors and nurses from infection, but they were bulky, hot, the visors fogged quickly, and no matter *how* thin the manufacturers made the gloves, they still made it difficult to work while wearing them.

“He’s going to have us put up every flu tent we have and pressurize them. Just hope it’s enough.” He lifted up his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “Three critical-care nurses are showing early signs of it now...”

Brenda sighed and lowered her head. “Well, that’s a *great* way to start the day. What about the gang war?”

“Uh, *what* gang war?” asked Dr. Fletcher as he picked up an apple off the food tray.

“Oh...I just assumed—”

“I haven’t heard anything...” The snap-crunch of his teeth tearing into the apple made Brenda flinch.

“I, uh...well, right before I came down here—I mean, before Nurse Goodson *marched* me down here—I saw a whole slew of gunshot wounds come in. The ambulance crews were talking to some cops and it sounded like they getting reports of GSWs scattered all over the place. I figured it was gang related.”

Dr. Fletcher chewed his apple for a moment. “I saw that, too, but unless the Crips and Bloods are recruiting from the Latino community or Best Buy, it’s not gang related.”

“What?”

Dr. Fletcher pushed his glasses up to massage the bridge of his nose. “I was saying that the GSWs were mostly Hispanic and white. Gang-on-gang violence doesn’t normally involve those racial groups, does it?”

Brenda thought for a moment. “How many did we have come in?”

“Oh...let’s see,” he said as he slid his glasses back into place. “Last count was twenty-two, I think.” He shrugged. “We’re going to see a significant rise in the ‘end of the world’ type injuries and behavior, I think. If people think this is

The Great Pandemic all over again, a good number will try to get away with looting and whatnot, just like before. If *that's* what we're facing, we're going to be in for a wild ride. L.A. got pretty nasty last go around."

"Wait," Brenda said, hand to her throbbing head. "That doesn't make sense."

"Why not? It's human nature to want to—"

"No, not the reaction to H5N1—or *whatever* it is we've got here. I'm talking about the GSWs. I walked past three different gurneys as the EMTs ran them into the ERs. Each one had at least a double-tap. One had a triple-tap."

"Okay, you lost me," he said, taking another drink of his coffee. "A *what?*"

Brenda cocked her head, trying to work the cobwebs of sleep deprivation from her mind. Something wasn't right and if her head didn't feel so damn fuzzy, she might be able to puzzle it out. "Okay, a normal gunshot wound is one, maybe two bullets. Over in the Sandbox, we'd occasionally get a stitcher. Where the victim is perforated by a trail of bullets up the leg or the side."

"Like in a drive-by," agreed Dr. Fletcher.

"Right. But a double-tap, that takes *skill*. It's where two bullets are placed on target real close together. The shooter aims and pulls the trigger twice in quick succession, with controlled movements to make sure that if the first bullet didn't take down the target, the second one does. Usually placed center mass to make sure the heart is stopped."

"Sounds like fancy shooting to me."

"It's how the military trains its best shooters. I'm talking Special Forces, that kind of thing. A gang banger is lucky to hit his target, first off. To pull off a double-tap takes a *lot* of training and skill."

"What if some Crip just got lucky?"

"Three different vics, all with double-taps and a *triple*-tap on one?" She shook her head. "No way that's luck. Maybe once. No, I've seen those wounds a lot in the Army. When we were attacked a few times at our bases, we had to go through the enemy dead and make sure...you know," she said.

"That they were enemies?" asked the surgeon, eyebrow raised.

"That they were dead," she replied coldly. "We weren't there to make friends and win the hearts and minds of the locals. We were there to kill as many of

them as possible to get Iran to surrender so America could focus on healing. But look,” she said, waving her hand, “the Iranians that I examined were nearly always taken down with double-taps. We had a lot of Rangers at our base. They’re pretty damn good shots.”

“So, let me get this straight,” Dr. Fletcher said around a mouthful of apple. “You think Army Rangers are out there in L.A. shooting people?” He grinned, white teeth flashing in the dimly lit room.

“No,” she laughed. “I think something strange is going on...I’m just trying to work it out so I don’t go crazy thinking that we’re facing H5N1, round two.”

“Fair enough,” he said, grinning.

The door to the lounge burst open and a breathless nurse stuck her head in, followed by the noise of a hospital in chaos. “Dr. Fletcher! The chief needs you, *now*. Oh, and you too, Dr. Alston. Come on, you’re not going to want to miss *this!*”

The doctors grabbed their gear and raced to follow the nurse in her pale-green scrubs, already heading off down the crowded hallway. She pushed her way past a few police officers, one with a bandaged head.

Brenda gasped as she stepped into the hallway behind Dr. Fletcher. “What the hell is going on?” she asked. There were people everywhere. Cops, paramedics, patients slumped against walls and sitting on the floor. More than one of the first responders was wounded, from the looks of all the bandages and torn clothing.

“It’s getting real hairy out there,” the nurse called over her shoulder. “ILI cases are up to about 40 an hour,” she said, gently placing her hand on a cop to move him aside. “GSWs are still coming in. Almost all of them are DOA. Now the police are getting wounded.”

“Did anyone say how?” asked Dr. Fletcher as he looked at Brenda. “Is there rioting or something downtown?”

“Nothing we can figure out, just shots coming from dark alleys or from behind. One cop who was over near the beach said someone dressed like a soldier pulled an assault rifle on him. He says his partner reported seeing boats by the coast, then this guy jumps up and yells something and starts shooting. Big

damn gun.”

Dr. Fletcher shook his head. “*That* makes no sense at all.”

“Did we get anything else?”

“No,” said the nurse as she pushed a supply cart aside and headed for the double doors that guarded the entrance to the critical care ward. There were two men in black suits standing to either side of the door. “He died. Blood loss. The guy had taken three shots to the chest. Punched right through his vest like it wasn’t even there.”

“Armor piercing rounds,” Brenda murmured. Dr. Fletcher raised his eyebrows.

Brenda was still processing the nurse’s last comment when the two men in suits moved in unison to block their way to the critical ward. The facts were adding up to something that was really off-the-wall. Boats off the coast, strange men sporting automatic rifles and armor-piercing rounds. Military precision gunshot wounds. Now these two guys who looked like FBI agents. She frowned, unable to put her finger on the root cause of it all.

“It’s okay,” the nurse said, nervousness evident in her voice. “This is Dr. Fletcher, and this is Dr. Alston.”

Without moving or acknowledging the nurse, the man on the right lifted his hand to his face and spoke quietly into his sleeve. Brenda looked at his clean, close-cropped hair, and noticed the wary look in his eyes which never stopped searching his surroundings. She surmised immediately that the guy had military training at a pretty high level.

She turned to the other guard, whose mannerisms were identical. He was watching everything without spending too much time on any one person in front of him. He was alert, awake, and ready. He had the same, clean-cut, crisp, cookie-cutter appearance as the man talking into his sleeve, except he was black.

“Who are you guys?” asked Brenda.

The man who spoke into his sleeve looked at her and his cold gray eyes sent a shiver down her spine. There was no emotion there at all. No stress. In the midst of all the chaos of the shootings and mysterious illness, these guards were acting as if there were nothing wrong in the world at all. And at 0430 in the

morning, no less.

4:30 am, she chided herself. *It's not oh-dark-thirty anymore—you're a civilian, remember?*

The one who had spoken into his sleeve touched his ear and nodded. "Okay, you're cleared to take them back." They stepped back and Brenda and Dr. Fletcher followed the nurse through the thick double doors.

"That was odd," said Brenda. She stopped in her tracks when she saw the hallway before them. This area of a hospital would normally contain a few crit-care nurses and surgeons carrying charts or equipment carts, maybe a few family members of patients milling around. Brenda was fairly certain that men dressed for combat should not be here. Tactical vests, M4 rifles, helmets, and a whole gaggle of guys in those black tactical suits. She leaned to look around Dr. Fletcher—was that a German shepherd down there?

"Janice, stop. Will someone please tell me what the *hell* is going on in my hospital?" barked Dr. Fletcher.

"Lewis," called a familiar gruff voice. "Over here," said the chief, waving from just down the hall. He was talking to a man in full battle load-out who nodded in agreement and marched off, his rifle hanging by a combat sling at his side.

"George, seriously, what the hell?" asked Dr. Fletcher with a sweeping gesture of his right arm that encompassed the overcrowded hallway. "We going to war?"

"Maybe."

"What?" said Brenda and Dr. Fletcher at the same time.

"We have a VIP down there in Suite Six."

"Who?" asked Dr. Fletcher.

"The President of the United States," said the chief, rubbing his eyes. "And I'm getting too old for this shit," he muttered.

"Okaaaay," said Brenda. "Why is *he* here? If this is another stunt to gain publicity for his re-election campaign..."

"He's presenting with what we think is our mystery ILI."

"How serious?" asked Dr. Fletcher.

“Right now, he’s got a fever of 104.5, half-delirious, increased heart rate and some bleeding from the mouth and ears. I swear, this thing looks more like hemorrhagic fever than influenza, but the tests—”

“How long?” asked Brenda.

“He’s been complaining of aches and pains for about 18 hours now, but took a real turn for the worse two hours ago. His personal physician made the call to get him here so he could be stabilized. They found what they thought was AFib on top of the flu.”

“Good Lord,” sighed Dr. Fletcher.

“And who are all *these* guys?” asked Brenda. She eyed the soldiers in the hallway. She was starting to wish her older brother Derek was here. He was a Ranger. She suddenly wanted someone right next to her, armed to the teeth, who she could trust.

“Those guys,” said the chief with a nod of his head, “are Secret Service. Outside of the people on this floor, no one knows the President is here. I’m told to make sure you understand this is a matter of urgent national security, what with Atlanta and all. No communications with the outside world until they say so. I don’t want to think what they’ll do to you if you get caught. Not under these conditions. Got it?”

Brenda shook her head in disbelief. She couldn’t even begin to try and process the fact that Atlanta had been wiped off the map the day before. There was nothing she could do about that and she had plenty of other things to worry about, right in front of her. “This is crazy.” She *really* wanted to talk with her brother, Derek.

And a martini. Definitely a martini.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” muttered the chief. “Look, I wanted my best people working on the President, Lewis, and you’re one of them. Dr. Alston, you’re the only one of us with experience in something...well, anything close to this.”

“What?” she gasped in surprise. “I’ve never dealt with anything like *this*—”

“Maybe not, but you’ve been in combat. Have you seen the GSWs coming in?”

Brenda had to quickly get her mental train back on the track after the sudden topic switch. “Uh...yes, they're pretty strange—”

“Not according to the Secret Service. The motorcade was ambushed on the way here. As a result, they're taking over the ward and turning it into an impromptu fortress until they can get the President out of here.”

“*Attacked?* By who?” she asked.

“They didn't stop to ask. They just plowed through the hail of bullets and got here as fast as possible. You should see their vehicles out back! Shot all to hell. I'm told they left several of their wounded men back out there in the streets somewhere. That's how seriously they're taking this.” He frowned. “They're having trouble contacting anyone outside the hospital, like their radios are being jammed or something. They think there's some sort of national, or at least regional, attack underway.”

“Who's attacking us? Whoever nuked Atlanta?” asked Dr. Fletcher. “I can't get my head around this...”

The chief shook his gray, balding head. “I don't know, and *they* don't either, if you ask me. Agent Sheffield,” he said, indicating a man in a tattered black suit talking with three others, “said he saw fully automatic weapons fire hit one of the motorcade vehicles from two different directions. Military-grade stuff, very high powered. Either the gangs got a hold of some new toys or...”

“Or *what?*” asked Brenda.

“Well, it's just speculation, but the rumor is there's some kind of assassination squad in L.A. trying to take out the President. The agents over there in the corner think it may be the North Koreans.”

“Oh my God,” muttered Dr. Fletcher. “We're at war?”

“What about the civilians?” asked Brenda. “If the President is here and these guys think he's not safe...that means whoever the hell is out there trying to kill him may know he's here. Everyone in this hospital is at risk now.”

The chief nodded. “I thought that, too,” he said with a sad smile. “There's nothing we can do. We can't evacuate the President; his vitals are too weak. We can't empty the hospital; there's just too many people. Besides, where would we send them? Every hospital in L.A. is bursting at the seams with ILI cases.” He

shook his head. “From what we can gather, every major hospital along the West Coast is in the same boat.”

“This place will be a circus when the media finds out...” said Dr. Fletcher.

“That won’t happen,” said the chief with a glance at the German shepherd, sniffing around doors and cabinets. “The media thinks the President is still at his hotel. Agent Sheffield figures we have a few hours before they start getting suspicious. But, he said they have ways to keep the media thinking the President has slipped away and moved up north. I don’t know what he’s talking about, but he says that should keep whoever is trying to kill him off guard as well. They’re trying to get military reinforcements until they can get the President out of here. Whatever the hell is going on, it’s serious.”

“Is he responding to treatment, then?” asked Brenda. She wondered if Derek was getting a call at this moment to mobilize and head into war. Would she be able to talk to her brother again? Would she ever see him again? She tried to fight the tears starting to form in her eyes. It *was* still her first day of work, technically.

“Not very well, but yes. He’s stabilized, which is more than can be said for most people in this hospital right now. Agent Sheffield says they had plans to get some of The Pandemic vaccine to the President before the trip but he refused on the advice of his political advisers. They said it would look cowardly and the media would eviscerate him for trying to act heroic and help the sick when there was no *chance* he could get sick. This close to the election, he listened to them.”

“Politics!” hissed Dr. Fletcher.

Brenda sniffed to get her emotions in check. *You are back in the Army, girl. Act like it!* “So they can just get him the vaccine now! We know it’s effective after exposure, it just takes longer. Right?”

“Right. But they no longer have any.”

“Any? *Why?*” she asked, confused.

“There was an order from on high to consolidate the remaining vaccine supply at the CDC’s strategic vault last week. No one thought anything of it,” said the chief.

“Strategic vault...” said Brenda, looking back at Dr. Fletcher. “That’s

Atlanta.”

“*Was,*” said the chief sadly. “I had a lot of friends down there...”

“But wait, I thought the CDC had all of the really important stuff buried deep underground in vaults...weren’t they designed to survive an attack by the Russians during the Cold War or something?” said Dr. Fletcher.

“They were,” said the chief, looking at his own hands.

“Oh my God, *that’s* why Atlanta was nuked. Even if the vaults survived, the whole *city* would be so hot, no one would be able to get in to bring any surviving vaccines out,” Brenda said, and slumped against the wall in exhaustion. “Why is this *happening?*” She slid to the floor, hands on her face. Exhaustion was knocking on her door again with the reminder that people could not function on two hours of sleep in 48-hour timespan.

“Without the vaccine, what hope is there for the President, or any of these people?” asked Dr. Fletcher. “Or us, for that matter? What if we catch it?”

“I don’t know,” muttered the chief sadly. “I just don’t know. I have to believe that those who have been previously exposed to H5N1—and survived—have a better-than-even chance of fighting this off.”

“That’s *something*, I guess. But...?” asked Dr. Fletcher.

“But...” said the chief, “we sent off samples of the first cases on Thursday. It’ll take a few days to be processed. We just don’t know,” he said, holding up his hands in a helpless gesture.

Just then, a nurse behind her circular desk at the end of the T-intersection of hallways, sneezed violently. The entire ward went deathly silent as all heads turned to look at the poor woman. She went pale—a trembling hand still over her mouth and looked around with wide eyes at all of the staring faces.

“God help us all,” said the chief.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAD

GLACIER NATIONAL PARK, MONTANA

CHAD HUNTLEY LAY on his side in the snow and tried to slow his breathing. He was a little surprised by the amount of snow this early in the season, but he figured he was high enough up in the Rockies that it was bound to snow sooner or later. He dusted the cold white powder from his weeks-old beard with the exposed fingers of his trigger hand.

He was so close. He wanted badly to take a peek over the boulder that he was hiding behind but was afraid the movement would blow his cover. Instead, he glanced down at the crude heartbeat monitor attached to his belt. The glowing point of light flickered but remained in the same spot on the monitor. The female cougar that had been tagged last year was acting erratically. He had been tracking her for a few increasingly cold days now and his suspicions grew the longer she sat still.

He adjusted the grip on his rifle. The well-traveled Henry lever action was chambered in .45-70 and Chad loved it. It wasn't as cool looking, he supposed, as the standard issue AR-15 his boss had issued him, but it had a *soul*. There was something that made him smile about the smooth polished walnut stock and heavy, solid barrel of the trusty Henry in his hands. It just felt...natural.

As a gust of wind cascaded cold air over the boulder and onto his face, he

thought he heard a low yowl come from the direction of his prey. The cougar sounded sick, sure enough. The heartbeat monitor showed the big cat was circling. Then it paused.

Time to move.

Chad slowly removed his father's old Stetson and set it gently in the snow next to him, letting the wind blow stray locks of his thick brown hair across his face. The cold air hit the dampness of his scalp and sent a shock through his body that was not completely unpleasant.

Slow as he could, Chad unstrapped the pack from his back and crawled his way up the side of the boulder. He was dressed in his custom winter ghillie suit made of white, gray, and brown scraps of painted burlap and twigs. He carefully pulled the hood up over his head. Since he'd started wearing it, and the dull brown-green one he wore in the warmer months, his success at taking sample animals had skyrocketed.

As far as he could see, the boulder before him was only about two feet high, but he was sure it would be a nice long drop on the other side. By the time he raised his eyes over the top of the snow-cruled boulder, he felt like he had just climbed Little Matterhorn with a deer on his back. He paused to survey the scene before him.

There she was. A big one. All at once, the fatigue threatening his muscles faded, replaced by the primal thrill he always felt when he was about to take an animal. The big cat's fur was a distinct tan color, rippling with the strength of the muscles beneath. She was pacing around in a wobbly circle, yowling and panting, tongue hanging out. He slowly brought the rifle up and put his eye to the scope, mounted on a base designed for a shotgun. This way, the scope projected closer to his face, freeing the action of the rifle from blockage. He settled the rifle on his cheek and looked through the scope.

The cougar's tongue was *definitely* darker than it should be if the cat were healthy. He could see right away her head wobbled side to side in an unusual manner.

Yup, she doesn't feel so good...

Chad steadied himself and forced his arms and back to relax and let himself

lean completely against the boulder. The rifle grew light as his mind focused on the sick animal in the scope. He put the cross-hairs just behind her left shoulder and tracked as she circled, stumbled, yowled and paused, panting. A few snowflakes began to drift across his vision in the scope. The storm he was expecting all day was almost here. The cougar's breathing created little jets of vapor that rose like a small cloud above her massive head. He was running out of time. He was still a two-hour hike away from shelter.

One breath. Breathe in, breathe out. Chad kept both eyes open. He waited until he was sure of the shot before putting his finger on the trigger. Breathe in, watch the target area. Cross-hairs locked, breathe out, he extended the exhale and started to gently squeeze the trigger.

The cougar froze, her shoulder blade suddenly blocking his angle on the big cat's heart. Something had spooked it. Chad held his breath and tried to calm his beating heart. He went over his actions silently, trying to figure out if he'd given himself away.

No, he could see through the scope that the cougar was intently focused on something else to the southwest. He was almost due east, downwind of the big predator. Whatever had captured her attention, she was intent on watching it. She was sniffing the air, eyes alert and ears forward, scanning, searching. For what?

Chad took his eye off the scope and slowly followed the gaze of the cougar to his left. There was a stand of evergreens there that partially blocked his view of the valley stretching down to the northern tip of Lake MacDonald. A second later he heard the sound. An engine. Two. Maybe three vehicles.

"What the hell?" he whispered to himself. Glacier National Park had been put under quarantine months ago. No one could get in or out without approval. His boss had made it clear that his job was to find the root of the plague and flush it out. The Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta needed samples. If some assholes slipped past the border and got in here, they could ruin a hunt that had taken half a week. Or worse, they could get themselves shot in his attempt to bag a sick critter.

Not to mention the whole park had been ringed with National Guard units patrolling the borders to keep lookie-loos out. Ignorance and fear made powerful

motivators, even a decade after the Blue Flu. Signs proclaiming the presence of Bubonic Plague in the park were good enough for most people, but boredom and alcohol bred bravery. He frowned.

“Crap,” he muttered. When he looked back to the clearing, the cougar was gone. He grunted and lay the rifle down on the boulder.

Well, there goes the element of surprise.

He slid down the back face of the snow-crusting boulder to his pack and rested with his back against the cold rock. He pulled out the heartbeat monitor. The blip representing the cougar was definitely absent. But now, on the very edge of the monitor’s range, he could see there were a few large clusters of blips. The monitor was calibrated for large animals—human size or above. It detected his uninvited visitors.

On the gusty breeze, he heard the wafting sound of engines growing louder. Whoever they were, they were getting closer and running right up into his hunting grounds. “Dammit,” he growled. They were not only going to spook the cougar, but any deer or wolves for miles around. He rummaged through his pack and brought out the field binoculars he always carried and repositioned himself on the sloping face of the boulder.

The early season snow was moving from the west and his vision through the tree line was obscured by what looked like fog. He realized the engine noise had disappeared. Hoping whoever it was down there had moved on, he scanned the area where the cougar had been looking. His hope was dashed. There, on the edge of a ridgeline about 500 yards out, a white Jeep appeared. As he watched, the front passenger door opened and a figure in woodland camouflage of some sort stepped out and stretched.

He could barely make out through the swirling flurries the roof of a second Jeep behind the first, just on the other side of the ridge. Now, two more people crested the ridge and joined the first. They stood there talking. He could see the first man gesturing with his arm, clearly encompassing the sloping ground before them—exactly where Chad was positioned. He knew behind him was Little Matterhorn, the imposing snow-covered mountain that brooded over Lake MacDonald.

“What the hell are *you* doing here?” he whispered. Four more men in camouflage joined the first three and stood quietly behind them. The other doors opened on the first vehicle and then three more men got out.

“What is this, a corporate retreat?” Chad asked, the snow swirling around his head.

It only took a few minutes for the men to unload from the two vehicles a large pile of crates and gear and place everything under camouflage tarps. Headlights cast beams of light through the snow and trees as the Jeeps turned and rolled off into the woods toward the lake. When the noise from their engines was lost in the snow-filled wind, Chad counted 18 remaining men, a whole lot of camping gear, and more rifles than he cared to see. He needed a closer look at what was going on.

He slowly lowered the binoculars and placed them in the fresh snow at his side. Just as slowly, Chad raised his rifle and peered through the scope. The man that appeared to be talking to the others made some more gestures to the pile of equipment. Then, two of them immediately began digging through the gear pile. The rest began to fan out into the clearing. They moved with confidence and made a box about 10 yards wide. Then, in a single coordinated movement, all of them dropped to one knee and brought their rifles up, scanning in front of them. But, it was the sharp synchronization of their movements that really spooked Chad.

“Holy shit...those aren’t hunters...” Chad whispered to himself. Through the rifle scope, he could clearly see the hard outline of the black guns the men in camo carried. They were clearly military rifles. He just wasn’t sure of the make. A few looked like AK-47s, but he thought it was his imagination, or the snow that was starting to obscure his view.

Chad panned back to the apparent leader of the group. He was using binoculars now, with huge, orange-tinted objectives. He was scanning the tree line and sweeping upward to view Little Matterhorn, the snow-capped mountain directly behind Chad’s position. Then the man next to him suddenly started to gesticulate excitedly, pointing in Chad’s direction. He was looking down at a little black box. The leader with the binoculars turned and looked straight at

Chad.

“Shit!” Chad dove for the ground. A shout echoed through the snow. He risked a peek over the boulder and saw the men—they *had* to be soldiers—fan out and start to move methodically toward his position. They were not running, they were keeping formation, covering each other and moving at a steady, deliberate pace. At that distance, Chad figured he had about ten minutes before they arrived. There were a few nasty ravines they’d have to cross to get up the side of the foothill he was perched on.

Another barked command from the leader of the large squad of men helped Chad quickly make up his mind.

The command sure didn’t sound like English to him, which he thought odd. Chad reckoned the gathering storm was playing tricks on his ears. At any rate, he had no idea who the men were with all the military hardware and had no intention of finding out. They did not look like the National Guard units that he’d seen every now and then. No, these guys were definitely...different.

Chad shoved his binoculars into his pack, strapped it on, and crawled away from the protection of his boulder, rifle slung over his shoulder. He donned his Stetson again and was damn glad to have it on his head. The wide rim of his father’s hat blocked the glancing snow from drifting into his eyes as he made his way as low to the ground as possible. He realized he was leaving a trail a mile wide, but figured that in this case, speed was more important than stealth. The storm was brewing up and his best chance was to put as much distance as possible between those men and himself.

He soon crested a ridge and descended far enough to stand without being seen by his pursuers. The storm winds were really starting to whip through the pines now, creating that oddly loud whisper so familiar to him. The violently blowing snow was producing a deafening roar and easily covered any trail noise he made. Stumbling between rocks and roots, Chad tried to make his way up the sloping base of Little Matterhorn.

The mountain loomed before him, a wall of rock and snow that offered protection. He was in the southern part of the large crescent-shaped valley formed by the collapsed northern flank of the mountain. Before him, the trees

thinned and over a few last ravines, the bare rocky ground sloped up at a dramatic rise nearly 1500 feet to the summit. He was already about 4000 feet above sea level and had to slow his pace. He wouldn't last long with his pack and rifle trying to run at this pace. The storm was building, dropping the light down to dusk levels. If he tripped and sprained an ankle in the dark, those soldiers would quickly overtake him.

That realization caused him to rethink his situation. The men following him were not running, they were walking, methodically—as if they knew what would happen if you tried to run while carrying gear in thin air. The rational part of his mind refused to believe that they were hunting *him* in particular, but he could not see any other reason why they were still on his trail, or even out here in the first place.

“What the hell is going on?” he shouted at the storm as he sucked in the cold air and thought frantically. He pulled down the brim of Dad's Stetson to block the biting snow in his face.

Chad peered around in the gathering dark and realized he couldn't continue south or east anymore. His cover would be gone in about a hundred yards as the pines thinned to scrub brush. After that, the protective foliage faded to nothing and he would be right out in the open.

If he could make it to his cabin, he'd have access to power communications gear, warmth, and security. His cabin though, was in the exact *opposite* direction: behind him, behind the soldiers hunting him, on the northeast shore of Avalanche Lake near the headwaters of Avalanche Creek.

He turned and looked north. Though he couldn't see it, he knew Mt. Vaught stood there at the entrance to the valley, blocking his escape that way. To the east, through the storm, he could barely make out the dark shape of Bearhat Mountain, towering directly over his cabin and Lake Avalanche. If he tried to sneak past his pursuers to the east, they would see him cross the open, rock-strewn field that graced the crescent skirt of Little Matterhorn's base. He had to reach the forest surrounding the lake so he could disappear into the trees.

He was starting to feel like a rat trapped in a cage—mountains all around him, soldiers chasing him, nowhere to run.

He fumbled in one of his pack's outer pockets and pulled out his cell phone. A quick check showed what he feared: *no signal*. As he put the cell back, he remembered the iridium satellite phone the CDC issued him in case of emergency. He took cover from the snow and wind behind a log and dug through his pack, cursing himself for not having it more accessible.

Just as his cold fingertips brushed the corner of the sat phone in the bottom of his pack, he heard a gunshot and instinctively ducked, dropping the pack and the sat phone. "Shit!" Chad immediately began frantically digging through the snow, looking for the phone.

"Oh my God, they're *shooting* at me!" he muttered to himself when a second shot echoed off the landscape. He decided it was too dangerous to try and contact help with the sat phone. Knowing there wasn't much anyone could do to help anyway, he quickly gathered up the spilled backpack with cold, shaking hands while looking around nervously. Satisfied he'd picked up everything, he struggled to get to his feet on unsteady legs.

Wait, did I grab the sat phone? He glanced down into the disturbed snow at his feet. Suddenly, it went from white to red.

When he looked up in surprise, Chad saw a bright red flare arcing through the storm directly overhead. He watched, mesmerized, as the red star plummeted toward the ground and crashing loudly in a copse of pine trees before it winked out. More foreign-sounding shouts echoed from farther up the valley startled him back to the task at hand.

The hell with this. I need to get out of here. If I can get back to the cabin, I'll use the radio there and get help.

He turned toward the long, steep western arm of Little Matterhorn. He knew on the other side of that mountain ridge, the land dropped sharply down to the adjoining valley and Lake MacDonald. The dim outline was all he could see through the worsening snowstorm, but he knew it was well-forested and he could maintain the high ground on his pursuers. Mind made up, he calmed his breathing and moved out to the west, trying to circle wide of his pursuers and hoping that the driving snow and steep terrain would give him enough time to escape.

After what seemed forever, he found himself just inside the tree line, as high up the slope as he dared. Chad was following the curve of the crescent landslide zone, working his way west and assumed his pursuers were well behind him now. Then he heard a muffled shout come from below and to his right. A light winked through the trees a few hundred feet below him in the snow. Another one bobbed and weaved even closer, followed by an echoed voice.

He crouched behind the trunk of a tree and closed his eyes to think, trying to ignore how cold he was. They couldn't *possibly* have come across the point where he'd turned and headed west already. There was no way they could've seen him—the storm was too intense.

So, how the hell'd they get around me like that?

Just then, a soft beep came from his belt. The heartbeat monitor was showing the line of soldiers approaching from the northeast.

“Oh *shit*,” he gasped. A sickening weight settled in the pit of his stomach. “The guy with the little black box—”

They were tracking him like he'd tracked the cougar. Clenching and relaxing his fists over and over again, he tried to keep his fingers warm and his frustration at bay.

There was no way he could evade them. As long as he was in range, they could zero in on him in even the worst blizzard. And, they were probably using some souped-up, state-of-the-art *military* version. Chad looked down sadly at his own old and well-used device. He shut his monitor off and slapped the cover closed, harder than necessary. He cracked the lid, but didn't care. It felt good to break something.

What the hell am I supposed to do now?

A new sound drifted over the snow. It was a rhythmic thumping, from somewhere out in the storm. “Jesus, you guys got a *helicopter*, too?” he said aloud to the wind whistling past as he watched the dancing flashlight beams of his pursers, farther downslope.

Chad looked along his path and shielded his eyes from the snow, now blowing straight into his face. The helicopter was the least of his worries though; any pilot would have to be crazy to attempt to get close to him in the storm.

Chad grunted and heaved himself to his feet, feeling uneasy about how fast he was tiring. Determined to give his pursuers a merry chase, he lowered his head and moved on, heading due north along the ridge and into the teeth of the storm. If he could just get out of range of their monitor, he might stand a chance. After all, he knew this land like the back of his hand.

He huffed and grunted and hauled himself farther away, pausing to rest against trees when he dared. Always, always they came after him; a few voices carried on the wind, a few lights flickering in and around the trees below and behind him. They were running him to ground as sure as he'd ever stalked an elk. His legs were starting to burn with fatigue. He was in pretty good shape but the stalks that he went on were more relaxed. He was burning through his energy reserves at an alarming rate.

Partly to satisfy his curiosity about who was chasing him and partly to gain a short, hard-earned respite from his arduous trek through the storm, he dropped to a knee by a snow-blasted pine. He gratefully leaned against the tree for support and brought his rifle up in order to focus the scope on the closest of his pursuers. Despite the blowing snow, he was able to spot one and hold him in the cross-hairs.

The man was definitely wearing woodland camouflage. It was dark green with brown streaks and dots and had a very mottled appearance. Definitely wasn't anything one could find at the local outfitters. He almost looked *Asian*. In all the snow, he stuck out like a sore thumb. That suggested they weren't concerned about being spotted. They had little respect for their prey. That, he decided was a mistake he could use to his advantage.

A cry to the right of the man he was watching caused him to shift his view. When the next man came into focus, Chad nearly dropped his rifle. That guy was aiming right at *him* and actually *fired*. Chad saw a brief flash before he heard a sharp crack and a chunk of bark showered down on his shoulder. Falling backwards on reflex, Chad's finger bumped the trigger on his rifle and it boomed into the storm, dwarfing the report from the military rifle.

Chad heard some screaming and many excited voices. Now he was *sure* they weren't American. A few more shots were fired in his direction, sending up puffs

of snow and bits of bark all around him.

“Oh, screw *this!*” he said and scrambled to his feet and took off north in a headlong dash through the storm. The realization that he’d just shot a man drove him forward even after his lungs were screaming for rest. If they weren’t chasing him before, they sure as hell were chasing him now. Over the din of the storm and the shouts from below, he heard the helicopter again.

He was in some kind of nightmare. *Had* to be.

CHAPTER NINE

CHAD

GLACIER NATIONAL PARK, MONTANA

CHAD KEPT up his top pace as long as physically possible and only stopped when he stumbled and crashed into a snow-covered log. He laid there in the cold snow, resting until the stars retreated from his vision. He rolled over on his side, placing his back against the frozen log. Only then did he realize he was half buried in the snow and a hell of a lot colder than he'd ever been before. Panting, his chest burned with the effort of his escape. His beard was coated in snow, making his face cold. His teeth began to chatter.

"Not...not...good...man..." he told himself as he struggled to brush the snow off his watch. It was only 3:37 p.m. He glared south through squinted eyes, looking through a tunnel of snow swirling around and about him. The storm had fully enveloped the mountains in darkness. This was no normal early season storm. It was a real blizzard. And he was about spent and still hours away from shelter.

Chased by those soldiers, he now felt a sudden, terrible kinship with the animals that he'd harvested for the CDC. Run to ground, exhausted, cornered. He had only to wait for a crack of a rifle and a bullet to end it all. He chuckled grimly. The Blue Flu couldn't touch him. The Black Death had no way to hurt him. But a little piece of lead might very well finish him off right here, propped

up against the snow-covered log.

He knew they were out there *somewhere*. Full dark would be coming soon, this time of year. That would be *real* bad news for him, stuck out here, freezing to death with no shelter, already exhausted. The prey had been run to ground.

A new voice called out. Chad held his breath.

“Mr. Huntley! *Chad Huntley!*” The voice came from behind the log, to the north—the opposite direction in which he had last spotted his pursuers. It was calm, authoritative, and loud. Whoever was speaking was *close*. And clearly spoke English.

“Sir, we’re here to help you! Can you hear my voice? Chad Huntley! Hell-loooooo!”

Chad gave up. Whatever was going to happen, hopefully it would all be over soon. Maybe they would take him to jail for shooting one of those guys back there. He didn’t care anymore. He just wanted out of the damn storm. He feebly raised a gloved hand and tried to speak. His voice croaked out a reply but it was lost in the howling wind. He waved his arm over his head, back and forth. He stirred, trying to raise himself on one elbow and keep waving. Chad was shocked to see how fast his body succumbed to the elements once the initial adrenaline rush ended. He felt weak as a kitten.

“Got movement over here!” shouted the voice, closer now.

“There he is!” called out a second voice, almost on top of him.

A shape appeared out of the snow as it slid over the top of the log and landed next to him with a muffled thump. Chad was expecting the woodland camouflage of his tormentors but was greeted with someone wearing *white* camouflage, and decked out as if he was going to war. The man was wearing a military helmet, snow goggles and a neoprene mask over his face—all white. The man was also wearing a white vest with bulging pockets and a rucksack on his back. He carried a wicked-looking machine gun.

“Sir, are you Chad Huntley?” said the masked figure, bending low to speak clearly through the wind.

“Yeah,” Chad replied hoarsely.

“Are you okay? Are you injured?”

“Cold...tired...”

“Okay. Just relax. I’m Staff Sergeant Garza. We’re gonna get you out of here, okay? I need you to put your rifle down first, though.”

Two other forms appeared out of the snow like ghosts, dressed like Garza. They both knelt down next to Chad and looked him over. One soldier took Chad’s Henry rifle and looped its sling over his shoulder.

The other turned to look around and called out into the air, “Anvil, this is Hammer 2, Actual.”

Garza was trying to help Chad to a sitting position and he could hear over the soldier’s in-helmet headset the static-filled reply, “Hammer 2, Actual, this is Anvil, go ahead.”

“We have the package—I say again: we have the package. The trees are too dense here, better call off our ride. We’ll head to the secondary LZ.”

“Anvil copies all. You got twenty minutes. The storm is eatin’ the gas up, how copy?”

“Shit,” the soldier said. Then louder, “Roger, Anvil—Actual copies all. We are Oscar Mike.”

“Somebody help me get him up,” said Garza.

“I’m...I’m *sorry*,” said Chad through clenched teeth. “I didn’t...mean to *shoot* him—”

“Calm down, sir, you’re going to be fine,” the soldier replied. “Wait, shoot? Shoot *who*?”

“Those g-guys back there,” Chad said, weakly pointing south. “Been chasing me since b-before noon...soldiers I think. Hunting me across the damn mountain.”

“What kinda shitshow we just walk into, Cap?” came a gruff voice from the other side of the log.

“Stow it, Donovan. Get your ass up that ridge and check it out.”

“Hooah,” the man replied and climbed over the log with as much grace as an elephant. He carried a long gun with a large scope on it.

“Who...who are you g-guys?” Chad was helped over the log by Garza and another man. He watched as the ghost he assumed was Donovan moved swiftly

off into the storm in a crouch, without hesitation. Chad knew the man was walking into a trap. He struggled to get the attention of his...captors? Rescuers?

“Sir, calm down, what is it?” asked Garza.

“Trap!” said Chad hoarsely. “There’s a dozen guys following me—armed...*soldiers* I think,” he gasped and grabbed Garza’s arm in a desperate grip. “Heartbeat monitor...*tracking me...shot* at me!”

“Shit,” said Garza through his facemask. He called out over the storm, “*Sir!*”

The leader easily slid over the log and crouched next to Chad. “What is it, Garza? This guy okay?”

“Yes sir, but he just informed me he’s being pursued by twelve armed men, he assumes they’re soldiers. Thinks they got a beater-scope—they’ve been tracking him.”

“You serious?” The helmeted head tilted in Chad’s direction. “Who the hell *are* you?”

“Hammer 2-1 to Hammer 2!” squawked Donovan’s voice. The sound was in stereo as Chad heard it over the headsets of the soldiers on either side of him.

“Actual, here, go ahead, 2-1.”

“I got 15-plus foreign foot mobiles in front of me. From the looks of them, I’d say North Koreans.”

“Get out of there on the double, 2-1. On me, *now!*” To the rest of the wraith-like soldiers gathered around the log, he said, “Deacon, Tuck, Zuka, you three secure the LZ, and take Mr. Huntley with you. Garza, you’re with on me. Bring that flyswatter. We’ll wait for Donovan and secure the retrograde.”

Strong hands helped Chad to his feet and pulled him north into the storm. “Come on, sir, we got you,” said the soldier on his left.

Chad figured he was getting delirious. He swore to himself he just heard that man say to Garza to bring his flyswatter. Before he could ask any questions, he was forcibly turned around and half-pulled, half-marched north into the teeth of the storm.

As they staggered along, the slope of the ridge finally gave way and started leading them down toward the Avalanche Creek valley. The going got easier, they lost altitude, and Chad could feel some strength returning to his cold limbs.

“Who the hell *are* you guys?” he gasped as two soldiers lead the way with weapons up and pointed forward. The third disappeared into the blowing snow behind them.

“Don’t worry, we’re the good guys,” the one on the right said. The one on the left chuckled softly.

Distant popping sounds carried by the wind reached them. The two soldiers in front of Chad froze and dropped to a knee, looking around warily. The one on the right turned to Chad and held up a gloved hand in front of his face mask with the index finger pointing up. Chad nodded to indicate he understood the signal: *be quiet*.

The soldier motioned again with his hand; he moved his hand slowly, palm-down facing the ground. Another message: *get down*. Chad lowered into a crouch. There were a few sharp cracks that Chad recognized as belonging to the rifles of his dogged pursuers who’d been tracking him throughout the hellish snowstorm. There was a loud *bam-bam-bam-bam* in immediate response.

Chad nervously watched the soldiers’ silent hand signals flash back and forth. He kept silent and listened, straining to hear anything else over the howl of the snowstorm. The wind gusted and the sounds of the firefight vanished. The soldier on the right tilted his head as if he was listening to something, then nodded and turned to the one on the left. They stood up and motioned Chad to follow.

“Let’s go, sir, we gotta *hustle*, now.” Without waiting for a response, they took off at a jog.

“Wait!” said Chad as he struggled to catch up. How the hell could those guys be running? They were carrying packs bigger than his and looked to be wearing body armor as well.

“Don’t worry, sir, we’re not leaving you,” a voice said behind him.

“Jesus!” Chad said, whirling in surprise and nearly stumbling headlong into a snowbank. “What the hell is going on?” he shrieked as the white-clad ghost grabbed his arm and spun him forward again.

“This way, sir. *Move!*” More popping and the bark of bigger guns flitted through the trees and snow. Someone was fighting back there and it was getting

louder. Then, as they continued on, the only sounds he heard were his own ragged breathing, his heart pounding in his ears, the crunch of his boots in the ankle-deep snow, and the ever-present howling of the wind.

Finally at the base of the ridge, Chad and his escort paused at the tree line, where a service road ran east-west. Chad looked with longing off to the right, down the road toward his cabin on the shores of Lake Avalanche. Just a few minutes by ATV, or an hour on foot. To the left, the road followed the MacDonald Creek valley between Little Matterhorn to the south and massive form of Mt. Vaught to the north. If they went that way, they'd be funneled right into Lake MacDonald.

The three soldiers put their heads together and discussed something while Chad stood there, looking at the road. Finally, one of them turned to him and said, "Okay, sir, the LZ is just on the other side of those trees there, maybe two hundred yards. Looks like there's a creek or river or something—"

"That's MacDonald Creek," said Chad. If he strained his ears, he could just barely hear the noise of the swiftly flowing glacial creek as it rushed toward Lake MacDonald.

"Right, okay. Well, we're going to assume the enemy has a patrol out *there* —" the soldier said, pointing to the east. "And they'd be stupid not to have someone set up over there," he said, pointing to the west. "That's Mt. Vaught, due north, right?"

"Yeah," sighed Chad. Trapped again.

"Then that's where we'll go. Did you see any vehicles with these men chasing you? Any aircraft?"

"I saw three Jeeps when they first arrived," offered Chad weakly. "They were down that way, and were driving east," he said first pointing to the right, then to the left, toward the lake. "I heard a helicopter later..."

"Copy that, sir. That helo you heard could have been us, though." He took a quick look left and right down the snow-covered road. "Okay, we're going to sprint across the road on my count, then regroup inside the tree line on the other side of that ditch over there. Got it? Don't stop—"

Some more gunfire, closer than ever, erupted behind them, up the ridgeline.

The soldiers didn't pay much attention to it but Chad ducked. He had heard that same sharp sound when the bark was blasted off the tree above his head a few hours ago.

"It's all right, sir, you're fine. But remember: run, do not stop for anything until you reach the trees. Okay?" Without waiting for Chad to acknowledge, he turned to his comrades and said, "One, two, three—*go, go, go!*"

Chad bolted and kept pace with the soldiers as they raced across the road, kicking up snow in their wake. From his left, Chad heard a loud *bang* and a clump of snow flew up in front of his face. He screamed and ran through it, tripping off the edge of the road into the ditch as more shots rang out and blasted snow from the road.

"Sniper!" someone called out.

One of the soldiers cleared the ditch in a leap and disappeared into the snowbank on the other side. The soldier immediately pivoted in place and fired a three-round burst from his rifle toward the east into the darkness. The gunfire thundered in Chad's ears and he screamed.

The other two dropped down in the ditch, oblivious to the shots fired at them and physically hauled Chad to the tree line a few yards away.

Once within the safety of the trees, the soldiers all dropped to a knee and waited. Chad was panting from fright and exertion. He fell down on his hands and knees in a cloud of snow. He'd never been so scared in all his life. Even when Blue Flu was killing everyone in his neighborhood, he hadn't been really afraid. He remembered feeling...nothing. But now, with some sniper shooting at him, Chad came face-to-face with a deep-seated fear that he had never known before. He felt his bowels begin to liquefy.

"All good?" asked one of the soldiers.

"Hooah," said one.

"You know it," replied the other in a cocky tone.

"I think I'm gonna puke," Chad muttered to the laughter of the others.

"Aw, you did all right, sir. For a civilian. Not bad at all," said the soldier next to Chad. He gave Chad's shoulder a brotherly slap.

The first soldier spoke again over his comrades' laughter, "Hammer 2,

Actual, this is Hammer 2-2: be advised, enemy sniper along the forest road, call it a 150 yards to the east, north side of the road. Repeat, enemy sniper north of your location. How copy?”

“What the hell is going on...this is *crazy*...” muttered Chad, trying to hold himself together.

“Actual copies all. Do not engage, repeat: do not engage the sniper—we *have* to make the LZ. Have engaged enemy foot mobiles. Confirm on the NKors, there’s only a few left, though. Get to the LZ and secure, we’re coming in hot!”

Chad could barely hear the words over the nearest soldier’s headset, but he could clearly hear the popping of gunfire in the background as the leader spoke.

“Roger that, Actual.” The soldier turned to the others. “You heard the man, let’s go.” They all stood up. He looked at Chad. “Okay, sir, we’re almost to the LZ—”

“The what?” asked Chad.

“Landing zone. Our ride is coming in to pick us up in a few minutes. We got to cross this creek.”

Chad followed the three soldiers deeper into the woods a few steps and finally understood what the soldier had said. “You gotta be *kidding* me! A helicopter?”

He could hear MacDonald Creek before he saw it—an icy-cold torrent of water, speckled with big rocks and boulders, perhaps ten yards wide. He stood on the south bank and watched first one, then the other of the soldiers scamper across the creek using the bigger rocks as footrests. They waved at him from the far side. Muttered to himself about the impossibility of his situation, Chad followed and managed to make it across the cold rushing water with only one wet boot.

“I don’t know how much farther I can go,” Chad said, bent over double.

The three soldiers chuckled in response, weapons still at their shoulders as they walked, scanning everything to the front and sides of their position. They continued into the trees again, following the slope of the ground north toward Mt. Vaught.

Chad paused and looked up at the massive flank of the mountain. They were

deep within the forest now so the wind and snow had died down considerably.

“You guys train for this kind of thing?” he asked, panting.

“SSDD to us, sir,” said one.

“Hooah!” replied the other with a laugh.

“What?” said Chad, his world suddenly starting to spin out of control. Reality seemed to be taking a backseat today. He could feel his knees starting to get weak. He needed rest, food, and warmth, and he needed them *now*.

“Same shit, different day.”

One of the soldiers studied a map. “Come on, we still got about a hundred yards to go before we reach the LZ.” He turned upslope. “There’s a clearing up there somewhere, but it’ll be a bit of a steep hike.”

Chad threw his hands up. “Wait a damn minute. Just *wait!* I’m not going *any* farther until someone tells me just what the *fuck* is going on here!” said Chad as he came to a stop. He leaned on a tree, panting. “I was out minding my own business, bringing down a cougar for a sample, the next thing I know these guys show up with guns and start tracking me. Then, next thing I know, they’re *shooting* at me...and...and I shoot one of *them*...”

“He’s gonna pop,” whispered one of the soldiers.

“No he’s not...he’s gonna freak,” replied the second.

“Then *you* guys show up and scare the shit out of me, now we’re running from a bunch of North Koreans...and...and snipers, there’s a gun battle going on somewhere behind us and you expect me to get on a goddamn *helicopter*—” He gasped for a cold breath.

As if in confirmation of his point, the *whop-whop-whop* of helicopter rotors started to register in the distance. Chad held his hands up again in a frustrated shrug. “I give up.”

The three soldiers looked at each other. “Yeah, that’s about the long and short of it. But...” He held up a finger. “Correction, sir: we do not run from *anyone*.”

“Fuckin’ A, bubba,” grunted the taller man to Chad’s right.

“He ain’t lyin’,” said the shorter man with a shake of the head, high-fiving the one on Chad’s right.

The soldier in charge looked up, listening to the helicopter in the distance

over the wind of the storm. “Satisfied?” he asked Chad. To the others, he said, “C’mon ladies, that’s our ride. Twenty yards.”

Chad crossed his arms and frowned. He still had no idea who these men were in their white camouflage, face masks, and helmets. The leader sighed and nodded to the man on his left who took a few steps toward Chad and lowered his weapon. He peeled back a Velcro tab of snowy camo and revealed a white-and-gray U.S. flag and below it a curved patch that read “SPECIAL FORCES.” Under that patch was a similar-shaped one that read “RANGER.”

“Does that answer any of your questions?” said the soldier, his breath a puff of vapor escaping through his facemask. Chad could hear the smile in the man’s voice.

Chad blinked. “Rangers? U.S. Army Rangers? Like, *the* Rangers?”

“We lead the way,” the masked, yeti-like figure said. He turned and started walking through the snow, rifle up again.

Chad let his arms fall to his sides in disbelief. “Well, *okay* then.” He took a few steps then stopped again. “But,” he said, pointing at the Ranger, “I want a *real* explanation when we...get *wherever* the hell you’re taking me.”

“I’ll let Captain Alston fill you in. That shit’s above my pay-grade, sir,” was the reply. The other two laughed.

“Now come on, sir, we gotta get going. They’re gonna be setting up claymores along the road. You don’t want to be anywhere near here when the North Koreans find those.”

CHAPTER TEN

DENNY

SALMON FALLS, IDAHO

DENNY LOOKED around his house one last time. He stood in the living room dressed in his winter hunting gear and checked to see if he was forgetting anything. In the large aluminum frame pack by the front door, he had two weeks worth of jerky and freeze-dried meals, his cold-weather camping gear, first aid, and ammo. His deer rifle, an old bolt-action .308 he had picked up at one of the ubiquitous estate sales following the Blue Flu, leaned against the wall next to his pack. Strapped to the white-and-brown-mottled camouflaged pack was his wooden hunting bow and a quiver of homemade arrows fletched with feathers off a turkey he had taken last season.

He had been watching the news, preparing, cleaning his gear, and getting ready to bug out if necessary. He couldn't shake the overwhelming urge to leave—yet, now he was just looking for a reason to stay. Certainly nothing on the news had given him any hope. The flu was spreading and rioting was breaking out in the larger cities as emergency responders were getting sick and becoming incapacitated.

In fact, some in the media were prognosticating that it would only be a matter of time before mass hysteria set in—much like what was experienced during The Great Pandemic. They were predicting that thousands would be

dying and soon, whether the direct result of the mystery flu itself or the widespread violence and unrest stemming from a general collapse of law and order.

On top of all the worry about the flu and rioting, satellite communications and television service had been increasingly spotty in the last 12 hours. It was hard to get a signal on TV or cell phone—and that made *no* sense. Satellites don't get sick.

On a whim, he walked over to the mantel and took down the picture frames holding his wedding photo and the picture of Grandfather Red Eagle. He wanted to take the photos with him. After all, who knew what would happen in the coming days.

Not for the first time that day, his mind drifted to the holocaust visited upon Atlanta the day before. The chaotic news reports had few facts and much speculation, but they all agreed on one thing: Atlanta was gone. All those souls, snuffed out in a brilliant flash, all those lives and hopes and dreams, erased in a heartbeat as if they never existed.

The idea was almost too great to imagine. If he hadn't lived through the Blue Flu and seen so many millions of people die around the world, he would have probably been paralyzed by shock. Atlanta. *Nuked*. It really was unbelievable. America was at war with no one at the moment, and no one claimed responsibility. He shook his head sadly.

All the news channels carried the same updates: terrorist groups were quickly lining up to say that while they were happy it happened, it wasn't *them* that launched the missile. No one wanted to bring down the inescapable wrath that was sure to land on the group that claimed responsibility. Countries around the world were sending condolences and asking what they could do to help.

Denny started to pull the pictures out. He stopped. If he took these big photos, they'd just get damaged in his pack or even worse, ruined. The pictures and people depicted in them would never look this good again. He had watched his wife wither and die once before.

"I will take you in my heart." He gently placed a hand on the picture of Grandfather and said a prayer for *Mishe Moneto* to watch his trail. He gently

kissed the picture of Emily, his wife, and put the 8x10 frames back on the mantel.

Denny found himself staring at the tomahawk that hung over the fireplace above the pictures. Grandfather had made it for him when he was just a kid on the res and he'd kept it with him his entire life, always giving it a place of honor in his home. The eagle feathers that hung from the hickory shaft brought a smile to his face.

He took it down and tested the heft in his hands. Holding the ancient weapon of his people made him remember all of the afternoons Grandfather had him practice wielding the wicked-looking blade. It had a flat top, making the slightly curved cutting edge look off-balance. Opposite the eye—the forged socket where hickory met steel—there was a wicked-looking spike that had been covered by a cork sheath for decades.

Denny pulled the protective cork cover off and spun the tomahawk in his hands, shifting his weight back and forth from foot to foot, just like Grandfather had taught him.

“Always move, always stay on the balls of your feet, Little Spear. Never stop moving and swinging. Keep the tomahawk singing its war-song and no enemy will stand before you. Use momentum—yours and your opponent’s—to add strength to your strike and keep your foe off-balance. This is what was taught to me by *my* grandfather.” Grandfather’s words still echoed in his mind as the weapon sung through the air. It felt like it was a part of his arm, a part of him. It felt good.

Denny smiled and looked at the picture of his grandfather. The weight of the tomahawk in his hand was comfort from his past. “*Niyaawe*,” he said. He held the weapon up in front of Red Eagle’s picture. “Thank you, Grandfather.”

Standing there holding his ancestral weapon, Denny noticed lights turn on in the Andertons’ house. “About time!” he said in relief. He ran out the front door and across the yard, squinting his eyes in the light blowing snow.

There was already an inch or so on the ground as he quickly jogged across the side yard. He saw John’s Cadillac parked askew in the driveway, the right front-end crushed. There was steam coming out of the grill and liquid leaking

onto the driveway, melting the snow. The windshield was smashed-in on the passenger side, a spider web of cracks emanating from a 3" diameter impact point in the upper-right corner. Something dark was smeared across the window. It looked like blood.

Denny frantically raced up the front steps, three at time. He pounded on the front door. After a few tense moments, the door opened and John stood there before him, breathing hard.

"Denny! Thank God," he said, hastily looking up the street over his neighbor's shoulder. "Come in, come in."

Unconsciously, Denny secured his tomahawk in the bar holster attached to his belt. He put both hands on John's shoulders. The older man was pale and sweating. "John, are you okay? Where's Ruth? I was getting worried these last few days!"

"I am so sorry, Denny," John said, nodding his head in thanks and leading Denny into the kitchen. He pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead. "We just got back from the hospital—we're both fine. Really!"

"What happened? Where's Ruth?"

"She's taking some pillows and sheets down to the shelter," John said. He looked out the window and sighed. "I don't know how much time we have, son. You may want to join us tonight, or at least lock your place up good and tight."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we went out for dinner Wednesday night..."

"I knew it!" laughed Denny.

John looked at him oddly but shrugged, filling a glass with water from the tap. "Anyway, at dinner we heard the waitress talk to some other customers about the flu spreading out west. Then someone mentioned the school would be closed Thursday...well, one thing led to another and we decided to take some cash out—just in case, mind you—on the way home. I don't know where the other car came from, but suddenly he was right there in front of me. I just couldn't brake in time. He was trying to get to the bank, too, I think."

"Your car looks pretty bad, John."

"I know, but it looks worse than it really is. It still runs—that Caddy is built

like a tank! After we got the police to the scene, we were advised to take Ruth to the hospital. She had a nasty cut on her forehead. Turns out it was superficial, but she bled like a stuck pig,” he said with a chortle.

“Thank goodness she’s okay,” said Denny, relief in his voice. Ruth was like the grandmother he never knew.

John waved a hand. “Psh, my Ruthie is a tough ol’ bird. Little cut was nothing to her. She’s had eight children—natural, mind you, no drugs,” he said proudly. “She told the nurses that and you should have seen the looks on their faces!” He took another drink of water and grew serious.

“When you didn’t come home, I started to worry,” Denny said.

“Yeah, well, they wanted to keep her overnight for observation and then they had to x-ray my neck...whiplash or some such nonsense. I feel fine. And I told the doctor that, too. They had a bunch of kids from the school show up with the flu and I guess they just plain forgot about *us*. Don’t look at me like that. I said, I feel *fine*. But do they listen to me? No.”

“So you just walked out?” asked Denny.

“Oh, no, not really. I made an awful stink about letting us go and finally they did—*after* a crash course on flu prevention. It’s really starting to get bad on the coasts. Scary. Glad we live up here in the mountains.”

“Yes, I’ve been watching the news. It does not look good,” Denny said sadly. “I fear a lot of people are going to die...”

John was quiet for a moment. “Yes...we agree. It—this all seems very similar to...you know.” He took another sip. “Anyway, since the car wasn’t too banged up, we decided it’d be a good time to visit our son, Eldridge. He lives about halfway between here and the bank,” he said, gesturing over his shoulder. “Spent some time there with the grandkids, you know. Well, today we went back to the bank after watching things get worse out there and...” His hands started to shake as he reached for the faucet to refill his glass.

“What happened?” asked Denny. Salmon Falls was not exactly a hotspot for crime. If someone got a parking ticket, half the town knew by dinner.

“Some punks tried to rob us. Rob us, Denny! They had a knife and a bat...” He put a hand to his face. That’s when Denny noticed the tear in John’s shirt on

his left arm, crusted brown material around the edges. The knuckles of his neighbor's hand were red and bruised.

"John, you're hurt!"

"What? Oh, this? Just a scratch. The punk with the knife got lucky. Thought he could take the old Mormon. Didn't know I was in the boxing club back in college, did he?" John threw a couple punches over the table with such finesse for one his age that Denny had little trouble believing a teenager would not last long against his Mormon neighbor.

"Well," he sighed. "His friend with the bat had an attitude, too. That's why the windshield on my car got busted. He smashed it while I was teaching his friend to respect his elders. In the end, I decided discretion was the better part of valor and got back in the car—to get Ruth out of there, y'see." The older man *harrumphed*. "Never did get our cash."

"That's *crazy!*" exclaimed Denny in disbelief. Things like that just did not *happen* in Salmon Falls, flu crisis or not. "Did you recognize any of them?"

"Me? No. Ruthie though, she says that two of them had letter jackets, you know, from the football team? Yeah...I guess letting the kids out of school was a bad idea after all."

Squealing tires in the distance made both men jerk up and look toward the front door. "I knew it!" said John as he got to his feet. "Little good-for-nothings were following us! I *told* Ruthie there was a car tailing us..."

Denny sprinted over to the front room windows and watched a car whip into the cul-de-sac, tires chirping on the asphalt and park along the curb at the end of the Anderton's drive, blocking John's car. Four teenagers got out, all wearing letter jackets with large football patches on the shoulders.

"We ain't done with you, old man!" one of them shouted.

Denny frowned. He recognized them well enough. Two were troublemakers in his American History class and the other two were just followers. Jeb Townsen, the largest of the group, pulled a baseball bat out of the blue, four-door import and casually swaggered up to John's car.

"This is for Billy, you old coot!" He reared back and smashed the rear window on the large Cadillac.

John grabbed Denny's left shoulder. "It's not worth it, son. Come with me—let's get down in the shelter with Ruthie. We'll lock up tight and they'll eventually go away."

Anger bubbled up from deep inside Denny. They were students—*his* students—and he was their teacher. He had to do something. He felt responsible for them, somehow.

"I'll handle this, John." He opened the front door and stepped out, the light snow swirling around the front porch.

"Denny, wait—"

"Mr. Tecumseh?" asked the smallest of the four, Johnny Parks. His eyes grew large. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Shut up, Johnny," hissed Jeb. He glared at Denny, the anger on his face, barely controlled, gave Jeb a half-wild look—something he had never seen before. He certainly did *not* look like the Jeb Townsen that Denny was always asking to be quiet in class—that much was certain.

"Boys," said Denny, "you know you're going to be paying Mr. Andertons for that car window. Now don't make it worse and force me to call your parents *and* the police."

He walked down the porch steps casually, but never took his eyes off the group. He was only a few strides away from Jeb when the young hothead raised the bat as if to swing at him.

"I don't know what you're doing here, but *you* ain't our problem right now. We're here for the old fart. Send 'im out. He beat up my brother and I'm gonna get my payback."

Denny put his hands on his hips and put on his best stone-faced Indian look, narrowing his eyes and staring the four boys down. He was a good head taller than all but Jeb and wider through the shoulders. The wind kicked up a notch and sent his loose hair in a swirl around his head. His right hand slowly slid down his hip until it brushed the cold steel of the tomahawk on his belt. So far, the teenagers had not noticed his weapon.

Jeb took a step forward and looked ready to swing. "Don't try to scare me with your Indian bullshit—I ain't no *freshman*."

“You’re not going to be getting an ‘A’ in English either, from the sound of it,” Denny replied. He got a couple grins from the others. Jeb’s face reddened and his hands tightened on the bat.

“Denny, I don’t want any trouble. You hear me? Just have them clear outta here and we’ll call it even,” called out John from behind him.

Damn.

“There you are, you sonofabitch! I’m gonna beat your ass for what you did to Billy!” Jeb roared and took another step forward.

“Billy got what he deserved, Jeb,” Denny said, struggling to keep his voice calm. “Why were you guys trying to rob John, anyway? What’s gotten into you?”

“It’s the end of the world, dumbass!” spat Jeb. “My dad says so—it’s all over the news. The Blue Flu is *back*! Hell, even President Denton got it!”

“Yeah, they think he’s so bad they can’t even let him leave that hospital in California,” said Johnny, peering around the side of his bigger teammate.

“Shut *up*!” barked Jeb. He pointed the bat over Denny’s left shoulder at John. “Your ass is *mine*, old man.”

“Whatever is going on elsewhere in the country doesn’t give you the license to raise hell and go all *Mad Max*, Jeb. Look around you, the world is *not* ending. It’s *not* the Blue Flu. Now put the damned bat *down*.”

Jeb glared defiantly at his teacher. “Get out of my way or I’ll lay your ass out in the snow!”

Denny held his breath to calm his nerves. This was getting quickly out of hand. The stupid kid was about to force his hand. He’d been hoping it was all a bluff, just Jeb trying to earn macho points in front of his buddies, but when he took another step toward Denny, that hope had fizzled.

“If you want Mr. Andertons, you’ll have to go through me, Jeb. Think about this. Don’t make me call the police.”

“Go ahead, *kemosabe*,” sneered Jeb. “My dad will come down here and pump your gut full of lead if you lay a hand on me. He never did like you.”

Like father, like son. So be it.

“Have it your way, Jeb. I just don’t want to hurt you.”

Jeb laughed, a crazed look in his brown eyes. “You? Hurt *me*? I’m the one with the bat—”

The laughter died in his throat when Denny unleashed and raised his tomahawk in one lightning-fast motion. “And I have *this*.”

“Look!” gasped one of the other kids. Denny did not bother to look. His eyes were locked on Jeb’s and he smiled as the kid’s eyes widened in surprise.

Jeb’s eyes narrowed. Denny could almost see the courage return to his opponent.

“Ah, you don’t know how to use that thing! It’s a *prop*,” Jeb called over his shoulder, “Halloween costume!” He spoke quietly to Denny. “I got two state records with *this*.”

Jeb cocked the bat and shifted into a batter’s stance. He looked at Denny, pure hatred in his eyes. He shifted his left foot forward and started to swing.

“Jeb, *don’t!*” shrieked one of the boys.

In a movement that would have made Grandfather proud, Denny lurched forward, closing the distance to Jeb in a heartbeat. The young punk barely had time for the surprise to register on his face before Denny body-checked him with his shoulder. He used his momentum to spin around behind Jeb and let the shaft of his tomahawk deflect the bat as easily as if it were nothing more than a cardboard tube. When Jeb turned to try and pull his bat back, he found the razor-sharp edge of the tomahawk resting against smooth skin of his throat.

Looking down his outstretched arm and along the haft of the tomahawk to the milk-white face of the teenager, Denny said two words, “Drop it.”

The bat made a muffled sound as it hit the snow-covered grass.

“Holy *shit*,” whispered one of the other kids behind Denny.

Without taking his eyes off Jeb, Denny said loudly, “I don’t think there’s anything more here for you boys. Time you got in your car and left.” When no one moved, he said louder, “*Now*.”

Defiant to the end, Jeb narrowed his eyes and tried to reclaim some cockiness. “You made a big mistake, *kemosabe*. When my dad hears about this—”

“Jeb, your dad is the town drunk. If he wants to start something with me, you

tell him I could use another scalp for my collection. Now get the hell out of here and *don't* come back.” He flicked the tomahawk away so that it left a stinging welt on Jeb’s neck but didn’t draw blood. The teenager winced and then stooped to grab the bat, one hand on his throat.

“Leave it,” said Denny, pointing toward the bat with his weapon. “Go.”

“Fuckin’ red-skinned bastard,” muttered Jeb as he hurried to Johnny’s car, hand on his neck. He got in the front passenger seat and slapped the side of the car, staring at Denny through the open window. “This ain’t over!” he yelled as the car spun out in the cul-de-sac, kicking up snow in its wake. Someone in the car was hooting like a Hollywood Indian.

Denny stood there on the lawn, watching them until the car, its horn still honking, turned the corner and sped off down the road into the gathering dusk. Finally, he exhaled. His hands were shaking.

“That was one hell of a performance, Denny,” said John, clapping him on the back.

“They’ll be back,” Denny said.

“I know,” said John quietly. “But they won’t get us. We’ll be locked up in the shelter.”

“*Skutelawe*,” muttered Denny, still watching the road through the snowflakes drifting down out of the sky.

“Huh?” said John.

“It’s Shawnee for ‘turtle,’” said Denny with a grin. “You and Ruth are going to hide in your shells.”

“And you won’t join us?”

Denny shook his head, his long black hair flecked with snow. “No. I am not skutelawe. I am *m’wewa*. The wolf. My family belongs to the Peckuwe clan of the Shawnee.” He turned to look at John. “The warriors of my people. You and Ruth are my neighbors, my family. I will watch over you, and I will do it from out here,” he said, looking around in the twilight. “Among the trees and the rocks and the hills. In the snow and the wind. It is where I belong.”

John looked at Denny for a long moment. “I sure wish you’d reconsider, son,” he said, a gentle hand on Denny’s shoulder. “Ruthie would feel safer if you

were with us in the shelter. We have plenty of food and water. We could survive down there for months.”

“Maybe.” Denny shook his head. “I can’t stay cooped up like that down in the ground. I just...I *can’t*.” He grinned. “Besides, they won’t be back tonight. I think Jeb is going to need to change his pants.”

“He didn’t look that scared,” said John with a lopsided smile.

“No he didn’t,” said Denny, stooping down to pick up the discarded bat. He handed it to John. “But he shit his pants. I smelled it.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

COOPER

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

“I HATE THESE THINGS!” said Mike’s static-filled voice.

Cooper grinned and adjusted his earbud radio receiver as he watched the dark surf flash by under his feet. He loved the feeling of freedom that filled his being when he was sitting on the platform strapped to the side of a Killer Egg. He turned his head to look through the open body of the MH-6M Little Bird as it hugged the coast heading toward Los Angeles.

“No better way to see the sights, Beaver,” was Jax’s scratchy reply from the other side of the small special-operations helicopter.

“Hooyah!” someone yelled.

Cooper checked his dive watch and noted the time. 18:49. He glanced straight out to sea and could see the vestigial glow of the sunset over the long horizon line. A little behind and to the port side, the second fireteam of his platoon flew along in formation. Two other Little Birds were on the starboard side, carrying eight more SEALs. Team 9 was going in full-strength on this mission.

He could barely hear himself think over the roar of the six-rotor engine a few feet above his head. That was fine, actually. He rather enjoyed the relative calm of this part of a mission. It didn’t matter if he was flying in the back of a heavy

transport ready to do a HALO jump, clinging to the side of an SDV fifty feet below the ocean surface, or sitting on a bench on the outside of a helicopter racing along the Pacific Coast.

God, what a job. Cooper was savoring this reprieve from his forced-retirement, but regretted knowing this might really be his last mission. He tried not to think about that and tightened the brace on his right knee.

If it weren't for the fact that the President's personal security was at risk, he doubted he would've been tapped to lead his fireteam one last time. But the LT went to his defense and was adamant to the higher-ups: it was Cooper or bust.

The pilot swung wide out over the ocean, about a half mile offshore from downtown Los Angeles, dipping the starboard side down. The maneuver rotated Cooper over onto his back so he was able to get a good look at the night's crop of stars popping out of the deep purple sky.

Something caught his eye. "You see that, Beaver?" he asked Mike, sitting next to him on the Little Bird's port outrigger bench. "Ships on the horizon..."

"Say again?"

"I thought I saw *ships* on the horizon..."

Mike leaned forward, looking. He shook his head. "There's nothing there. Better get you some bifocals when we get back, old man," he chuckled. Cooper held up his middle finger.

The pilot's no-nonsense voice crackled over their headsets, "Coming up on final approach. Viper flight, hit the deck."

In perfect formation, Cooper watched the trailing Little Bird swoop gracefully through the turn and then angle down to where it, along with Cooper's vehicle, was skimming the ocean swells, just fifteen feet above the waves. He leaned out around Mike and could see the lights along the Santa Monica Freeway rapidly approaching. Cooper noticed how deserted the shoreline was as they roared toward the glittering line of white that was Santa Monica State Beach. He had heard that the flu was getting bad, but never thought it would empty the beach on a fine day like today.

"Anyone want to stop at the Pacific Park?" asked Charlie from the second bird as they flew over the park. Cooper grinned, watching the few people

walking around The Pier look up in surprise as the four small black helicopters split the peaceful evening air and flew overhead in an arrowhead formation.

“Nest, Viper Lead. Viper flight is feet dry,” reported the pilot.

“Roger that, Viper Lead,” replied the voice of the mission handler back at base.

They followed the Santa Monica Freeway for a few minutes before approaching their destination. “Two minutes,” reported the pilot.

“Get your shit wired SEALs, this is the real deal,” Cooper called out.

He looked to his own load-out and checked his HK MP5 submachine gun. The integrated red-dot laser and a rail-mounted tactical light were all functioning properly. The front grip was secure and ready. One magazine fully loaded, a round in the chamber, and 4 more across the front of his tactical vest. He had his radio and a pouch loaded with M-79 rounds for the ‘pirate gun’ he had strapped to his pack. He also had an old K-Bar that had been handed down to him from his father, a Marine in the First Gulf War.

“There’s the interchange...forty seconds...” announced the pilot. “Viper Two, on me. Viper Three and Four, take the triangle and call it.”

“Roger that, Viper Lead.”

“Shifting for approach on your starboard,” answered one of the pilots behind Cooper’s aircraft.

“Viper Four has starboard flank.”

“Here we go ladies...stay frosty,” said Cooper. The silence he received by way of reply was expected and comforting. His men were locked, cocked, and ready. Nothing else need be said. They had executed protection-extraction missions before in enemy territory, under fire. Here, flying over Los Angeles at sunset, would be pure cake, but no one was slacking off.

As he focused on the odd, arrow-shaped building that was All Saint’s Hospital, the sky behind him suddenly lit up to noon-bright.

“Missile!” someone yelled.

“Holy shit!” screamed Charlie.

“SAM lights, Viper flight, evasive! Scatter!” yelled Cooper’s pilot. Without further warning, he pulled the Little Bird into a gut-wrenching dive that caused

the world to spin past Cooper's head in a dizzying blur. The other pilots responded, creating a confusing jumble of chatter in Cooper's ear.

"Nnnnnh..." someone grunted.

"Hang on!" roared Cooper.

"Rooftop, two o'clock low, here comes—"

Another explosion lit up the early evening sky, this time right in front of Cooper. Two screams were cut off in a hiss of static. As his own pilot forced the little helicopter to gyrate and drop even lower, he could see parts of the unfortunate Viper 3 and its passengers shoot out in all directions from the fireball.

"No!" someone roared.

"LT!" Cooper heard himself scream.

"Taking small-arms fire," warned the pilot. "Hang on back there."

"I got targets on three rooftops—aaah!" yelled Jax.

"Jax's hit!" said Petty Officer Alexander Knuteson from the other side of the helicopter.

Cooper was desperately scanning the buildings blurring past his field of view, looking for targets. The pilot was flying forward even faster now, nose down, zipping in between buildings. Muzzle flashes to Cooper's left caught his eyes as he struggled to keep his head level in the wind.

"Tangos, seven o'clock high, the rooftop! Light 'em up!" Cooper called out. He pulled his MP5 to his side and fired a burst in the general direction of the figures on the roof of the apartment building as they roared past. He had little hope of hitting anything with the pilot jerking the aircraft as if he were flying drunk, but at least it gave the enemy something to think about. Three more weapons spat fire and bullets from his helicopter. He could see flashes coming from behind them and knew Charlie's fireteam was shooting back as well. The broad starburst of Jax's M60 shredded windows where someone had taken a few pot-shots at their aircraft.

The pilot came to an intersection and dove for the street. Cooper felt sick to his stomach. *That* had never happened to him before. Making a hard bank to port, the pilot hugged the street and Cooper and Mike were almost low enough

to touch the cars below. Cars, delivery trucks, motorcycles, and scooters were squealing out of the way of the little black helicopter as it cruised through the intersection doing 80 miles an hour only ten feet off the deck.

Cooper got a blurred glimpse of windows exploding and more muzzle flashes. “They’re everywhere!” someone called out. Loud metallic pings and pops echoed around Cooper.

“We’re taking damage,” grunted the pilot. “Losing hydraulics...hang on!” The helicopter was smoking now, leaving a curling black trail in the air about ten feet above street level. Cooper could see people running for cover.

“There’s a parking garage, dead-ahead. Hit the roof, Viper Two!”

“I’m right on your six...”

“Ten seconds,” warned the pilot.

As the Little Bird flared out over the upper level of the garage, dirt, gravel, and thick acrid smoke flew up into the faces of the four SEALs. Cooper ignored the stinging from his face and was thankful he had his clear goggles on. Ten feet, five...

“Now!” he called out. Safety straps were ripped clear and his SEALs leapt from the still-moving helicopter and rolled clear. In a heartbeat, the pilot hit the throttle and powered the aircraft up and away, engine whining, heading north in a cloud of smoke.

As the Killer Egg lifted out of his line of sight, he could see the last remaining helicopter perform a similar maneuver on the building across the alley. It was a five-story medical building with a few large air-conditioner units and a helipad on the roof.

In seconds, the helicopters had passed from sight and slipped in between taller buildings, effectively leaving the remaining SEALs in silence.

“Cover, *now!*” hissed Cooper. His black-clad squad crouch-walked to the edge of the roof and ducked down below the short parapet. They were in near-darkness—there was only one light on the roof, glaring balefully above the single roof-access door.

“Ell-Tee?” Cooper said. He checked the frequency on his radio. “Echo? Stumpy, Little John—*anyone*, come in...”

“What the fuck was that?” called out Charlie’s voice over the net.

“Head count,” said Cooper, angrily pulling his clear eye-shield off his helmet. He looked at his fireteam.

Swede was finishing up a field patch on Jax’s left arm. On his other side, Mike was peeking over the edge of the building with his next-gen night-vision goggles already in place.

“Team 1, good to go,” Cooper said, satisfied that his squad was combat-ready.

“Team 2 good to go. I think we lost both birds,” said Charlie from the next building’s rooftop.

“I know,” Cooper said through gritted teeth. “Those assholes were waiting for us—”

“On our whole flight path?” said Charlie’s voice in disbelief. “That’s not possible...”

“Someone must have *gave* them our flight path. It was a goddamn *trap*. In *Los Angeles*.” He punched the graveled roof by his side in frustration, but calmed himself after a second and called out, “Nest, this is Striker, Actual, do you read me?”

He got no response.

“Hey Coop, I see some of ‘em on the building across the block to the south. I count six,” whispered Mike. “They’re right between us and the hospital.”

“Nest, Striker, Actual, *do you read me?*” Cooper called out again. Static was the response. “Tank, keep trying to raise fleet.”

“On it,” came the deep reply.

Cooper closed his eyes tight for one deep breath. *Get a hold of your emotions, Master Chief. There will be time to mourn later. You have a mission to perform. And you will exact retribution.*

With two bright fireballs, he had lost half his team, including his commanding officer and close personal friend. He was now in command of what was left of SEAL Team 9.

Two days...they were going to retire my ass in two fucking days...

“Sparky, what you got?” asked Cooper.

“Got a dozen more on the two buildings east of the hospital. Dammit... there’s a lot of them,” reported the deep bass voice from Petty Officer First Class John Sparks, the platoon sniper. “They look like they’re setting up comms. Some kind of mast array. Industrious little bastards.”

Cooper leaned around Jax and Swede and could see the Nebraska native on the other building with his Mark 12 5.56mm SPR sniper rifle perched on the edge of the building, scanning for targets almost half a mile away. Cooper closed his eyes again, leaning back against the facade. He needed three heartbeats.

Three...two...one...

When Cooper Braaten opened his eyes, he was the cold, hard, killing machine that the Iranians had feared for nearly a decade. All his storm-tossed emotions—the anger at the breach in operational security, the upwelling of grief over the catastrophic loss of half his team—*everything* not essential to mission completion were locked securely in the sea chest of his heart. He would deal with that post-op.

“Yo, Coop, I got Nest,” whispered Tank over the net.

Cooper switched channels on his radio. “Striker, Actual, to Nest.”

“Go ahead, Striker, Actual.”

“We made a hard landing with Bravo platoon only, grid Poppa-Bravo-Niner. Repeat: Alpha Platoon is down. Assuming command and proceeding to objective, approaching from north. Multiple tangos on rooftops to north and east of original LZ, there’s a shitton of civvies in between us and the objective, please advise, over.”

After the briefest of pauses, he heard the reply, “Nest copies all, Striker, Actual. You walked into a real sierra-sierra. We’re getting some interference on —” Static broke up the transmission.

“Nest! Nest, come in...” Cooper said. He looked at Swede who shook his head sadly. *Sierra-Sierra. Hmph. Shitstorm doesn’t begin to describe it.*

“—eat: proceed to your objective post-haste. No contact with Slipknot. Repeat, *we have lost contact with Slipknot.* You are weapons-free to engage any enemy encountered. Just get to that hospital!”

“Copy that, Nest. Striker, Actual, out.” Cooper switched back to his

command frequency.

“Let’s get down to the street. Go, go, go!” he said, pumping his arm for the men on the adjacent building to see.

“I’ve got a fire escape, east side,” said Mike, already running across the roof.

Once on the ground, Cooper’s squad took a knee, weapons up and covering all sectors as he consulted the map attached his arm guard. “All right, we’re two blocks south of the objective. Charlie—”

“Yeah?”

“Get set up. We’ll leapfrog to the annex building across the alley from the objective, south side.”

“Hooyah,” was Charlie’s whispered reply from the opposite side of the building.

“Let’s go,” Cooper said. He flashed a hand gesture and led his fireteam across the dark alley. He noticed the absence of normal civilian traffic. There were a few cars driving by, but nothing like what he had expected for Los Angeles at sunset. It should be packed with civvies. It looked like the general population was heeding the government’s call to stay home and avoid contact with people to try and stem the spread of the flu. Or maybe the reports that people were starting to die weren’t just media hype. Either way, Cooper didn’t like what he saw.

“Awful quiet,” Charlie whispered from a block away.

“Where the hell is everybody?” asked Tank.

“Coop, I got a body in the street. Civvie,” whispered Tank. A second later, “No wounds. He’s cold. Think it was the flu?”

“Damn if I know. Just keep your eyes open and try not to touch anything. No one gets infected. Team 1 moving.” Cooper paused at the corner of a building, covering the forward advance of the rest of his fireteam. In the distance, he could hear an ambulance siren echo. He checked his frequency. “Striker to Slipknot Support, do you read me?”

Static.

Switching back to his command frequency, he whispered, “Still can’t raise the Secret Service. Something ain’t right, boys. Stay frosty,” he warned.

“Team 2 in position,” Charlie reported in a whisper.

Cooper waited until he could see Mike, Jax, and Swede at the emergency exit of the parking garage across the street—three shadows waiting for him. Suddenly, the world around him was plunged into darkness.

“Wait one,” he hissed. The ground started to rumble, then a dull, deep *boooooom* echoed between the buildings around them. Car alarms went off and in the distance, he heard glass shattering from what must’ve been dozens of plate-glass windows.

“The hell was that?” hissed Charlie.

“Earthquake?” asked Jax.

“Go dark!” whispered Cooper. Now that the street lights and shop signs were extinguished, he flipped down the state-of-the-art wide-view night-vision goggles attached to his helmet and turned them on. The world went black, then glowed green and came into clear focus.

The six-tube design gave him the widest possible view with the best clarity and definition available. He could see the blinking IR markers on his team across the street as they crouched, weapons out, scanning for threats. *Textbook*. He grinned.

“Nest, Striker, Actual, how copy?” he whispered. Getting no response, he gritted his teeth and sprinted across the street. As he took his place next to Mike, he tried again. “I say again, Nest, come in. This is Striker, Actual.”

Static.

“I got a bad feeling about this,” whispered Charlie’s voice. “All clear from our side. Comm net totally deserted.”

“Well, if that was a ‘quake, our job just got a little harder. Hey, I got a visual on the main entrance. We’re a hundred yards out. Moving now,” warned Cooper. He used hand signals to direct his squad. One by one, they filed out and ran for the annex building, staying as close to walls as they could.

“No movement from the rooftops. I don’t think our tangos hung around,” reported Charlie.

Cooper paused at the corner of the Annex building to catch his breath and scan the rooftops once more. “Team 1 in position. Rooftops clear. Bring it home,

2.”

“Moving.”

Out of the green-tinted shadows displayed in his night-vision goggles, Cooper watched his second-in-command lead the last remaining fireteam. Each man sprinted forward and dropped to one knee, covering everything in front and above him. The next man ran past and found a spot farther along and like clockwork, they leapfrogged past each other.

Cooper couldn't shake a feeling that they were being watched. Something was wrong, very wrong. First they had been ambushed by men on rooftops directly along their flight path with shoulder-fired missiles that took out half his SEAL team. There were attackers scattered everywhere along their possible evasion routes, then nothing. Communications with Coronado just went down the toilet. Now, just as they were approaching their objective, power goes out in this part of Los Angeles. He could see in the distance the high-rise buildings that were still lit up like Christmas trees. So, the rumbling they'd felt *wasn't* an earthquake.

Someone had selectively taken out power to the area just around hospital and nowhere else. That was *not* the result of a minor earthquake. *That* showed planning, resources, and purpose. It *was* a trap—a well-executed one, but a trap, nonetheless. He could feel it in his bones.

Static tickled Cooper's ear. He checked his frequency. “—in, Striker!”

Relief washed over him. “Go ahead, Nest, Striker, Actual. What the hell is going on?” he whispered.

“—attack, say again, comms failing—”

Cooper frowned. “Say again, Nest?”

“—blind, GPS, and our satellites are being—”

“Nest!” said Cooper. “*Come in!*”

“—Korean strike force! Hostiles in your—”

“*Nest!*” hissed Cooper. No response. He looked around. Los Angeles was looking more like Tehran by the minute.

“Coop, what the fuck was that about?” asked Charlie.

Cooper checked the main and auxiliary command frequencies. *Nothing.*

Switching back to his squad, he sighed. “All right guys, I think we’re on our own. Last I could tell, it sounded like HQ said our satellites have been taken out by the North Koreans. I’ll bet you a case of beer those tangos on the rooftops were NKors, too.”

Automatic weapons fire echoed in the distance. It was joined with more, closer it seemed, to the west. Now they could hear multiple sirens and people screaming at the edge of their hearing. Horns started to honk at intersections where the stoplights were out. The panicked voices of civilians filtered in between the darkened buildings.

“I got tangos firing on the hospital’s north entrance!” called out Mike from the south corner of the annex building.

“—units this net, repeat, all units this net: Apache Dawn is in effect. This is not a drill! I repeat, all units this net, Apache—” The link went dead in a painful burst of high-pitched static.

The sound of a gun battle rattled all around them. A louder *bang* signaled someone’s use of a grenade. Single *pop-pops*. It sounded like pistols firing in between all of the *rat-a-tat-a-tat*’s of AK fire. The screams of wounded, frightened civilians penetrated the night. Cooper could also detect the sharp *popping* of M4s. It sounded to him like the Secret Service had enough sense at least to bring a few real guns.

Civilians appeared in ones and twos, dragging and pulling each other away from the fighting. Some were yelling for help and calling on God. Most just ran, crashing into each other and anything that got in their way. Fear, Cooper observed, was a powerful motivator.

“What the hell is Apache Dawn?” asked Tank. The sound of his voice drew Cooper’s attention back to the mission. He ignored the civvies and activated his mic.

“That means we’re in some deep, deep yogurt.” Cooper paused as a man shoved an elderly woman out of his way. The old woman angrily shook off Cooper’s hand when he tried to steady her.

“Let go of me!” she hissed. She tottered off, clutching her tattered dress tightly.

Cooper shook his head. “Listen up, Striker. Our president is across the street, under siege in that hospital. All that stands between him and those NKors over there are a handful of Secret Service agents. It is up to *us* to reach and secure him. That, gentlemen, we *will* do, *at all costs*.”

An explosion echoed across the street and the number of screaming civilians diminished. Smoke drifted across into their positions. Cooper could see a man trying to half-drag, half-support a woman with blood covering most of her lower body.

Doctors, nurses, patients—some in hospital gowns flowing in the wind—along with people caught on the street, all streamed out of the hospital. The surrounding buildings were emptying as well, contributing to the growing river of screaming, shoving, panicked humanity spreading in all directions away from the invaders.

Most people seemed not to notice the squad of dark-clad heavily armed SEALs wearing night-vision goggles as Cooper tried to lead his team through the roiling wave of civvies. “Keep moving forward!” he yelled, pushing a screaming man out of his way.

“Help us!” someone shouted.

“Run! Move!”

“My baby—”

The voices rose into a cacophony of sound that fought for dominance with the explosions that shook the ground. In all his years of training and fighting around the world, Cooper had never experienced anything so chaotic.

A break in the mass of fleeing civvies let him throw his back against the corner of a building adjacent to the hospital. It was forward progress, but not much.

This is taking too long—there’s so many people!

“From what I can tell, comms are down net-wide—we are cut off from reinforcements. That means it’s time for us to drop the hammer and do what we do best, SEALs.”

“Hooyah, Master Chief!” was the chorused response.

“All right, then,” said Cooper, checking his weapon one more time. “Let’s

show these cocky little fuckers what happens when you show up uninvited at *our* house. Team 2, flank right. Team 1, left.”

“They’ve gained entrance to the hospital,” warned Mike, standing on a parked car’s hood to see over the mob of running civilians.

“All right. I want controlled bursts, and keep it accurate. We got a lot of wounded civvies on the ground, so watch your step and keep your footing. If you go down, you’re going to have a hard time getting back up.”

“Hooyah,” someone grunted.

“Like a cattle drive back home,” observed Tank.

The ground shook violently as they started to move forward. Most of SEALs were thrown to the ground, along with the civilians. It was like a giant hand had just come along and toppled everyone in one swipe down the street. Cooper could see through the flailing arms and legs, a huge explosion erupted, lighting up the sky briefly—he guessed it was somewhere downtown. The shockwave blew out windows and set off car alarms in the wave that rolled toward them. Bits of flaming paper floated on the breeze. Debris rained down on the surrounding buildings and the screaming throngs of panicked civilians.

“What the hell?” someone yelled.

Another explosion shook the ground like a small earthquake. Cooper found himself on his back on the sidewalk, under a woman in a hospital gown. She screamed hysterically and clawed at his face, begging for help. His mind had enough time to register that she reminded him of Allie, before he shoved her roughly aside.

Thunder rolled through the sky from the north. Bits of glass fell from above—busted out of windows overlooking the street. The ground trembled again and Cooper glanced up and shielded his eyes. It was like some sort of nightmarish rain.

“Coop!” said Mike, struggling to his feet on the other side of the street. He pointed up into the evening sky. “We got some big fuckin’ missiles inbound!”

Cooper rolled to his side and fought the urge to hold onto the ground as it shook again. He could feel hands grabbing his legs and feet, voices screaming for help and crying out in pain. He risked a glance up where Mike had pointed

and his heart froze in his chest

Holy shit.

His training kicked in and the cold rationalization hit him that if the missiles were *nuclear*, then nothing would make a difference in the next fifteen seconds and everyone around him—his brothers in arms, all the civilians—would be burned to a crisp and obliterated in a ball of fire and radiation.

If they were *conventional* missiles, though...

“Stay on target!” Cooper said as he knocked a man away from his rifle. He picked himself up off the street and elbowed through the crowd. A hand slapped his face and he had to pause and adjust his night-vision goggles.

“Mission first—we *have* to get into that hospital!” he yelled. “Weapons-free!” Cooper roared as he raced forward and fired his carbine in three-round, tightly controlled bursts. The wall of civilians parted in front of him as they tried to escape the gunfire.

He could see muzzle flashes out of the corner of his eyes—his SEALs were advancing in step with him. He smiled. If this was going to be the end of their world, if they were going to die in a nuclear holocaust, then by God, they were going to go out like *SEALs*: teeth bared, guns blazing, *advancing* on the enemy, and taking no prisoners.

Cooper ignored the shrieks and screams of the enemy soldiers as they fell under the hail of bullets unleashed by his team. He was surprised to see that despite the hot-leaded hell he and his men had created in their rear, the mass of soldiers seemed to surge forward, hellbent on gaining entrance to the besieged hospital.

The ground rumbled and Cooper looked down to see his feet above the ground. Then all he saw was empty sky, then concrete rushing up to meet his face. When the earth stopped vibrating, he coughed and pulled the night-vision goggles from his face. The smell of concrete dust filled his nose and made his eyes water.

First thing he noticed, upon getting to his knees, was that the fleeing crowd was thinning out at last. Only the weak, the wounded, and the stragglers remained near the hospital now. And the dead. They were everywhere, covering

the ground in twisted, broken shapes. Arms and legs stuck up at wrong angles where people had been trampled to death in the mad stampede to escape the North Koreans.

His ears were ringing and everything seemed to moving slow as the flaming paper drifting through the air. Cooper looked down at his hands—black gloves covered in fine-gray powder. He brushed himself off and peered through the smoky darkness. The world had been transformed in a heartbeat.

No longer could he see orderly buildings and street lamps and parked cars. All he saw was a wall of smoke. Here and there in the grayness, a burning car or a fire in a building made a bright point, but otherwise, only things within about twenty feet were visible. He swallowed. He didn't want to look at those things—the bodies of the civilians, the body parts, the faces, locked in horror-filled screams that would never be heard, the struggling forms of people still alive, still desperate to get up and get away...

He heard one of his men coughing over the squad's comm-net. Cooper blinked to clear his head and focus again on the mission. He slapped the side of his rifle to clear the dust.

"Jesus..."

"Guess it wasn't a nuke," said Tank's deep voice.

Someone else grunted a bitter laugh.

"Swede, gimme a hand—I'm stuck over here..." gasped Mike.

"On it," was the reply.

Cooper looked up at the sky. Only two more missiles were up there, falling like shooting stars to the north. He put them out of his mind and turned back to the task at hand. Before him, scattered among the dead civilians—and a growing number of dead Koreans—was the remaining mass of invaders, all struggling to force their way into the hospital.

"Lot of NKors got inside," said Charlie, voice steady as steel.

"Changing mags," Cooper called out. He took a knee to quickly switch the empty magazine from his MP5 and slap in a fresh one. Jax staggered by, still shooting and tapped Cooper on the shoulder to let him know it was safe to stand again.

“I’m out,” said Tank in a calm voice, taking a knee to switch magazines, exactly as Cooper had done it, ten feet to his left. Cooper watched out of the corner of his eye as Mike’s small form stepped up to signal Tank it was safe to rise again. He grinned. Precision. Deadly precision. He stepped over another North Korean body and moved forward.

Over the constant staccato of his team’s gunfire, he could hear the roar of jets overhead. Explosions scorched the air in the distance and seemed to be getting closer. And on top of everything, the screams of civilians. He saw people racing up and down the streets in a wild, mob-like stampede, leaving buildings to witness or flee the gunfight. Some even had cell phones up, trying to record the movie-like violence.

A jet streaked by overhead, turbine engines whining. Cooper looked up from the controlled carnage to see afterburners glowing in the night sky like twin stars. A building exploded with a tremendous roar down the street as the jet banked hard left and screamed west. In the distance, through the haze of smoke, he could see toy cars and tiny people tossed through the air from the shockwave as the building collapsed in a billowing plume of smoke and dust.

“Damn civvies are *everywhere*,” said Sparky. “This is ridiculous—hey, get the hell out of here! Move!”

“This is some serious shit, man,” yelled Jax over the din. “They got fast-movers past NORAD, ICBMs...how the hell is this possible?”

“Stow it—we’ll worry about that later! Charlie, *go*,” ordered Cooper. Whatever North Koreans had pulled on America, his team would respond *after* they secured the President.

“Right flank that breach,” Cooper said as he raced forward over the bodies and dying enemies to secure the blasted-open north entrance. Smoke was billowing out of the hole, rendering his night vision nearly useless. Charlie slammed against the wall on the other side of the gaping hole and nodded. Cooper looked to his right to see his fireteam spreading out and covering the entrance.

Farther behind Charlie, the other fireteam was doing the same. He took a quick scan of the immediate area and counted at least twenty dead or dying

North Koreans. He grinned. Poor bastards never had a chance. Just the way he liked it.

Another jet screamed low overhead, splitting the night sky as it streaked away trailing smoke, fire, and destruction. The smile faded from Cooper's face. North Koreans doing ground strikes in downtown L.A...where the hell was the Air Force?

Cooper watched as Charlie took a second to slap in a fresh magazine and stow the partially spent one in his tactical vest. He checked his weapon and nodded at Cooper. He looked back at his fireteam and flashed the hand signal to cover the lead elements. Cooper did the same and watched as his team took knees and scanned all sectors, looking for someone to shoot. Other than the occasional North Korean that rolled over half-dead, there was really no one that needed dispatching. His SEALs had been efficient, brutal, and lethal. They had used the element of surprise and had wiped out at least twenty enemy soldiers—marines by the look of their uniforms.

Cooper looked at Charlie and motioned to enter the building. Charlie nodded and ducked under a piece of the wall and stepped in, weapon up. Cooper followed a second later. Behind him, he could barely hear the footsteps of his team moving forward.

Once they cleared the immediate entry-point, the smoke dissipated and their night vision was effective again. Cooper looked around the small waiting room and notice two figures in dark outfits with small packs on their backs moving toward the far wall where an exit door was being held open by a third. The figures turned and started firing.

Cooper dove for the deck and rolled left into a corridor. Charlie and the rest of the team went to the right and sought cover behind the low walls of the waiting area. Plaster and masonry exploded in little puffs as the North Korean marines fired their AK-47s blind. The noise was deafening.

Cooper raised his MP5 and sighted in one smooth-as-butter motion and fired two shots to the head of the first soldier. Before that man knew he was dead, two more bullets were flying downrange to his partner's face. The third soldier screamed as he saw his two comrades die and slammed the door.

“Clear!” called Cooper. The SEALs ran through the waiting area, stepping over bodies and checking for survivors. Two or three of them were scanning for enemies and covering the rest that knelt down to check for signs of life among the fallen bodies strewn through the room.

“Got a lot of dead civvies,” Jax said sadly, kneeling next to a small boy. “No pulse. Most of ‘em still warm. Lot of blood, man...”

“Got a bunch of ‘em over here, no wounds...” said Swede. “Oh shit...”

“What is it?” asked Charlie in a hushed voice.

“Bio-hazard sign taped to one of the bodies. Looks like flu victims.”

Cooper looked around, night-vision goggles casting an eerie green light on the macabre scene. *Whole place is full of bodies.*

“More over here,” said Mike, kneeling a few feet away from Cooper.

Well, that’s comforting. The NKors sure picked a convenient time to attack— he paused, mid stride to examine the bio-hazard sticker hastily slapped on the black body bag at his feet.

That’s why there’s so many of them here. They knew in advance the flu would be deadly and take out a lot of their own people. Son of a bitch. There’s no way they could have timed this...bastards turned the flu into a weapon and hit us at just the right time...

Cooper stepped away from the pile of flu victims and instinctively covered his mouth. “Everyone break out your masks...nobody touch *anything!*”

“Found a stash of level-three respirators over here!” called out Jax. He tossed one to Cooper. “Looks like they were in the process of handing them out when the NKors breached.”

“Good find,” Cooper said. “Everyone put ‘em on.”

He put his mask on and hoped it didn’t distort his voice too much as looked up in the air and spoke again, keying his mic, “Slipknot Support, do you read?”

“Secret Service, *any unit*, respond,” Cooper said, his radio blasting on all emergency channels. “I say again, Secret Service, *respond!*”

A few static-filled words faintly came back over the bone phone in his ear. “Say again!” he called out.

“This is Slipknot Support...nnnnhh...” Cooper heard gunfire and shouting in

the background.

“Slipknot Support, this is Striker 1, Actual, what’s your sit-rep?”

“Goddamn, I’m glad to hear your voice. Lacey, over there!” More gunfire erupted. “They’re pouring down the corridors. We’re pinned down at the entrance to the Critical Care wing. I got wounded and KIA. Seven effectives left. We’re holed up opposite the nurse’s station. Whoever the hell you are, you better hurry.”

“Is Slipknot secured? I say again, *is Slipknot secured?*” Cooper pointed at his arm-guard map and then at Charlie. His XO flipped through wrist-mounted maps of his own, looking for the Critical Ward.

“Affirmative, Slipknot is secured, but I can’t tell you for how long. I’ve got at least a company of enemy combatants in front of us. Who the hell *are* these guys? Where did they come from?” More gunfire and screaming.

“Hold your position,” Cooper said. “The cavalry’s on its way. Striker, out.”

“That way!” Charlie said, pointing toward a large double door to their right. “VIP Critical Care rooms are on the second floor. Stairwell access over there.”

The SEALs, moving like shadows, quickly left the waiting area to the dead.

“Run and gun!” called out Cooper. He kicked the double doors open with a crash and charged through. Two North Korean soldiers were setting up firing positions behind an overturned gurney. Without hesitation, Cooper swung the M-79 grenade launcher from his back and fired. A split second after the *phoomp* of his pirate gun, the corridor exploded in light and smoke with a tremendous crash.

Cooper charged into the smoke and stepped over the remains of the two North Korean rear-guards. He jogged down the shattered corridor toward the stairs, his team hot on his heels. Sounds of a fierce firefight reverberated down the stairwell toward them.

As they passed each door along the corridor, the forward SEALs paused to cover their teammates as they leapfrogged the rest. Every one of them was focused on the rooms they passed—some had patients laying in beds, wide-eyed in fear. Many more had bodies on the floor and bullet holes in walls and doors. It appeared the North Koreans were either randomly searching rooms or simply killing for sport. Either way, Cooper felt his anger rise.

It was one thing for the cowardly bastards to have shot down his team—they would pay *dearly* for that. But killing *civilians*—people in hospital beds? That was crossing a line. More than one room had a North Korean soldier in it trying to ambush the SEALs. Cooper's wraiths dispatched each one with brutal efficiency.

Cooper reached the stairs first and took the steps two at a time. He could hear some shouted words from the top landing and slowed down, carbine at his shoulder, eyes downrange. The sound of fighting grew louder with each step, bouncing off ceiling tiles and walls. Cooper poked his head above the landing. He held up his hand to halt the platoon. Charlie moved up next to him, silent as a ghost.

The hallway beyond the stairs was dark with only one emergency light, hanging from a wire and swaying drunkenly. The corridor was strewn with bodies. Some were clearly patients, dressed in hospital gowns and still trailing IV lines from arms and wrists. Others were in scrubs and a few had white coats, stained with blood. The North Koreans had clearly moved down the corridor guns blazing and killed everyone in their path.

The doors along the hallway had been forced open, some shot through, and debris and equipment was scattered everywhere. Cooper could hear the eerie, spine-tingling wails from multiple medical monitors shrilly calling for attention from dozens of rooms.

Muzzle flashes accompanied by the deafening sound of gunfire in confined quarters at the end of the hallway painfully split the darkness. Cooper flipped up his night-vision goggles and let his eyes adjust.

When he could see again, Cooper found himself looking down a long hallway. About halfway down the hallway, at the junction of the main corridor to the left, was a large circular desk littered with computer monitors and phones. There were two North Koreans taking shelter behind the desk, shooting their rifles over the top of the bullet-ridden desk. The tactical lights on their weapons were lancing all over the place with their movements.

"There's the nurse's station. Secret Service is down that left-hand corridor," Cooper whispered to Charlie.

Charlie gripped Cooper's arm and pointed—on the other side of the nurse's station, a few flashlights winked with movement. Cooper could hear muffled shouting over the noise of the firefight. He squinted and could just barely see North Korean marines kicking down doors on the left side of the corridor. There looked to be at least twenty of them. When they didn't come back out, he realized what was going down. Flashes and the sound of more gunfire. A few bodies in hospital gowns tumbled out into the hallway.

The North Koreans are going to cut through those rooms...they'll flank those Secret Service pukes if they can find a way to jump out down that left corridor. Cooper had seen enough.

He signaled to Charlie and pointed at the nurse's station.

Both men opened up their weapons and in an incredibly loud few seconds, the North Koreans hiding behind the circular desk were on the ground, painting the floor red. The rest of the SEALs then advanced up the stairs and moved down the hallway, finding no survivors.

Cooper keyed his throat mic. "Secret Service, Striker 1 advancing on your position. Do not shoot, I say again, *friendly forces turning the corner*, your twelve o'clock!"

He stepped to the corner and looked left, almost expecting to take a bullet in the face. Instead, a flashlight beam pointed in his direction.

"Thank *God!*" someone said in the smoke.

"Charlie, go!" he said, pointing down the main hallway where the North Koreans had entered rooms and disappeared. Charlie instantly peeled off with his fireteam and vanished into the darkened corridor.

"Direct your men that way," said Cooper as he trotted toward the besieged Secret Service agent. "You got at least ten NKors working through the rooms and advancing fast on your nine o'clock! They're trying to flank you." The agents nodded and faced the doors on the left side of the hallway.

Cooper, satisfied that the agents were prepared, turned to his fireteam coming up fast behind him. "Spread out and anchor the line. Jax, get in the center."

"Team 2 in position," Charlie whispered, dead calm.

Without a word, Mike pushed past and vaulted over the makeshift barricade the agents had cobbled together. He raced down the corridor toward the far end, watching the doors on the right side. Jax, right behind the smaller SEAL, shouldered past carrying his massive twenty-pound M60 light machine gun. Swede scaled the barricade, dropped to a knee and covered the hallway, the smallish MP5 looked like a toy next to his large frame.

“Everyone, reload and check weapons; they’re not done yet!” Cooper ordered to the half-dozen steely eyed agents. A few agents, dressed in battle load-outs, rummaged grim-faced through the gear still strapped to their fallen comrades. The odd thing in Cooper’s mind was they did not hesitate or question his authority at all. They recognized the wisdom of his order, stranger or not.

“They’re going to come straight at us,” Cooper said quietly, “so get to the side of these doors here in front of you. Get ready...”

They could hear some noise and shouts from the other side of the three doors on the right side of the hallway. “They’re almost through,” Cooper whispered. “Charlie, go on my mark.”

The tiny bone phone in Cooper’s ear broke squelch twice: Charlie was ready. He shifted his carbine and raised it to his shoulder, waiting. The hallway was deathly quiet. Dust swirled in the air but was barely visible in the emergency light’s cone of illumination. Cooper’s vision, through his night-vision goggles, was bright as day, albeit green-tinted.

The door directly across from Cooper suddenly flew open with a crash, propelled forward by a foot. The North Korean soldier coming through never got his foot back on the ground. He landed flat on his back with two rounds to the face. Two more men charged forward to take his place, screaming like banshees. The next two doors down the corridor were smashed open with similar results. The SEALs and Secret Service agents easily dispatched the first targets to emerge.

“Go, go, go!” yelled Cooper. Suddenly, Charlie’s fireteam, advancing through the rooms behind the North Koreans, opened up on their unprotected rear elements. The flanking maneuver was crippled before they had a chance to execute. The rooms lit up with the sounds of gunfire and screams, accompanied

by staccato flashes of light. Above it all, the booming voice of Jax's M60 reverberated down the corridor.

Caught between Cooper and the agents in front of them and the meat grinder of Navy SEALs behind them, the North Korean squad was quickly dispatched into a bloody, quivering mess, adding to the already extensive carnage on the floor.

A few of the agents whooped in victory but not a single SEAL showed any sign of celebration. Always on mission, Cooper was gratified to see, his men immediately secured the perimeter and prepared for the next wave.

"Left flank secured," reported Mike from down the hall.

"Right flank secured," said Swede, watching the nurse's station at the T-intersection of corridors.

"Center secured," called out Jax.

"Friendlies coming in, hold your fire!" a voice yelled from inside one of the rooms used by the North Koreans in their ill-fated flanking maneuver.

"Hold your fire," called out Cooper. "That's my men coming in." Four shadows silently moved through the butchery in the rooms in front of the defenders and emerged, scanning for threats, weapons up.

Cooper disengaged his night-vision goggles and stood, stretching his knee. The damn brace squeaked and he winced. "Mike, check the wounded. I don't want any surprises."

"On it," replied Mike from down the corridor. He stood and methodically checked each body on the floor for a pulse. The third one he checked was alive. Without hesitation, he pulled his dive knife and plunged the 8" darkened blade into the soldier's chest. The man stiffened and gurgled, a bubble of blood forming at his mouth. After the body relaxed, Mike twisted the blade and with a savage motion, ripped it free from the corpse. He moved to the next North Korean casualty in a low crouch and checked for a pulse.

"Jesus!" one of the wounded agents said, nursing a bandaged arm and propped against the wall. "What the hell was that for? That guy was half-dead already..."

"Well, now he's *full*-dead," was Mike's grim reply. He crouched next to

another body and checked it. “Chief said ‘No surprises.’ Only way we’ll be surprised now is if these assholes turn into zombies.” He grinned, his teeth white against a sweat-streaked, grimy face and moved on.

“I’m Sheffield, head of the President’s detail,” said the agent with the flashlight. Agent Sheffield looked back down the hallway where the partially destroyed nurse’s station sat in silence. He gestured at a North Korean body. “You guys sure know how to make an entrance.”

“Master Chief Braaten,” said Cooper. He scanned the battle scene and was rather impressed by what he saw. The handful of agents had held off a vastly superior force, judging by the numbers of bodies crumpled along the corridors in every direction. “Looks like you and your men put up a helluva fight.”

Sheffield grunted then blew out his breath and winced in pain. “We sure that’s the last of ‘em? Don’t have much ammo left.”

Cooper nodded. “Slipknot?”

Agent Sheffield looked at Cooper, as if deciding whether he could reveal such information. He smiled and wiped the blood from his cheek with the back of a grime-covered hand. “Not here. We’re the front line. We’ve got him in the basement in a makeshift ICU with a few doctors and the rest of my team. We wanted to draw their attention up here to the Critical Ward until we could get him out of the hospital.”

“Is he alive?” asked Cooper, switching magazines on his weapon.

“Yeah, but he contracted that super flu that’s going around. He’s in bad shape.”

“Shit.” Cooper looked around the demolished corridor leading to the bullet-riddled nurse’s station at the T.

“This is *no bueno*, man. We gotta move. Can you get your wounded on their feet? We need to regroup with the others and get Slipknot out of here—like, yesterday.”

“Something to do with the explosions we heard? Our comms went dead a while back and we haven’t heard from anyone till you guys showed up and tore through these assholes like Sherman through Atlanta,” said the President’s chief bodyguard as he helped another agent to his feet.

“Those weren’t just explosions. Fuckin’ missiles from offshore, hell maybe from orbit or something,” Cooper said. “We spotted at least one jet doing ground-attack runs. We lost comms just before we got here.”

Cooper paused. When he spoke next, it was in a quiet voice. “Walked into a damn trap and lost half my men.” He stared right at the SAC and added, “Last thing we heard was Apache Dawn has been activated.”

The agent paled, noticeable even in the dim, murky light. “Oh my *God*.” He turned to his men. “Apache Dawn is in effect! We have to get Slipknot and evacuate *now*!” Turning back to Cooper, he said, “Follow me, I’ll get us down to the basement.” The agents kicked themselves into gear, rushing to collect what weapons and ammo they could find before gathering up their wounded.

“I got our six,” said Charlie. “Sparky, on me!”

“Take ‘em out,” said Cooper to Agent Sheffield with a brief nod. He backed up against the wall as Agent Sheffield limped past. The remaining agents and SEALs followed closely, queued up behind Cooper. Charlie and Sparky took up trailing positions, walking backwards and scanning for threats from the rear.

It only took a few minutes of winding through darkened, deserted hallways and stepping over the bodies, busted-up equipment, and trash to make it to the basement. The North Koreans had really shot the hell out of the hospital. Cooper imagined the upper floors of the hospital must be crammed full of terrified civvies: patients, family members, doctors, nurses, and staff. He didn’t like leaving them behind, but his mission was to secure the President at all costs.

Once on the basement level, his advance guard was readily challenged by some nervous-looking agents in tactical gear. However, following recognition, the hard-pressed agents’ faces radiated relief. Cooper was again very impressed with the agents’ attention to detail—especially the expedient redoubt that had been constructed. Gurneys and equipment carts had been knocked over and positioned in such a way that if an enemy were to make it down here, they’d have to work their way through the obstructions in a zigzag pattern that would keep them exposed from many angles. The North Koreans would’ve paid dearly to fight through that maze of death.

The final ring of barricades was manned by agents with automatic shotguns,

pistols, and even a few grenades. Cooper nodded as he walked past, carbine pointed at the ground.

He could see movement just beyond the semi-translucent plastic surgical tent that had been attached to assorted bits of HVAC equipment. Power to the lights and monitoring gear appeared to be provided by a curious tangle of cords leading from a few devices Cooper imagined had been hastily liberated from an operating room.

A short woman in teal-blue scrubs with auburn hair pulled into a loose ponytail glanced up from the bloodied agent she was tending to on the floor. She stood up, knuckling her back in a feline stretch and looked him over.

“Who the hell are *you* guys?”

“Navy SEALs, ma’am,” Cooper said, feeling heat rush into his face. Standing there before her in bloodied armor, tactical vest, helmet and black BDUs, he suddenly felt uncomfortable, like he was underdressed at a formal event. He looked around the makeshift ICU, cleared his throat, and refocused his attention.

“We heard you needed some assistance. Can you tell me where I can find the doctor tending to the President?”

“Yes. I’m one of them.” She smiled and adjusted the stray lock of hair that threatened to tumble down across her face. Cooper’s mouth went dry—she had lovely hair and that smile was the prettiest thing he’d seen on a night full of horror—but he chased his wandering thoughts away. *Mission first, dammit.*

The doctor whispered something to a passing nurse decked out in blood-splattered green scrubs, who stared open-mouthed at the arrival of the SEALs. Cooper watched as the nurse nodded and moved back toward the plastic tent, eyes still on his grim-looking SEALs.

“The Chief of Emergency Medicine for the hospital is in with the President right now.” The pretty doctor pointed over to the corner. “Dr. Fletcher—he’s our top thoracic specialist—is resting. He’s the only other doctor that made it...down here...” She pulled off a bloody latex glove and extended her clean, soft hand. “I’m Dr. Alston. Brenda.”

“Master Chief Cooper Braaten, ma’am,” he said as he shook her hand. It was

soft, in the way that women's hands were, yet had a supple strength to it that sent electricity shooting down his spine at her touch. He had to force himself to remove his hand before the handshake turned awkward. He cleared his throat again and looked around, suddenly grateful to be watching his men talking with the agents as they helped to secure the perimeter.

Dr. Alston hugged herself and sighed. "You guys couldn't have picked a better time to show up. When those soldiers arrived and started shooting everyone..."

"Ma'am, you don't know the half of it." Cooper shook his head. "I never would've believed what I saw outside if I hadn't lived through it. I need to talk to the President."

"I'm sorry," Dr. Alston said with a genuine look of sorrow on her face. "He's got a really bad fever. He's actually delirious most of the time..."

Cooper frowned and looked around the basement, trying to organize his thoughts. He'd never before had to fight himself to remain on mission. Every time he glanced at Dr. Alston, the world seemed to grow brighter.

Goddammit, sailor, there's a war going on! Think about the doctor's ass some other time! It is pretty nice, though...

"We need to move him, *now*," Cooper said in a tone he immediately regretted. He hadn't felt so flustered like this since *high school* for cryin' out loud. "This basement isn't secure enough. Hell, the damn *city* isn't secure. No, we gotta get him out of *Los Angeles*." He put his hands on his hips and rolled his neck. After a satisfying crack, he sighed and said, "We put a hurtin' on the NKors, but they're gonna be crawling all over this place pretty soon."

Jax walked by and smiled at Dr. Alston, reloading his M60 in stride. "The North Koreans are easily frightened, but they'll soon return...*and* in greater numbers," he said in his best Alec Guinness voice.

"I'm *serious*, Obi Wan," said Cooper. The lopsided smile on his face softened the tone of his voice. Dr. Alston actually giggled. It was a sweet sound that made him really, *really* wish the North Koreans weren't out there trying to kill them all.

A balding, elderly man burst from the medical tent. He appeared to be in his

mid-sixties with a fringe of unruly gray hair orbiting his gleaming dome of a head. Obviously in charge, the short man bustled promptly up to Cooper. He pulled the mask off his face and fixed Cooper with a suspicious glare hooded by the biggest, bushiest gray eyebrows he had ever seen.

“I’m Chief of Emergency Medicine, Dr. George Honeycutt. Can you tell me just what in the Sam Hill is going on around here?”

“‘Hell’ about sums it up, sir. The President—can he be moved?”

The older doctor snorted a laugh. “*Moved?* Hardly. The poor man is barely holding onto his life. We’ve got him so pumped full of Tamiflu and...” He shook his head. “I honestly don’t know if we can even control the fever.”

“It’s the mystery flu that’s hit all up and down the West Coast,” offered Dr. Alston with a concerned look on her face.

Cooper nodded to hide how upset was at himself for letting that look on her face affect him so much. He soldiered on. “We were briefed that someone had weaponized a strain of The Pandemic and deployed it to the West Coast. Maybe New York and Chicago, too—at least, that was what we heard before we lost all contact with the outside world.”

“Who *are* they?” asked Dr. Alston. “The soldiers that attacked?”

“North Korean marines,” said Cooper. “Probably some of their spec-ops thrown in for good measure. I don’t know; they all died the same.”

“*Hooyah*, Master Chief,” grunted Mike with a smile as he and one of the agents walked by carrying a heavy piece of equipment for the barricade.

“Look...we need to get the President out of here. They know he’s here; that’s why they’re trying to take this place. We cut a good and bloody swath through them to reach you, but as I told Dr. Alston here,” he flashed a smile at her, “there’s bound to be more coming. We’ve got to be *gone* when they come back.”

“Can’t we just hold out till reinforcements arrive?” asked Dr. Alston.

“I’m afraid not, ma’am. I think the NKors are invading.”

“*Invading?* Los Angeles?” asked Dr. Honeycutt.

“*America*,” Cooper said, hardly believing his own voice.

“Apache Dawn?” asked Dr. Alston. She looked around. “*Jesus*.”

Cooper felt like he had been slapped. *How the hell does she know about*

Apache Dawn? She grinned and Cooper felt his heart flutter.

“I was a combat medic in the Army. Did a tour in Iran, went to med school in the reserves, and here I am. I stay in touch with some friends who stayed on for another tour...” Dr. Alston sighed. “I just got out last week,” she muttered, looking around the basement.

“What rank?” asked Cooper. He was more impressed with her every second. He noticed with alarming satisfaction that Dr. Alston didn’t wear a wedding ring.

“Captain. And back on the front lines, it seems.” She frowned, creating an endearing little crease between her eyebrows.

Dirt and chalky smelling concrete dust drifted down from the ceiling as the ground rumbled beneath their feet. Emergency lights flickered. Conversation stopped as everyone looked up and then at the person next to them.

Cooper nodded. “Then I’ll give you the straight dope, ma’am. We’re deep in the yogurt if we can’t get the President out of here. We were dodging incoming ICBMs, jets on bombing runs, and cut through a company of NKor marines out there, just to get inside this building.”

“My God...” whispered Dr. Honeycutt.

“Mark my words, this is no small ‘international-incident.’ This is a well-planned, seriously coordinated, large-scale offensive action. They somehow took down our global comms—I’m talking *net-wide*. I can’t raise HQ at all—no signal on the sat phones, either. *Everything* is dead—except squad radios. We’re on our own here, folks.”

“What are we supposed to do, then?” said Dr. Alston, a hand raised to her mouth. Cooper suddenly felt angry that her hand was trembling slightly. He reined in his emotions and looked back at Dr. Honeycutt.

“First, you have *got* to get the President stabilized. Second, we’ve got to get the hell out of here and find a better place to hole-up. Preferably a military installation.”

“Well, where did you guys come from? Can’t we just go back?” asked Dr. Honeycutt.

“Negative, sir. We flew in on small helicopters. Two were shot down.”

Dr. Alston gasped. “Shot down? With *what*?”

“Stingers, we think. Or the North Korean equivalent.” The Chief of Emergency Medicine’s blank face prompted Cooper to explain further. “It’s an infantry weapon, a shoulder-fired heat-seeking missile. Very accurate and highly portable. They were on the rooftops waiting for us.” Cooper cleared his throat. “It was an ambush; we never had a chance.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Dr. Alston softly.

Cooper keyed his throat mic. “Charlie.”

“Yeah, Coop?” said his XO, moving up next to Cooper. He shouldered his rifle and nodding a greeting to the doctors.

“Oh, there you are. Hey, what’s the closest base around here? *Anything*. I’ll take a damn Coast Guard station.”

“Uh, Los Angeles Air Force Base, I think.”

“I believe that’s near Inglewood,” offered Dr. Honeycutt.

Cooper rubbed his chin. “Distance?” he asked Charlie.

A quick check with his wrist-mounted maps and Charlie looked up. “Little less than 20 miles. Down by the coast, El Segundo.”

“I like the coast,” said Cooper. He lost the smile and turned to the doctors. “You need to have the President ready to move as soon as possible.”

Dr. Alston looked at her boss. Cooper noticed the little crease between her eyebrows was back. Dr. Honeycutt shook his head. “Young man, I can’t tell you if he’s going to survive the *hour*, let alone be ready to move any great distance.” He snorted. “We’ve *barely* got him stabilized. We need the vaccine if he’s going to have even a fighting chance.”

“Great, where’s the vaccine? We’ll go get it for you,” offered Charlie.

The two doctors looked at each other and shared a sad expression. “I’m afraid you can’t, son,” said Dr. Honeycutt. “It was in Atlanta. *All* of it.”

“Of *course* it was,” said Charlie.

“El Segundo is still our best bet, then,” said Cooper. He pointed at the docs. “Get him ready to move as soon as you can. We’ll secure transport. We need to be out of here, *pronto*.”

“Son,” said Dr. Honeycutt, putting his hands into his lab coat pockets and adopting the air of the professor. “I think—”

“Doc, don’t give me that ‘son’ bullshit.” He waved a hand at his SEALs. “I did *not* lose half my men to those North Korean *fucks* and then fight our way to the President—only to sit here and watch him *die*. We’re going to have the whole goddamn North Korean army screaming for our heads and tearing this building apart, shortly. We will not—I repeat, *we will not* be sitting in this basement wringing our hands when they get here.” The older doctor straightened his back as if slapped in the face. Cooper noted with some pride that Dr. Alston tried to hide a grin.

“Now, you do what you have to do—do what you can—to keep the President stabilized. My men and I are going to do everything we can to unfuck ourselves and get us all to safety. Wherever the hell that turns out to be.”

“You can’t just move him—” started Dr. Honeycutt.

“Doctor,” Cooper said in a deathly quiet tone. “If I have to, I will throw the President of the United States over my shoulder and carry him on my back to safety. My mission is to get him the hell out of Dodge and I *will* complete my mission. Do I make myself clear?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAD

Glacier National Park, Montana
MacDonald Creek Valley

STAFF SERGEANT GARZA LOOKED UP. "THERE," he said. The blinking running lights of the helicopter overhead glittered through the snow blowing in Chad's face. The reunited squad of Rangers clustered around him in a defensive perimeter and waited for the big helicopter to land. "Captain, I got visual!"

The captain nodded and shouted into his mic, "Anvil, what the hell's the matter? Land that thing!"

Chad had been provided a small headset to communicate with the Rangers while they were trying to exit Glacier National Park. He could hear the pilot squawk back a reply, "Negative, Hammer 2, Actual...uh...we still can't swing it...we have...uh...wind shear at a hundred feet is vicious and it took too much fuel to get in here. I'm bingo fuel again. If I land, I don't take off. I've marked your location; we'll be back again when the winds die down."

"Dammit!" said one of the Rangers. "He just got here!"

"Anvil, Hammer 2, Actual. What the hell?" asked the captain. He frowned at the lack of response from the helicopter. "Thanks for the attempt," he said, sarcasm dripping from his voice. "We'll meet you at the emergency LZ," yelled

the captain over the noise of the storm and the helicopter.

“Hammer 2, Actual, roger that. Hunker down, we’ll refuel and get you outta there in the morning. Anvil out.”

As the helicopter gained altitude, the lights winked out and they were all left in total darkness again. The storm that had enveloped them yesterday showed no signs of letting up. The sun had set an hour earlier and it was black as ink. Chad did not want to spend yet another night out in the wild with nothing but a crudely made lean-to as shelter.

The Rangers huddled around Chad and took a knee, facing out. Captain Alston watched the sky where helicopter had been. “Anybody else think that pilot was lying?”

The big Ranger grunted. “Doesn't seem any worse now than it did when they dropped us off...”

“Mr. Huntley, is there any shelter around here?” yelled the captain. “I don’t think I need to express to you how important it is for us to get warm...”

Chad shivered and thought. He was so tired, his mind seemed full of mush. “Can you show me exactly where we are on a map?”

The captain nodded and pulled out a small GPS unit with their location marked on a topographical map of the area. Chad examined it a bit then nodded. “Yeah!” he hollered over the storm. They were about a mile west of where he thought they were. He shook his head at the idea that someone as familiar with the local terrain as himself could so easily be lost so quickly. It was a hell of a storm. This early in the year...it promised to be a bad, brutal winter.

“About half a mile north, up that slope,” Chad said, pointing at the colossal southern flank of Mt. Vaught. “It’s just a waystation, really—but it’ll get us out of this mess!”

“Let’s move, Rangers. Garza, take point.”

“Hooah!” barked Garza as he stood, then moved out in the direction his captain was pointing.

Chad stood up, but was immediately grabbed by three different sets of hands and held in place. “Hold up, sir,” someone said. Chad could only watch as Garza’s ghostly form disappeared into the snow ten feet away. “Okay, now we

move.”

The squad followed just behind Garza, holding formation in a loose circle with Chad in the middle. Two of their number were detached to follow slowly behind, to discourage any North Koreans still following them in the storm. The Rangers had wiped out the entire group of men that had been hunting Chad yesterday, but the captain was not completely convinced that there weren't more of them in the woods.

After another hour-long slog through the deepening snow, fighting against the wind, and feeling their way through the dark, they finally made it to the little waystation cabin. It was halfway up the southern slope of Mt. Vaught, right where Chad had said, tucked in a little ravine. There was no obvious path and the approach from the south was blocked by a little cluster of pines and a snowbank.

“Looks more like a *shack*,” muttered one of the Rangers.

“Deuce!” barked the captain.

“Sir!”

“Scope it out.”

“On it.”

“I'm sure it's empty...no one uses this thing in the summer, let alone now. And with this storm, who the hell would be up here?” said Chad bitterly. They were only a few yards away from being able to get out of the storm and start to warm up. All he wanted to do was lay down by a fire.

“Didn't expect to find any North Koreans shooting at you in your own park either, did you, sir?” asked the captain. “As long as I'm in charge, we do it by the book.” And that was that.

Eventually, Donovan radioed back that the shack and its surroundings were clear. “Let's go,” said the captain. Chad thanked God and quickly stood up, stomping his feet in the snow a bit, trying to get his cold blood flowing enough to drag his ass into the waystation and start a fire.

Once inside with the thick wooden door shut, the relative silence was deafening. After nearly two days of hearing the wind howl and feeling snow sting his face, the absence of those abuses was jolting. He stood there in the

cramped, cold, and dark cabin and closed his eyes. At last some of the tension began to melt from his body.

“Tuck, you and Deacon dig in and watch the perimeter,” said the captain, removing his helmet and face mask. “Three-hour shifts. I’ll take next watch with Garza.”

“You got it, boss,” said the Ranger named Deacon.

“Here, take the thermal,” said Donovan and tossed his rifle to Deacon, who swapped for his own M4. Chad noticed an odd-looking scope on the rifle Donovan had given away.

When the door shut again, the remaining Rangers began removing helmets and facemasks. Chad was glad to see there actually were human faces under those masks after all. The men who stood looking at him were all hard-faced individuals with short, close-cropped haircuts and sharp eyes.

“That’s better,” sighed the tall one with red stubble on his head. He removed his gloves and offered an outstretched hand. “We never got to be formally introduced out there...I’m Captain Derek Alston.”

“Chad Huntley. But you already knew that...” Chad felt foolish. They shook hands. The Ranger’s grip was firm and solid, his piercing blue eyes locked on Chad’s as they greeted each other formally.

“That there is Sergeant Garza,” Captain Alston said with a nod toward the short, olive skinned man with a close-cropped Mohawk. Garza flashed a grin and began dropping his gear.

“I’ll get us some heat—there’s a woodstove in the corner,” said Garza.

“Over here we got Corporal Daniel Donovan—”

“Call me Deuce,” said the bull-necked soldier in a deep voice. “Everyone else does.”

“And this here is Zuka.”

Chad noticed that “Zuka” was the shortest member of the squad. When he pulled his helmet off, his Japanese heritage was obvious. Slightly almond-shaped eyes, jet black hair in a short-cropped brush and a slightly tan skin. “The name’s Preston Onizuka. Everyone calls me Zuka, though.”

Garza quickly added, “No one calls him Preston. He looks small, but that

little *hijo de puta* is half-ninja. Don't fuck with him, *esse*." Garza laughed.

Deuce walked past Zuka and laughed, more of a rumble than a chortle, slapping the short man on the back of the head.

"I know where you sleep, bitch," said Zuka with a scowl. His face split into a grin a half second later as his comrades laughed.

Captain Alston squatted on the wooden floor of the cabin and shrugged out of his pack and gear. His rifle leaned against the wall within easy reach to the left of the door. He eased back against the wall and stretched his long legs with a sigh.

"I—have made—*fire!*" called out Garza from the woodstove, hands raised in self-praise. Chad saw the warm glow of the fire from inside the open door.

"Cook me up a steak and I'll be impressed," muttered Deuce.

"Won't be long now, we'll get this place nice and cozy," Garza said as he looked around the meager cabin. "Not much here, though. We got plenty of wood for the stove, but I got nothin' else, Cap."

"All right then, guys, we need some chow. Think you can whip up something, Donovan?"

"Do bears shit in the woods, sir?" Deuce grumbled from the stove. The big Ranger was already laying out packets of what Chad assumed to be ingredients on the floor along with a few metal cups and pans.

"Great. I just got *over* the runs a few days ago," muttered Zuka to stout laughter. "Go easy on the axle-grease this time, okay, Deuce?"

"That was *chili*..." muttered the big Ranger, to a fresh round of chuckles.

Chad shivered and put his own pack on the floor, then leaned against the wall and dusted the snow off his ghillie suit. He leaned his lever-action rifle against the wall like the captain had done. He noticed the snow from his gear already melting on the floor.

Captain Alston grinned. "So," he said, bringing his knees up to rest his arms on them. "You mind telling me why the hell we were sent out here in the middle of this godforsaken storm to drag your ass out?"

Chad shook his head, brushing snow out of his beard. "I have no idea, man. I want to know the same thing."

“That’s some bullshit, right there,” said Deuce, shaking his head and stirring a pot of steaming coffee on the stove. He tossed a package in brown wrapping to Zuka. Chad watched the short Ranger whip out a long, gleaming knife from somewhere and slice open the package with practiced ease. In a flash, the knife disappeared again.

“You honestly have no idea?” asked Captain Alston. He frowned. “I suppose you have no idea why a platoon North Korean soldiers were hunting you, either?”

Chad shook his head. “No clue. How the hell did they get in here in the first place? The National Guard is out there blocking all the roads...”

Captain Alston nodded sadly. “They probably cut their way through the Guards, no problem. I got a look at their uniforms. They weren’t just grunts—I recognized the emblems. A recon outfit with the North Korean Special Forces. They call themselves *sniper brigades*.” He laughed. “Got a lot of fancy names for themselves, but, at the end of the day, they’re still just NKors—a bunch of *fanatics*. Crazy sonsabitches buy into the ‘North Korea vs the world’ propaganda hook, line, and sinker.”

Chad sat up. “*Special Forces*?” He looked at the Rangers. “But *you* guys took *them* out, and there’s only, what—*seven* of you?”

The Rangers laughed long and loud. “That’s ‘cause we’re fucking *hardcore*, baby,” said Deuce, flexing his massive arms.

“Hooah!” said Garza.

Zuka sat down next to Chad and offered him some sort of food from the brown package he had been working on. Chad didn’t like the taste, but it was warm and it was food.

“Their expertise is airborne insertions and behind-the-lines kind of stuff. Very high tech,” said the captain, taking a similar food pack from Deuce. He grimaced but dug in just the same. “Our expertise is taking assholes like them to the cleaners.”

“*Hooah!*” called out the others in a throaty roar.

“SpecOps...” said Deuce thoughtfully after the laughter died down. “That explains the beater-scope.” He shook his head. “I *hate* those things.” He

examined the pot of coffee. “Hey, why the hell do you have one, anyway?” he asked, pointing his canteen at Chad.

Chad put a hand on the heartbeat monitor. He unhooked from his belt and held it up. “This thing? It’s for my job.” He looked around at the blank, expectant faces. “I work for the CDC. I’m a field retrieval specialist. I gather samples.”

“Samples?” asked Garza. He smiled. “Of what, *snow*?”

“No...Plague.”

All smiles vanished from the Rangers. Deuce paused, a steaming cup on the way to his mouth. “Plague?”

“*Bubonic* plague, to be exact,” said Chad matter-of-factly. “Didn’t you guys know this whole park is under quarantine?”

“*Jesu Christo!*” said Garza as he crossed himself, backing away from Chad. “Ain’t that the Black Death?”

“Yes,” said Chad nonchalantly, unzipping his ghillie suit as the woodstove began to warm the small one-room cabin to a comfortable level. “My job is to track and kill animals infected with the plague, then harvest samples—”

“Samples?” asked Deuce. He took a sip from his cup and frowned. He passed it to the captain. “It don’t taste very good, but it won’t kill you.”

“Yeah,” said Chad, shrugging out of his ghillie suit. After a cursory check that his sweatshirt and undergarments weren’t too thoroughly soaked, he carefully stretched out the ghillie suit to dry on a couple of rough-hewn pegs sunk into the wall as he talked. “I take blood, bone, and tissue samples from harvested animals and check them under the microscope back at my cabin. Then I send the results back to HQ. While I’m out in the bush, I also take down as many infected animals as I can to try and limit the spread of the disease.”

“Aren’t you worried about catching it?” asked Garza. He took a cup of the coffee from Deuce with a nod of thanks.

“No,” said Chad. His expression went blank. Every single time someone asked that innocent question, he relived that cold day years ago when he buried Mom. “I don’t have to worry about that.”

“Oh, yeah, they got a vaccine, huh?” asked Zuka, warming his hands by the

woodstove.

“No,” said Chad. “I’m immune.”

“Uh, say again?” asked the captain.

“*Immune*. As in I can’t get sick from it. Or from *anything*, for that matter,” Chad said. He shrugged. “Been that way most of my life. There’s something in my genes that keeps me from getting sick. No colds, no flu, no disease, no nothing. At least, nothing they’ve tested me for.”

“They?” asked the captain.

“The CDC, the government, CIA, hell even NASA, I think.”

“Well,” sighed Captain Alston after a long sip from the mug. “*That* explains a lot.”

“So, like you can never get sick...at all?” asked Garza.

“Not once in my entire life...at least that I can remember.”

As the Rangers mulled that thought over in silence, Chad scratched his head and ruffled his damp, thick hair. What he wouldn’t give for a nice hot soak right about now. “Would someone mind explaining why those Special Forces guys were trying to kill me, and why you were trying to get me out of here on a helicopter?” He took an empty metal mug from his pack and handed it to Deuce. “Thanks,” he said when the big Ranger returned with hot coffee.

“You really have no clue?” The captain shook his head. “What a mind job.” He took a bite from his food packet and grimaced. “Okay, listen up. Our orders were to get in here and extract you,” he said, pointing the spork in his hand at Chad. “Then get your ass back over the Rockies to Spokane, Washington. Nobody told us shit about the Black Death in these woods. My CO made no mention of any NKors, either.” He took a bite and chewed thoughtfully. “Or why the hell we were supposed to get you in the first place—only that you’re on someone’s list. And that someone is pretty damn high up—if you take my meaning—for us to be re-tasked to dragging you outta here in the middle of a damn blizzard.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” asked Chad.

“Whaddya mean?” asked Garza. “We could be doing a hundred other missions right now in all this chaos. Something big is going down and you must

be a part of it...”

“What the hell are you *talking* about? *What’s* going down?”

The captain narrowed his eyes. “You got TV up here?”

“No,” said Chad, starting to get worried. “No radio either. I like the quiet.” He looked around. “*What’s going on?*”

“Cell phone?” asked Deuce.

Chad pulled his out and showed them the screen. “No signal,” he said. “I have a sat phone, but I’ve never needed to use it. It’s for emergencies.”

“Holy *shit*,” muttered Deuce. He looked at Captain Alston. “He doesn’t know.”

“Know *what?*” asked Chad through clenched teeth. He could feel the frustration and fear inside him begin to boil over into anger.

“How long have you been up here without contact from the outside world?” asked Captain Alston.

“Guess I’ve been up here about a month or so. What day is it?”

“Saturday the 27th.”

“Yup, I passed through the quarantine checkpoint on the 3rd.” Chad sipped from the forgotten mug in his hands and winced. It was awful. But it was hot. “We’re still in September, right?” He grinned. He looked at Deuce, who watched him intently. Chad smiled weakly. “Not bad,” he said, raising his mug. The big Ranger smiled.

“See?” the mountain of a man said to Garza. “*He* likes it.”

“So you haven’t heard anything about the flu or Atlanta?” asked the captain over the foul-mouthed response from Garza.

“What flu? What about Atlanta?” asked Chad, taking another sip from his steaming cup.

“It’s hitting some big cities. Kinda strange-like. I don’t know, I’m no doc, but my sister is. She’s in Los Angeles and called me Friday night, after Atlanta... People getting sick in numbers she hasn’t seen since...”

“The Pandemic?” asked Chad in a quiet voice. “It’s back?”

No one spoke for a few moments. “I don’t know,” said the captain in a quiet voice. “My sister said she ran some tests and this strain is related, but it’s...”

different somehow. It looks like people who were infected ten years ago and survived should be okay, but...she can't be certain. She said it's mutated, but in ways it shouldn't be possible to mutate. They're still trying to figure it out, but people are starting to die much faster than during The Pandemic." He shook his head. "I don't know, man. Like I said, I'm no doctor. But the last thing I heard before we came out here, it's getting *real* bad and a lot of the brass are getting worried. Like, Def-Con 2 worried."

"Where?" asked Chad in a flat voice.

"L.A., San Diego," said Deuce.

"San Fran, Portland," added Garza.

"Yeah, I guess most of the big cities on the West Coast are like ground zero. Hospitals swamped, that kind of thing. On the East Coast, New York, Boston, Philly, the big ones there are just starting to see cases." Captain Alston rubbed his eyes but kept talking, "Hardly anything in the midwest, but last I heard, Chicago and a handful of smaller cities in the Rockies are reporting numbers of sick they haven't seen since...you know."

Chad closed his eyes and put a hand to his face. "How long?"

"Shit, just in the past week. It's like it just popped up everywhere in the west at once. Now it's in the east," replied the captain. "Freakin' unreal. And yet here we sit, trying to protect you from a bunch of ninja wannabes."

Eyes still closed, Chad tried to fight off the memories from his past. Burying Mom and Dad, his sisters, his neighbors. "What kind of casualty count worldwide?" he asked, ignoring for the moment that a bunch of North Koreans were trying to kill him.

"Uh..." said the captain. "You know...I don't really know. Hadn't thought about it." The others grunted agreement and ignorance.

Chad opened his eyes and looked around. The Rangers looked genuinely confused.

"I haven't heard anything happening outside North America," said Deuce. "Why?"

"And even then, it's mostly in the U.S.," Captain Alston mused, his frown deepening. "There's a few cases reported from Canada, but..."

“Jesus,” Chad whispered. “They weaponized it.”

Captain Alston sat up. “What did you just say?”

“Some crazy son of a bitch in a lab coat weaponized The Pandemic strain of H5N1! Don’t you get it? That’s the only explanation. You said it yourself, we’re the *only* country that’s got it in significant numbers. It popped up in major cities, in waves, at the same time—”

“Jesus...someone hit the West Coast, then the next round went east,” said Captain Alston, nodding at Chad’s assessment.

“Why the hell hasn’t CDC gone completely *apeshit* over this?” Chad demanded.

“Damn,” said Garza, shaking his head sadly. “He doesn’t know.”

“Know *what*?”

“The CDC is *gone*, Mr. Huntley,” said the captain. “Someone nuked Atlanta Friday afternoon.”

Chad’s mouth dropped open. He was stunned. “Wait...when you mean *nuked*, you mean like a terrorist bomb or something...a—what do you call them...a dirty bomb, right?”

“No. I mean some tourists in Florida saw a fucking *ICBM* shoot up out of the Atlantic Ocean. It damn near wiped Atlanta off the map.”

Chad looked at the captain in utter disbelief but the grim look to the man’s face confirmed his words. He looked at Garza, who merely nodded. Deuce’s face was dark with anger.

“My parents lived in Atlanta,” the big man growled.

“Who?” Chad squeaked in a whisper. “Who *did* this?” All his friends and co-workers were all at the CDC main campus in the northern suburbs of Atlanta. They were all *gone*. It was like The Great Pandemic all over again.

“Don’t know,” said the captain. He looked ready to crush the metal coffee mug in his white-knuckled hands. “But when the brass figures that out, you better believe we’re gonna be dropping the hammer on *somebody’s* ass.”

“Why Atlanta?” asked Chad, eyes closed again. Everyone gone. His home, his neighbors. *Again*. Wiped out. And now with the Blue Flu apparently visiting the country *again*...His eyes flew open.

“Holy shit,” he said. “Holy shit, holy *shit*...” Chad got up and started pacing, his mind reeling from the thoughts that were spinning in his head.

It can't be. It's too outrageous...but there's too much coincidence. If I'm right, though...holy shit.

“What?” asked Captain Alston. “What is it?”

“*Atlanta*. The nuke—it *confirms* that someone weaponized The Pandemic strain. We...the CDC, my division, I mean...they made a vaccine for it the year after The Pandemic, remember?”

“Yeah, it's what started calming everything down and stopped the war in Iran from going nuclear,” replied Captain Alston.

Chad pointed at him. “Right! And do you know where the vaccine came from?”

“Well, the CDC I would guess.”

“No way!” said Garza, getting to his feet. He pointed at Chad. “It came from *him*, man! He said he couldn't get sick, right?”

“Right,” said Chad with a nod toward the grinning Garza. “They took so much of my blood, I thought they were going to *kill* me. They needed it to make a vaccine—to kill that fucking super flu dead in its tracks. Then they started stockpiling it.”

“That's great! Where is it?” said the captain. “They should be able to haul it out and stop this flu so we can focus on getting back at whoever nuked Atlanta.”

“In the vaccine vaults at the CDC main campus. In Atlanta,” said Chad with a shake of his head. “Oh, the CDC sent samples to the other countries in the world to let them make their own, but without my blood, it was just synthetic, and it wasn't as good as ours. The bits that I overheard from the virologists, whatever they did to make the vaccine was pretty classified. They didn't want anyone else out there to find out how we made the vaccine so they built into it a limited shelf-life or something. After a few months, all the vaccines we made to kill H5N1 were *useless*. That kept the entire world dependent on the CDC for the good stuff.”

“How do you know?” asked Captain Alston. “You some sort of doc or something?”

Chad's anger suddenly bubbled to the surface. "Hey, when *you* see everyone you care about wither and die because of some goddamn disease, you tend to read up on it." Chad closed his eyes and tried to calm his breathing. The faces of his co-workers flashed across his mind. All their families, their kids...

"I'm sorry," Chad said after a moment. "Didn't mean to jump down your throat like that."

Captain Alston waved off the apology. "Don't worry about it. You got a lot to take in at the moment."

Chad sighed deeply before continuing, "At any rate, those lab geeks loved to tell me how smart they were—they had to make a new round of vaccines—that's what they froze, that's what got pulled back to the CDC—"

"*That's* what got everyone in Atlanta killed," muttered Deuce.

Chad looked at the floor and after a moment of silence, said, "Last I heard, somebody in Washington determined that the bio-synthetic vaccine was too valuable to national security or some shit. They wanted it all in the basement at the CDC for safekeeping."

"Figures," said Deuce. "Some REMF decides to put all the vaccine in one place right before that place gets glassed." He shook his head. "Fuckin' bureaucrats."

Chad leaned against the wall and slid down to the floor in exhaustion. The weight of the world was pressing down on his shoulders. H5N1 was back. He couldn't even grasp that concept, let alone that some fools had actually released it on purpose, then wiped out the country's only means of fighting back. He put his head in his hands.

"A lot of people are going to die."

"A lot of people have already died..." said the captain, sadly. "Atlanta was a big town and they glassed it during rush hour. They're saying a half-million casualties—minimum."

"*Madre de Dio*," muttered Garza, crossing himself.

"So why the hell are the *North Koreans* after you?" asked Zuka, pointing a steaming mug at Chad.

"And how the hell did they get in-country in the first place, that's what I

want to know. Someone dropped the damn ball on that, big time,” said the captain, disgust rippling across his face. “Air Force was too busy getting coffee, I guess.”

Chad shook his head. “I have no clue. My God, this is a nightmare.”

Captain Alston’s radio broke squelch. “—net, repeat: Apache Dawn is in effect...communications—” Static erupted again. A moment later the anxious voice returned, “—in effect. Our satellites have been compromised, a large North Korean force including naval and air assets has invaded southern—”

“Invaded?” asked Deuce. “Who? Taiwan?”

“Southern *what?*” asked Garza.

“—marines off the eastern seaboard. Apache Dawn is in effect—” The static came back and this time the voice didn’t.

“Anvil, this is Hammer 2, Actual, come in!” said Captain Alston. “*Anvil!*”

He switched frequencies and tried again. “Anvil, this is Hammer 2, Actual, how copy?”

The only reply was static.

He switched frequencies again. “Hammer 2-1, this is Hammer 2, Actual, do you read me?”

The instant reply was two breaks in squelch. Captain Alston leaned his head back against the wall and sighed. “At least we have squad-level comms. Must be only long-distance that’s been killed, along with our satellites.” His brow furrowed in thought, then relaxed. “Apache Dawn...”

“What’s that?” asked Chad.

Captain Alston sighed. “It’s a code. It means the United States has been invaded by foreign forces. Enemy combatants on American soil. If *that* has happened, it’s bad juju for everyone.” He shook his head. “I just don’t get it.”

“So we don’t know what ‘southern’ meant,” observed Zuka from his corner of the little shack.

“I got an idea,” said the captain. He opened a side pouch on his pack and pulled out a smartphone. “I keep this thing off for OpSec, but you never know when you’ll need it...” He turned it on and waited for it to start up.

Chad shook his head. “Won’t work. Too many valleys and tall mountains

around here—cell signals are pretty much blocked completely.”

The phone chirped as soon as Chad stopped talking. Captain Alston grinned. “Okay...couple text messages...Ah, here’s a voicemail.” He held the phone up to his ear and his face split into a smile as he listened.

I didn’t realize we were high enough up to get a signal, yet. Forgot how tall Mt. Vaught is...wish mine had worked when I needed it...

Chad pulled out his own cell phone and noticed with a frown that its display was shattered. The battery case fell apart in his hands. Sighing, he tossed the worthless phone on the floor and rubbed his hands together to heat them up a bit.

At last, Captain Alston pulled the phone away from his ear. He was still smiling.

“Good news?” asked Garza.

“*Horrible* news,” said the captain, smiling. He hit a button on the phone and the speakerphone came to life.

“—listen to your messages, press 1. To delete, press 7—”

The captain pushed a button. Everyone in the little shack heard the woman’s gentle voice say, “*First new message...*”

A youthful voice, tight with anxiety, came over the speaker. Chad grinned. She sounded cute. “Hey bro, it’s me. We’re really in the deep-end here. L.A. is a *war zone!* There’s North Korean marines all over the place, jets strafing buildings and missiles dropping out of the sky all around us. I’m not supposed to be calling you, but the hell with it, they already know where we are. We may not have much time. Look—that flu I was telling you about? It’s bad. *Real bad.* People who were exposed to the Blue Flu have a chance of being at least partially immune and that’s it. Everyone else seems to be incapacitated—I’m talking bedridden—in 48 hours or less. It’s...worse than before.”

There was some indistinct commotion in the background followed by a big crash and static, then a lot of coughing and finally the captain’s sister came back on the line. “Jesus, that was close. They’re still raining missiles down on the city and that one probably took out a building down the block from us. It’s like an earthquake every time one hits. But they won’t touch this hospital because...” Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper.

Chad imagined her crouching behind something, one hand covering the phone...

"The *President* is here!" she hissed. "He caught the flu on some campaign fundraiser downtown a few days ago and the Secret Service brought him here at oh-dark-thirty this morning. He's in real bad shape, Dee...I...I don't know if he's going to make it. We don't have any of the H5N1 vaccine here and I think the antibodies in that vaccine are the only thing that can fight this new strain even, halfway! The really scary thing is we heard the President is dead on the news...but I'm sitting not thirty feet from him right now! What does that mean?"

A different, deeper and rougher voice could be heard in the background, issuing indistinct orders. Then, quite clearly, everyone in the tiny cabin heard, "All right, people, we are leaving! Get your shit wired and prep to jump. We move as a group and we fight as a group. We're going to cut through these fuckers—"

Captain Alston's sister returned. "I gotta go, the SEALs are getting us out of here. Their leader's kinda cute," she whispered. Chad saw Alston's face harden.

"We're heading to some Air Force base around here. My new hospital—All Saint's—it's just not safe...God, I wish you were here. I...I love you bro," she said, her voice thick with emotion. The shouting in the background started up again and a single shot rang out and the message ended.

"End of new messages. To save, press—"

The captain clicked the button to end the call and put the phone down.

"Uh, why you smilin', Cap? That message sounded pretty bad to me," asked Deuce.

"Donovan, wipe that confused look off your face. We're changing our flight plan."

"What? Don't we have orders to get this guy to Spokane?" asked Garza.

"We do. But that was before we knew everything we know now." He stared at his empty hands. "Since we were ordered to Spokane, we have lost direct contact with HQ. We don't even know if our ride will show up when the weather quits."

"I still don't know what the hell is going on," said Chad.

“Well, we know everything we need to know, now,” replied Captain Alston. He held up a cold finger. “Those NKor bastards are invading southern California, which means we’re at war. That also means the Chinese are involved somehow. North Korea doesn’t take a piss without the ‘go-ahead’ from Beijing—everyone knows that. Our primary mission is to defend this nation—now, we know where to do that.”

Another finger went up. “The President is—or was—at All Saint’s Hospital, in Los Angeles.”

Another finger went up. “My sister is—or was—alive as of last night, at that same hospital.”

Another finger. “Apache Dawn has been put into play. And that means we abort all other missions or tasks and get our asses to the front, get to our CO, and fight to the last man.” Captain Alston paused and looked at every man in turn. Chad watched—no one flinched or seemed to show any sign of reluctance. They were a dangerous-looking group of men.

“Well, gentlemen, we are cut off from our CO—but now we know where our CNC is.”

His thumb went up. “The President is with my sister, along with some Navy SEALs apparently.” His face turned sour. “Leaving aside my sister thinks one of those Squids is *cute*—” disgust dripped from his tongue and he shook his head, “the President’s already been declared dead—despite the fact that my sister says he’s very much alive. That tells me someone is grabbing power during this shitstorm back in Washington. That don’t fly in my book.” He shook his head again, glowering.

“No, the President is alive and it looks like there’s only one thing that can save him...” He turned to look at Chad. All the Rangers looked at Chad.

Chad put his hands up in front of him. “Whoa...hey...”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BARRON

Washington, D.C.
The White House

“ALL RIGHT EVERYONE,” said the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, a wrinkled conservative crone whose voice sounded like crumbling parchment sliding on pavement.

Harold could almost *taste* the dislike the shriveled old woman was broadcasting by her body language. She held herself stiff, like a corpse wrapped in a black shroud, as if preparing herself for a very unpleasant task. He mentally shrugged, supposing for her it *was* unpleasant. She was one of the conservative dinosaurs that had been made irrelevant in the last few general elections, a relic of a bygone era.

And now he would be ushered into office and assume command, leading a vast network of like-minded congressmen and women, senators, most of the Supreme Court, and the majority of American voters. President Denton had honestly *tried* to be moderate and at least put lipstick on his jamming of pet projects into law over the conservatives’ cries of outrage. Harold James Barron vowed he would waste no effort over the hurt feelings of those political Neanderthals.

Their time was over. He believed there needed to be a truly progressive future for America and he was going to build on his predecessor's advancement of liberal ideas and make it permanent. Forget change—he was going to recreate America.

“You don’t have to look so happy about this, you know,” the old crone hissed at him while trying to look nonchalant for the impromptu gathering of pool reporters. “We don’t even know if he’s still alive or not and you’re carrying on as if you just won the election.”

Barron ignored the old witch and beamed for the cameras. He was mere seconds away from being sworn in as President of the United States and he was going to relish every single second.

“Have it your way,” she sighed, shaking her gray head. Louder, to call the gathering to attention, she said, “Raise your right hand. Good. Now, repeat after me: *I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States...*”

“I do solemnly swear,” he heard himself say. He was lost in the moment and while his mouth was speaking the rest of the sacred words, his mind was reeling in unabashed joy. The possibilities that lay before him staggered the mind.

“...*So help me, God.*”

“So help me, God,” Barron said, quickly pulling his hand off the Bible held in the clutches of the old hag. He idly mused what would happen if he appointed some sexy young co-ed just out of law school to the Supreme Court. His party had the power to confirm the nomination in a heartbeat...

“Congratulations, Mr. President,” the venomous harpy said through clenched teeth as she offered a limp, clammy handshake. Her contempt for him was palatable. “May God help us all.”

As the cameras flashed and the reporters jockeyed for position, Harold James Barron, Esq., President of the United States, took a deep breath and smiled for his new nation, he thought, rather ruefully. It was true, he was elated, but he did not want to come off as jubilant. He shook hands with the half-dozen foreign dignitaries rounded up from State, and a few cabinet officials, including the Secretary of Defense.

“Mr. President, we need to speak,” an elderly serious-looking man said in a whisper as he shook the newly sworn-in Chief Executive’s hand.

“President Barron!” called one of the reporters. “Do you have any comment on the civil unrest reported in California? Have you—”

“Okay everyone, the President has a full agenda today, so let’s let him get to work,” said his Chief of Staff as the press was ushered from the Oval Office. The howls of protest from the reporters were pushed aside by a small swarm of Secret Service agents that materialized out of the shadows to clear the room.

The last flash went off and the curved door to the Oval Office hushed shut with a soft click and vanished into the curved, white wall. Harold looked fondly at the massive desk that dominated the far side of the room. It was all his. Just like Reginald had promised.

“Sir,” began the Secretary of Defense. He started to open his briefcase.

The President held his left hand up absently to forestall the stodgy-looking man. He continued to stare at the desk—*his* desk. Walking over to it, he ran his hands along its glossy, dark finish, admiring the luxurious feel of the ageless desk. It had been the throne of power, the place from which the most powerful men on the planet had dictated terms to entire nations, declared both war and peace. The pinnacle of American political power.

He sank into the plush, leather-upholstered high-backed chair and sighed. Now he was at that pinnacle; he was that man; he was the power. He opened his eyes slowly and a smug smile crept across his face.

“Go ahead, Albert, what have you got for me?” The President twirled in his new chair. Not a single squeak or creak. The taxpayers had spared no expense.

The Secretary of Defense smiled, Harold thought a bit condescendingly, and adjusted the half-glasses on the tip of his nose. “Of course, Mr. President. If you’re sure you’re ready?”

“Proceed,” said the President with a regal wave of his hand. He twirled around in his chair again and stopped after one revolution, smacking his hands on the desk. The loud slap made his Chief of Staff flinch.

“I’m glad you like your chair, sir, because we’re on the fucking brink of World War III here.”

The smile vanished from the President's face. "Wh—what?" Panic gripped his heart for a split second. Reginald had said, just that morning, that everything was under control! He tried to calm his quickly accelerating heart rate.

The Secretary of Defense sat down heavily in a richly upholstered chair across from the President's desk. The other cabinet members, NSA, CIA, the Joint Chiefs, and his Chief of Staff all sat on the matching couches, shuffling papers and tablets. The elderly head of the Defense Department took off his glasses and glared at the President with rheumy eyes.

"We have foreign soldiers in...at last count," he looked down at his papers and held his glasses in front of his face. The crusty, balding old man fixed those hawk-like eyes on Harold again. "...*Seven* major American cities. *Foreign soldiers*, Mr. President, on *American* soil, attacking *our* cities. And that's just what we can confirm. With most of our satellites out of commission," he threw his hands up, "we're basically blind, deaf and mute. We are cut off from the majority of our forces overseas. It's like they just vanished."

"Is this confirmed?" the President asked. He looked over the Secretary of Defense's shoulder and got a roomful of somber nodding heads.

Admiral Bennet, the leader of America's Navy, stood up. "Sir," he said, smoothing out his white dress uniform liberally coated with ribbons and medals, "we haven't had reliable, let alone consistent, communications with about 80 percent of our naval forces since the attack on our satellites. Mr. President, that was nearly 36 hours ago." The nation's top sailor rolled a shoulder and adjusted his dress uniform.

"Ships still in port," he continued, "have access to landlines, but any forces out at sea are...hit and miss. Sometimes, we can hail a carrier battlegroup but most of the time, all we get is static. We are—essentially—defenseless without the ability to coordinate forces." The grizzled sailor frowned at his Air Force counterpart. "There could be entire *fleets* approaching our shores at this very moment and we wouldn't know it."

"Don't look at me, Roger," said the Air Force Chief of Staff. "We're in the dark, too. We still have a secure link with the football," he said, gesturing to the Air Force officer standing quietly at the edge of the room. The officer was

holding a large briefcase, handcuffed to his left wrist. The Air Force Chief of Staff then stood up in his dress blues, with an equally large display of medals and ribbons as his Navy counterpart on his puffed-out chest. He nodded toward the President.

“Sir, it’s true, most of our satellite capability has been shut down, but we’re working with the NSA to use some backdoors we re-discovered.”

“‘Backdoors’?” repeated the President with an arched eyebrow. He struggled to push a suggestive image of Jayne from his mind and cleared his throat. “‘Re-discovered’?”

“Yes, sir. Back in the ‘60s and ‘70s, we figured the Russkies would try some anti-satellite warfare, so we built in some emergency access systems into a select batch of civilian birds, like geostationary weather sats. If the Russians took out our military and spy satellites, we could tap into our weather sats and possibly neutral, international communication satellites to carry our own comm-links.”

“You hacked international satellites? That doesn’t sound very diplomatic.” The President could just see the negative headlines flash across the screens.

“Yes, sir,” said the Air Force general. He looked surprised that the President was surprised. “Uh...sir, England, France and Germany, among others—back in the early days—paid us to launch their satellites. We shouldered the risk, we designed and paid for the technology, we supplied the workers, and we supplied the launch facilities. Everything was on us. It wasn’t very hard for our techs to add some extra functionality to those satellites before launch.” He gave a weak shrug. “They never said we couldn’t add some extra communication functionality—and we never asked.”

The President frowned. “Better to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All that being said,” growled the Secretary of Defense, “we still are nowhere near the capability we had just last week. We can get through to a few units and bases when these old clunker satellites pass overhead. After that, we have to wait until the next flyover. It’s primitive technology we’re working with, but it’s all we’ve got and it’s working. Barely. It’s leaving us pissing in the wind.

If someone decides to take out a few of our forward bases in Iran...they could be wiped out before we even know what the hell is happening.”

“Is that all we have?” asked the President in a gasp of disbelief.

“At the moment, yes sir,” said the Air Force general sadly. He sat down with a sigh.

“So. Mr. President, as I said, we are blind, deaf, and mute,” the Secretary of Defense said. “We have North Korean troops taking ground in Los Angeles and—here’s the real kick in the balls—the last image we had over the Pacific is not good.” He stood up and passed a glossy 8x10 photo to the President.

“Why isn’t this on the screens?” asked the President, motioning to the bank of monitors along the entire length of the far wall, displaying current information about the casualties in Atlanta, the fighting in Los Angeles, and half a dozen other crises the nation currently was facing.

“Ancient tech, sir,” offered the head of the National Security Agency with a dangerous glance at the Air Force Chief of Staff. She nodded at the photograph. “It’s the best we can do with these old satellites. They weren’t designed for the workload we’re asking of them. It’s a miracle they’re even still in orbit. If Space Command had actually taken command of space instead of just watching—”

“Our hands were tied and you know it,” snapped the Air Force Chief, the sudden burst of venom in his voice shocking everyone. “The Star Wars program was scrapped decades ago,” said the Air Force General with an accusing finger at the NSA head. “We had no defensive capability or strategy in place because Congress defunded us to funnel money into your programs to spy on American citizens! And we all know how well *that* worked out...”

“Let’s settle down, people. This is not the time for infighting.” The President cut the political blame game short. He turned back to the Secretary of Defense. “So, what am I looking at?”

In the image, a brownish coastline was on the right, or eastern side. The blue waters of the Pacific stretched far to the west and covered 3/4 of the photo. “That, is California and part of Oregon. *Those*,” said the Secretary of Defense, indicating the small oblong shapes with white lines trailing them, “are surface vessels. Cargo ships. Battleships. A massive fleet—we’re thinking just about

everything North Korea has. God knows how many subs are with them. I would bet my career that there's more than a few Chinese vessels mixed in there." He shook his head. "Either way, they're about a day from arrival."

"That's..." He cleared his throat. "That's a *lot* of boats," the President said. He suddenly felt very inadequate at his new job. Reginald never said anything about a North Korean invasion. A very heavy weight seemed to settle on his shoulders and threatened to crush him into the plush chair in which he sat.

"It's a goddamn armada," grunted the Admiral.

"I'm getting word from Beijing that it's a routine merchant fleet," offered the Secretary of State. She pushed designer glasses up her thin nose and sniffed as if the matter were closed. The President took an immediate dislike to the woman, one of Denton's favorites.

"Bullshit. This is an invasion," said the Army Chief of Staff. He pointed at his own copy of the satellite image. "Hell, they could have two divisions—complete with support vehicles and materiel—on that number of ships. If we can't get the Navy to take care of this or at least get some airstrikes launched... This is going to hurt."

"Why now?" asked Admiral Bennett. "They're going to lose a lot of men to the flu when they land..."

The President felt his anger rising. Reginald had said there would be an expedition from the Koreans, but nothing of this magnitude. The plan was that he would have his own private army, to hold the peace while the weaponized-flu burned itself out.

Granted, the use of foreign troops on American soil was bitterly distasteful and he wished he could accomplish his goals without having to resort to such heavy-handed tactics, but the President's plan to solidify his power for the coming changes required swift and resolute action.

But, now the timetable was off. *Way* off. Denton got himself sick on some damned fool campaign stop and died. Harold frowned, his fingers caressing the polished edge of the great desk. He was supposed to enjoy a few months of solo control before the North Koreans arrived. Why had they moved so early? And what the hell were the damn North Koreans doing invading California? They

were supposed to police it for him.

He glanced at the red phone sitting on the desk in front of him. That would be the ultra-secure, untraceable phone that Reginald would contact him on in the future.

The President looked up to see every face in the room focused on him. He had to throw them back on the defense. He deepened his frown and reached into his bag of tricks to pull up a stern, disapproving fatherly look.

“How the hell did we let all this get past us? What about NORAD?” he barked.

“Sir, without those satellites, NORAD is next to useless,” the Air Force general said. He shook his head. “We’re trying to establish landlines but...*everything* is dependent on geo-synchronous satellite communications these days. I can only imagine the chaos that is about to hit the rest of the country when people realize that there’s no more TV, cellphones, or internet service.”

The heads of the Air Force and the NSA started bickering again, blaming funding cuts on each other. The Secretary of Defense started to argue it had been Congress that had screwed things up—that the conservative minority had been trying to add money for defense spending for years but the liberals had—

“There’s plenty of blame to go around here, people,” said the President in his best mediator voice. Inside, he was shuddering in revulsion. Once again, that innocent little code that he’d given to Reginald was proving to be a major problem coming home to roost.

“Any word from State?” the President asked, desperate for anything to keep the military from attacking Reginald’s forces.

The Secretary of State flipped through some of the papers in her lap. “Sir, I have a message that came in just as we lost communications. It states that the United Nations stands ready to assist us during the flu crisis.”

“That’s it?” the President asked.

“That’s it.”

That son of a bitch... he thought, trying to keep his face calm as he looked at the picture of the East Coast again. *Reginald took down our entire defense*

system, killed the satellites, launched the flu...he's going to bring the whole country down! He could've at least had the decency to warn me about this...

Okay. He'll get in touch with me soon. I just have to hold the military back until he calls. But he'd better call soon, before these puffed-up bastards overreact and really screw up my plans...

The President rubbed his eyes. That heavy, impossibly heavy weight that had settled on his shoulders was now threatening to drive him into the ground. All those Americans that had died in Atlanta...that he had killed...and that was just the opening act. The death toll was starting to trickle in from California, but he felt in his bones that number was about to skyrocket.

What was he supposed to do? He could almost feel the lynch mob's noose around his neck. He loosened his tie and undid the top button, getting air under his shirt. He needed to think. He needed to drink. He needed Jayne. *But right now, I just need to keep the Joint Chiefs focused on blocking the Koreans, not wiping them out. I still need them until I can get the military on my side...*

"Sir," said the Secretary of Homeland Security, "I have to ask you to assign priority-status to the mission to retrieve Chad Huntley."

The President shook his head. "Who?"

"Sir, he's the sole-remaining source of our vaccine that stopped The Pandemic ten years ago. I requisitioned a unit of Rangers to pull him out of Glacier National Park when the CDC...and Atlanta..." He paused and put his hands together, looking extremely nervous. He swallowed audibly, then continued, "We've confirmed the strain of flu that's afflicting our nation is *not* the strain of H5N1 that caused The Pandemic, but we think—at least from what I've seen, it could be a mutation that—"

"Oh hell, Tom, just say it! The Koreans weaponized it!" burst the Army Chief of Staff. He didn't stand up like his counterparts but merely leaned forward, one arm on his knee. "Mr. President, this flu is no accident. Those bastards did this to us on purpose, to soften us up for the invasion. My boys found Huntley, and he was being chased by a platoon of North Korean SpecOps. They must know he's the Source of our H5N1 vaccine and they're trying to take him out of the equation."

“How the hell did they figure that out?” asked the Commandant of the Marines, a grim-looking whip of a man.

“We’re working on that. The HD-GPS chip we implanted in his shoulder led us right to him, but somehow, they got a hold of the info as well.”

The President’s mind raced. That *somehow* was the information he’d given to Reginald. That simple code had been used like a battering ram to crack open the entire American security mainframe.

“HD-GPS chip?” he asked, trying to buy himself time to think. He could see by the irritated expression on the Admiral’s face, the Joint Chiefs thought worrying about Mr. Huntley was a waste of time.

“Yes, sir,” said the head of Homeland Security. He pushed his glasses up his nose again. “He’s the Source. It was thought at the time in the best interests of national security to keep a close watch on him, but we couldn’t just arrest the man. He was a deep-blue hero in the press—untouchable. We arranged a job for him with the CDC to keep him available, implanted the GPS locator chip in his shoulder, and watched him 24/7 for the past ten years.”

Harold ignored the explanation. He had known the flu was going to be let loose on America. He knew Reginald had a hand in that pretty mess. He had *not* known the North Koreans were going to capitalize on the havoc that Reginald was going to cause. Now, it seemed they were hellbent on trying to take out the one man who could help turn the tide against the infection. It alternately made no sense and yet scary-perfect sense to him. Either way, he could feel his options beginning to vanish.

“Did they get him out?” he asked, after realizing that the room was quiet.

“Of *course*,” said the General, looking offended. “Rangers do not fail, Mr. President. Even if our comms do.” He shot a withering look at the Air Force General. “We were able to re-task the extraction team to bring Huntley to Spokane, Washington before all communications were lost and NORAD went silent.”

“Why Spokane?” asked Harold, hands on either side of his head, elbows on the desk.

“Because the CDC has an extensive facility there with the right equipment to

produce a new vaccine based on Mr. Huntley's blood antibodies," said the head of Homeland Security. "Outside of Atlanta, it's our best bet. If the Rangers get him there—"

"They will," growled the General.

"—then we have a better-than-even chance of beating the flu, at least. It could save millions of lives on the West Coast alone, provided they make it there."

"And if the Koreans take out Spokane?" asked Harold, seeing another "rogue" submarine in his mind. "They seem to be a step ahead of us on this..."

"They are, predictably, not in communication with us at the moment," offered the Secretary of State. She smoothed the lines of her business skirt. "Since we lost our satellites, we are in the dark. We have secure landlines to Japan and have spread the word that we will retaliate with the very wrath of God if this goes any further." She shrugged. "The North Koreans learned to ignore our threats a long time ago."

"I say we nuke the bastards," said the Army general with a wolfish smile. "Let them ignore it when Pyongyang is turned into a glass parking lot."

"I concur, before their fleet gets close enough to launch theater capable missiles," said the Admiral. He shook his head. "Hell, they could have a few nuclear capable subs offshore right now."

"We still have 100-percent combat effectiveness on all land-based ICBMs, sir," said the Air Force Chief of Staff with no small amount of pride. "We could wipe North Korea off the map twenty times over...But I caution against using nuclear weapons at this point. I agree with Admiral Bennet: they may have subs off the coast already, just waiting to paste us when we launch. Without our comms, we can't contact our fleets, *if* they're still there; we just don't know without those satellites."

"Don't we have a missile-defense system?" asked the President.

"Yes, sir, but it's visual-only thanks to the loss of our satellites. And the visual system is only 25-percent effective."

The Admiral *harrumphed*. "Even if there are subs waiting out there, the damn flu will likely cause as many casualties as any hypothetical Korean nuclear

weapon. If our cities are hit with tactical nukes, at least the civilians will die quicker and in less pain.”

“Jesus, Admiral,” said the President. “I am shocked you’d suggest—”

“We have been attacked, Mr. President. The time for pussy-footing around and hand wringing and negotiations is *over*. This is our Pearl Harbor! Our defense systems have been hacked and compromised, one of our largest cities has been obliterated by a nuclear-fucking-weapon, and need I remind you—there are North Korean soldiers in the process of conquering Los Angeles! We have no choice but to declare total war and respond in kind!” The admiral took a breath, his chest heaving, and his face beet-red.

“To that end, I will ask Congress to—” said the President.

“There’s no time for asking Congress to act, sir,” barked the Admiral. “We need to take action now! Now is *not* the time to stand around with our dicks in our hands—”

“And the sub that launched the nuke that destroyed Atlanta? Wasn’t that one of ours?” the President said icily.

The Oval Office went silent; the Admiral’s face drained of blood and went ghostly pale. He nodded stiffly, his body at attention. “It was, sir. James McNeely was the skipper. A captain I respected, one I would’ve trusted with my life...He was a lifer...he *never* would have done this willingly. It had to have been...I mean...if...”

“Where is this Captain McNeely?” asked the President, furious. “I want the full weight of the JAG Corps dropped on his ass.” A little voice in the back of his mind chided him quietly, *How brave of you...you’re going to go after a traitor? What will you do to yourself? Hmmm?*

“He has already judged himself, Mr. President.”

“What the hell does *that* mean?” the President snapped. Frustrated, he ripped at the tie around his throat. His aide had put the damn thing on too tight.

“Sir, he committed suicide this afternoon. His XO is in command of the sub and she’s bringing it home to Norfolk,” said the Admiral.

The President cleared his throat in the awkward silence and tried to think of something to say. *Is that what I will do one day when all the guilt gets to be too*

much?

“Gentlemen,” the President said. He sighed. “What are your recommendations?”

“We’re in quite the pickle, Mr. President,” said the Air Force Chief of Staff. “Our home guard units are stretched beyond thin. Losing contact with NORAD leaves us completely blind. The bulk of our armed forces are overseas and we’re out of contact with 90 percent of them. What we have left are mostly training units, reserves, and the Guard. Not a whole hell of a lot of firepower to repel what’s coming.”

“We have three SEAL teams at home, one is already fighting in L.A., trying to get to President Denton—” offered the Admiral in a considerably more calm voice.

“Admiral,” said Harold patiently, holding up a hand to stop the SecDef from talking. “Why are we wasting a SEAL team on finding the President’s body?”

The Admiral looked at his fellow chiefs and said, “Sir, I wasn’t aware President Denton was dead.”

“He contracted the weaponized flu, did he not?”

“Well, yes, that’s what his personal physician reported four days ago,” said the head of the NSA. “But—”

“Then if he’s still alive, he’s on death’s door. Tom, didn’t you tell me the mortality rate on this thing is something on the order of 80 percent?”

“Well...” said the Secretary of Homeland Security. “Technically yes, but people infected with the Blue Flu seem to have a greater chance of survival, at least based on our preliminary findings. And President Denton *was* a survivor of The Pandemic. So,” he said, rubbing his chin, “I suppose, if we can get a vaccine to him—”

The President shook his head. Reginald had promised Denton would be dead by Monday. He wasn’t about to waste precious fighting units on hunting down a corpse. He had been sworn-in as President because Denton was incapacitated. That was final.

“No. Gentlemen, this entire situation is looking pretty grim and I will *not* have us sending our finest war fighters on wild-goose chases. They need to be

killing the enemy...”

“Oh, they are,” said the Admiral with a sly grin. “You can be damned sure of that, sir. I don’t need a radio link to know my boys are doing some serious damage.”

“Good. Gentlemen, we need to shore up defenses and get a counterattack organized, ASAP! I don’t care *how*—use Morse Code if necessary,” the President said, forestalling any complaints. “Just fight back.”

“Apache Dawn has been put into effect,” said the Army Chief of Staff. At the President’s questioning look, he continued, “Every unit that has heard the message now knows we’re being invaded. They will move mountains to get to their respective headquarters, link up with their commanding officers, seek out the enemy wherever they are, and counterattack. We put the word out about the West Coast.” He shook his head. “I never thought we’d use this protocol in my lifetime.”

The other heads of the military nodded and mumbled agreement as the door on the far side of the room opened quietly to reveal a nervous-looking aide who stepped in and whispered something to the Chief of Staff.

He nodded and stood, arranging his stylish suit just so. The President fought mightily to repress a smile—the Joint Chiefs must be positively fuming that he’d appointed someone so openly fashion-conscious to be his Chief of Staff.

“Sir, it’s time,” he said in a soft voice, his hands folded primly together in front of his chest, as if he were praying.

“Very good, Ricky,” said the President. He rose from behind the desk with as much dignity as he could muster. The cabinet members jumped to their collective feet with confused looks on their faces.

“I’m going to implement COG, people. In the face of this invasion and the nascent epidemic, I think it’s better to be safe than sorry.” He nodded to himself in congratulations at actually doing something presidential. “Now, get to your secure locations and report in. Stonemyer,” he said pointing at the Secretary of State.

“Sir?”

“I want you to reach out to The Hague—I think we could use some W.H.O.

backup on this flu thing.”

“The gesture will go a long way toward reestablishing our presence in the international community, Mr. President,” purred the Chief of Staff. He nodded his perfectly coiffured head slightly. “That will show the world we’re not too proud to ask for help.”

“I don’t like that idea at all, sir,” said the Army General. He shot a wary glance sideways at the effeminate Chief of Staff. “We’ve got enough to worry about with the North Koreans—assuming China doesn’t have any dog in this fight. I don’t like the idea of having Europeans meddling—”

“General, ten years ago Europe was hit even harder than we were by The Pandemic. We could use any medical and containment supplies they’ve got to help us keep this thing bottled up. At least until we get a handle on the Koreans.”

“You can’t be serious!” exclaimed Admiral Bennett.

The President ignored the outburst and made a mental note to clean house and replace the Joint Chiefs with people loyal to him. He was ready to flex his muscles and stack the deck with loyal yes-men. Reginald had all but promised he would be an American emperor.

The President took a deep breath and addressed the rest of the assembled advisers. “Listen up, people. Our goal here is to stop the enemy and push him back, but *not* at the cost of American cities. From the sound of it, we don’t have the manpower to retake Portland, let alone Los Angeles. So don’t waste time, just surround them...I don’t know, keep them bottled up, or something.”

“So we’re to give them Los Angeles and just...walk away?” asked the Admiral, eyes bugged wide. He was apoplectic.

“We are not giving them anything, Admiral,” sighed the President. “I just don’t see the point in trying to take back what has been lost—at least not right now. From the looks of these photos here, there’s a big invasion force heading our way. Let’s try to block that, then mop up the first wave when we have a better idea of what we’re facing.”

The Army and Air Force chiefs looked at each other, the President saw, in begrudging admiration of his plan. *They thought I was some limp-wristed liberal. Well, they’ll see soon enough that I mean business.*

“We will make every effort to find a diplomatic end to this mess...or at least give our forces time to get home from overseas before we counterattack. Is that clear?”

After a chorus of agreement, they all gathered papers and walked out. A small army of aides waiting outside was already scurrying on errands and delivering messages.

The President took a briefcase filled with reports and angrily threw in the two glossy photos the Secretary of Defense had given him. He slammed shut the pricey leather attaché case with a resounding snap.

He followed his Chief of Staff out of the Oval Office and entered the familiar circle of Secret Service agents, led by James. They had already started down the marble-lined hallway when his nose twitched. He could just barely detect a whiff of flowery perfume.

In a heartbeat, he began to sweat, his senses heightened and the cares of his presidency melting away. Ahead of him down the gallery-like hallway stood his lovely Jayne in a business suit that fit her figure well but did not attract too much attention. She wore glasses and her golden hair was pulled back into its regular businesslike bun. He locked eyes on her and smiled briefly. He thought for a second he was floating down the corridor, so strong was her scent.

“This way, sir,” said the agent, leading the President by the elbow toward the reinforced elevator that would take him many floors below the White House to the War Room.

The President ignored the rush of people running for exits as the evacuation signal was given. His thoughts were consumed by Jayne. Those people were heading for secure locations, but none would be as secure as his, locked down in the Presidential Emergency Operations Center, safe from even nuclear strikes on Washington itself.

He was only able to turn from Jayne’s burning, blue eyes by exerting tremendous personal will and the strong guiding hand of the Secret Service agent. The President turned around inside the elevator as the reinforced steel doors slid shut. He caught a fleeting glimpse of the line of people waiting for the next trip down. And there was Jayne. She smiled coyly and winked at him just as

the door sealed tight.

The country can go to hell, he thought without a trace of guilt as the scent of her perfume lingered a few more seconds in the rapidly descending elevator.

I just need her body...

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

COOPER

Los Angeles, California
All Saint's Hospital

"ARE YOU IN POSITION?" asked Cooper. He looked up into the darkness of the empty elevator shaft. The only things visible—as far as he could see—were the dimly glowing emergency lights at every level, combating the darkness with their feeble glow. He had just sent Petty Officer John Sparks, the team sniper, to make his way up to the top of the shaft and gain access to the roof, ten floors above. Cooper desperately needed to know what the hell was going on outside.

For hours, they'd hidden in the darkness of the hospital's basement, waiting for a counterattack from the North Koreans that never came. The rumbling they felt through the floor, heralding the deaths of fallen buildings outside and screams of jets overhead continued unabated. But in the last hour, the noise had increased dramatically. More jets had arrived and the floor shook less—he desperately hoped it signaled the arrival of the good guys.

Not that the time spent in their improvised fortress was completely without a bright spot. He got to spend a few minutes talking with Dr. Alston. He had been curious how she knew about Apache Dawn. Now that he knew she was a combat medic turned surgeon and had done time in the Sandbox, she was just that much

more attractive. No matter how many times he'd tried, he'd never found a woman who understood what it was like to enter combat, to put your life on the line for those around you.

His radio broke squelch twice, signaling that Sparky was in position at the edge of the roof, observing the chaos surrounding them. Cooper filed his wandering thoughts away and focused.

"Okay, drop the cable," Cooper ordered. He scanned the hallway, looking for movement through his night-vision goggles. The Koreans had thus far played it safe and not made a move on the basement, but Cooper would not take any chances and remained alert. He told himself for the hundredth time, *They have to know we're here. They have to.*

A loud clatter reverberated down the length of the empty elevator shaft as a black ethernet cable fell seven stories. Cooper knew that meant Sparky had already plugged the other end of the temporary cable into their portable satellite receiver array up on the roof. They had ripped ethernet cords from every computer they could find in the waning hours of the night, in order to splice one together long enough to reach the rooftop before dawn kissed the sky.

Cooper pulled the sat phone free of its holster on his chest and plugged it into the makeshift hookup. While it searched for a signal, he continued to watch the darkened basement for any sign of the enemy. He was on the far side of the basement from where the Secret Service had holed up with the President. Cooper was alone now, except for Sparky seven floors above on the roof; the silence was overwhelming.

"Damn," he whispered as each preset frequency came back with no joy. The sat phone was an expensive paperweight at this point. It made no sense. The phone, even with a boosted receiver up on the roof, could get no signal from any of the dozens of military communications satellites overhead. Just as he was about to close the phone, an extremely weak signal appeared, on one of the auxiliary emergency channels.

"All units this net, do you read me? This is Striker, Actual," he whispered.

Static hissed in his ear. He tried again, boosting the gain. There was a constant static background, suddenly interrupted by silence, and then a muffled

sound that he hoped was a voice trying to reach him.

“Say again, I got a very weak signal,” he hissed, eyes searching the basement in front of him. He keyed his throat mic. “Sparky, see if you can adjust the array...it’s locked on to a signal but I got bad interference.”

His radio broke squelch two more times.

Within seconds, the frequency on the sat phone calmed down and he heard a voice say, “—again, Striker 1, Actual, how copy?”

“I read you, who is this?” he whispered, cringing at the sound of his own voice in the silent gloom of the basement.

“Striker 1, Actual, I need your authentication code.”

“Shit,” he whispered. He was probably dealing with some REMF somewhere who didn’t know his ass from his elbow, but it was the only contact he had. Maybe they could at least give him some intel on what the hell was going on topside.

“Roger that, authentication Charlie-Victor-Niner-Five-Seven-Alpha.”

“Wait one for confirmation.”

Cooper frowned. That emergency authentication code he’d just broadcast told anyone in the know that he was part of a SEAL team and to stop screwing around and provide *immediate* assistance. He adjusted the grip on his MP5 and checked the magazine for the hundredth time, waiting for whoever the hell he was talking with to return. The voice was calm, but weak, as if the signal was fighting an awful lot of interference to get to him.

After what seemed like an eternity, the line picked up again. “Your code checked out, Striker 1, Actual. This is Eagle’s Nest. What’s your sit-rep?”

Eagle’s Nest? Holy shit, that’s NORAD. He held his breath, waiting to see if there was anyone out there listening to him. Before speaking again, he leaned out into the dark elevator shaft and looked up to check that all the doors on each floor were still closed. None were open.

“Lost half my team on the insert; we were ambushed by Korean marines on rooftops with stingers.” He carefully considered how to relay that he’d rescued the President without breaching security. He had no idea if the North Koreans were listening to his transmission. “We recovered the fumble, I say again, we

recovered the fumble.”

There was a pause at the other end. *Come on, you guys, figure it out...* he said to himself, willing the man he was speaking with under Cheyenne Mountain to figure out his message.

“Roger that, Striker 1, but be advised, Mongoose has announced that Slipknot is untied. I say again, Slipknot is untied.”

“What the hell?” he muttered to himself. Mongoose was Vice President Barron. He keyed the phone. “Eagle’s Nest, *negative*, Slipknot is loose, but holding. Repeat: *Slipknot is still tied*. Downtown L.A. is a hornet’s nest—incoming ICBMs and North Korean fast-movers are tearing up the skyline. We got what I’d guess is at least a battalion of Korean infantry and marines out there. Request immediate air support and evac, over.”

Some strange clicks and pops erupted from the sat phone’s speaker. He looked at the phone in his hand. *Someone’s trying to hack this signal*. The back of his neck started to tingle.

“Roger that, Actual, we have Air Force units in your AO engaging enemy fixed-wing and rotors now. We’re re-tasking units all up and down the coast, but there’s a lot of tangerines to deal with. Are—” The transmission hissed and popped and started to break up. He heard more of the odd clicks and pops.

“Striker 1, this is Eagle’s Nest, Actual,” a new, older, voice said. The line was suddenly very clear.

“Fuck *me*,” said Cooper. He racked his brain, thinking of who was the current commander at NORAD. If the government was in panic mode and the Vice President was sworn in, already replacing President Denton, there could be any number of civilian bigwigs hunkered down in NORAD *claiming* to be in charge.

“This is General Thomas Morrison. You are to hold your position; we will come to you, son. What’s your fighting strength? Send us your coordinates and we’ll have an evac team onsite in thirty.”

Every warning bell in Cooper’s head went off at once. Evidence stacked up: the pops and clicks over the line, the comm officer in NORAD suddenly pulled from his station, a new person—and a suddenly crystal-clear channel—asking

for OpSec intel that could get him *and* his men killed over an open channel. The fool had used his own name to top it off.

Even guys straight out of boot know not to use their own name over open comms for Christ's sake. On top of that, the general's voice sounded oddly...*European.*

It added up to one thing in Cooper's mind: security breach. He was confident the younger voice was legit, but whoever the hell had hacked the line was trying to get him to reveal his position and tactical strength. His mind raced. He had an opportunity, if he could exploit it.

"Thank *God*, sir," he said, trying to impart a sense of relief to his voice. He was taking a risk talking louder, but he figured it was worth it if his plan was successful. "We've moved Slipknot across Grand Avenue to the USC medical center. The NKors think we're still holed up in the hospital! We're on the upper level, and can access the roof as soon as you show up—there's a helipad on the roof. I have two men combat effective and ten wounded. Slipknot is with us. You better hurry, there are Korean—" He dropped the phone and grunted as if injured, then killed the transmission by turning the power off.

Before they could trace the array's signal on the roof, he keyed his throat mic. "Sparky, kill it and get your ass down here on the double." The signal on the sat phone went dead before he finished speaking. "Grab the array and drop the cable down the shaft; we may need it again."

"Wait one. I got bad guys exiting the annex and moving across Grand to the east," Sparky reported. "Looks like they're setting up a perimeter around the USC building over there...Jesus, there's a lot of 'em."

"Good, they took the bait. Now get down here, we're moving in five!" urged Cooper. He stood up and started to coil up the ethernet cable that had begun to fall out of the elevator shaft. He could hear a quiet hissing sound. He keyed the throat mic again. "Beaver."

"Yeah, Coop?"

"Round up the troops and get to the Emergency Department—northwest corner of the hospital. We gotta get the hell out of here, pronto. Docs, Secret Service, Slipknot, *everyone*. Start loading into the motorcade, or what's left of it.

As soon as Sparky gets down here, we'll link up."

"Hooyah."

The hissing sound from the elevator shaft grew louder. He looked up and could see his sniper sliding down the heavy elevator cables, dropping like a rock from seven floors up. With a grunt, the SEAL landed on the ground and climbed out of the shaft to squat next to Cooper. In one smooth motion, he pulled free his sidearm and held it at the ready, leaving the long sniper rifle securely strapped to his back.

"Coop, there's some serious hardware out there. APCs, LAVs, HumVees...a couple companies of foot mobiles, at least. That's not to mention the shit they got flying around out there. Looks like we got a couple good guys givin' 'em some trouble, though. I saw an F-35 take out one of their jets." Sparky shook his head, night-vision goggles making him look like some nightmarish, snouted animal. "I could see clear up Grand Avenue; the U.S. Bank Tower is about blown to shit, man. Whole financial district is on fire. By the number of NKors I saw out there, it looks like an invasion, Coop."

"It is. That Apache Dawn broadcast was no joke. Come on," he whispered, moving cautiously toward the redoubt at the far end of the basement. "We got to get the hell out of here."

By the time Cooper rejoined the rest of the survivors at the Emergency Department, explosions and gunfire were shaking the hospital to its foundation. The doctors and a few nurses were desperately trying to keep the President stabilized while being carried by two Secret Service agents. "Be careful!" hissed Dr. Honeycutt. "Don't jar that IV or he'll die before we get going."

"They're coming!" called out Mike as Cooper and Sparky rejoined the group. "We've got movement outside..."

"Don't worry, they're killing each other for the moment," said Cooper. "Someone hijacked a signal I had with NORAD. I told whoever the hell I was talking with that we were across Grand Avenue on the top floor of the Family Medical Building. They took the bait and I guess they're tearing it up looking for us. Now's our chance. Let's—" He turned to look at the remaining vehicles of the Presidential motorcade and froze. "Those things are shot to hell..."

“We ran into an advance element on the way here,” offered Agent Sheffield. “Didn’t know it was part of an invasion.”

Both large Suburbans were riddled with bullet holes and leaking fluid. One had a smashed-up front-end. The driver must have plowed into something at a decent clip. Another vehicle, Cooper guessed, by the white paint streaks down the side of the crumpled doors on the black SUV. The President’s limo looked dirty and dented, but there were no bullet holes. Big as it was, however, there was still no way they would all fit.

We’re gonna have to find some wheels. I don’t have time for this...

“APC!” hissed Jax, crouching by the tail end of the limo. “Ten yards out, two o’clock!”

Everyone dove for cover in a panic. They were dangerously exposed in the Emergency Department at the northwest end of the hospital, with the parking lot and covered bay in front of them and the empty receiving room behind them. Their only cover was the presidential motorcade, parked haphazardly in front of the main doors. Cooper ducked under the large windows and made it to the wall. He took a breath and slowly peeked around the open doors toward the street.

Sure enough, a large, ugly, green-and-tan-colored Korean APC with sharp, angular reactive-armor sat parked behind the limo, facing east, its big diesel engine idling like a flatulent rhinoceros.

“Shit, shit, shit,” said Charlie over Cooper’s headset. “Coop, main hatch is opening...foot mobiles comin’ out!”

“Hold your fire,” whispered Cooper in a dead calm voice, devoid of emotion. He watched as the North Korean soldiers exited down a big ramp and peeled out to run down the sides of the armored eight-wheeled vehicle, a mishmash of sharp angles and a half-assed attempt at stolen designs and aerodynamics. Cooper frowned in disapproval. In his experience, doing things half-assed usually got you killed.

The North Koreans continued running east across the parking lot, heading toward the doomed Family Medical Building. They didn’t give more than a casual glance toward the shot-up motorcade parked at the Trauma Center. A hatch opened on the top of the APC through the turret that housed what looked

like a 20mm cannon, and a helmeted head popped out, followed by the shoulders and chest of what Cooper figured was the vehicle's commander. The man pulled up large binoculars that looked oddly similar to his own night-vision binos.

"Now what?" asked Charlie in a whisper.

"Stay put—I'm gonna get us some wheels. Sparky, on me. Charlie, give us a diversion when we get to the rear."

"Roger that," said Charlie as the platoon sniper appeared next to Cooper like a ghost out of the shadows.

"Let's go," Cooper whispered. The two SEALs slipped around the double doors and crouch-walked across the open space to the side of the APC. He could hear someone talking in Korean from the inside. The engine noise was tremendous and it almost felt like the ground was trembling as the big armored troop carrier sat there waiting.

Behind him, a loud explosion rocked the Family Medical Building and more gunfire erupted. Cooper had to force himself to ignore the commotion and crept quickly to the rear of the APC. He was standing just on the outside of the open hatch and moved the MP5 to his side to draw his Sig Sauer P226. Cooper pumped his fist in the air to signal Charlie.

There was a loud bang and the street lit up in a flash ten yards in front of the APC. He heard the commander cry out in pain from above and heard someone inside yell in surprise. That was his signal. He stepped around the open maw of the APC and charged in, weapon up, Sparky right beside him.

Cooper raced up the ramp and pulled the screaming commander down through the turret and out of the way. As Sparky slipped past, he dispatched the driver with a shot to the back of the head from his silenced pistol. Cooper then plunged his K-Bar into the commander's neck before ripping it free in a jugular spray. Without hesitation, he snapped his wrist and flung the bloody knife at a third North Korean who looked like a radio operator. The man died with a knife in his chest, slumped over at his station.

"Still got it, Hoss," Sparky said from the cockpit. He grinned. "Nice."

Cooper flipped his sniper the bird and keyed his mic. "Okay, we're secure. Get everyone over here, Charlie. *Move!*"

Cooper let Sparky cover the advance of the Secret Service agents who carried the President over first, followed by the three doctors and a few nurses. They quickly and efficiently packed the open bins and shelves of the APC with the supplies they needed to keep the president alive.

Once satisfied that the President was secure, Cooper had Mike and Jax dispose of the North Korean bodies out the back hatch. They stripped weapons and vests off the corpses and passed the gear out to the agents.

Cooper wiped the blood off the computer screens in front of the driver's seat and took the place behind the wheel. "Turret!" he said over his shoulder.

"Got it," replied Mike, who reached up and quietly pulled the armored lid shut on the turret. He knelt next to Cooper. "They got NV binos just like ours," Mike said in amazement.

"Okay," said Cooper, scanning the controls and knobs arrayed in front of him. Everything was labeled in Korean symbols. He quickly spotted a blinking red light next to a toggle switch. "Clear the rear hatch!" he called out.

"Clear!" was the muffled reply from twenty feet behind him in the crowded crew space.

Cooper flicked the switch and could hear hydraulics come to life. A *ding-ding* alarm went off and an amber light flashed in the crew compartment as the heavy armored hatch began to move. The ramp retracted smoothly into the floor of the vehicle just before the hatch closed and sealed itself. The amber strobe light went out, interior lighting kicked in, and the entire cabin area was bathed in a red glow.

"Hatch secure!" someone called out.

Cooper tried to ignore the noise of the medical personnel tending to the President and the wounded agents they had carried with them. He could hear Dr. Alston calling out numbers to a nurse and tried to ignore the sound of her voice. That made him think about the way her hair looked—

"Hey, Coop, I think I know how to work the turret," said Mike. Cooper reined in his thoughts and looked over his shoulder to see the smaller SEAL standing in the turret bell, watching some video screens, his hand on a joystick. He twisted his grip to the right and the turret came to life, electric motors

whining as the little tube Mike was in rotated.

“Yeah, baby, Daddy’s got a new toy,” he said, laughing and swinging the turret around to the left as he practiced maneuvering the main gun up and down. The electric motors driving the turret drowned out the noise the doctors were making in the crew cabin.

Cooper noticed the APC’s radio was squawking excitedly in what he assumed was Korean. Different voices were competing with each other for airtime. Cooper frowned at the din. They were assaulting the building they assumed the President and his team to be in and he didn’t want to hear about it, even if he could understand the gibberish.

He found what looked like a headphone jack dangling from a bloody helmet the APC driver had been wearing. The helmet had been blown off by Sparky, along with most of the driver’s head. He inserted the plug into the jack and the obnoxious chatter was pumped through the helmet on the floor, effectively silencing the noise. As an afterthought, he snapped the microphone stalk off the helmet with a vicious twist. He was taking no chances.

Mike’s voice echoed down from the turret, “Coop, I think I got the hang of this thing. I think all I gotta do is line up this thing here on that line over there... then it should be on target and I pull the trigger. Like a video game, man.” He dropped out of the turret and crouched next to the driver’s seat.

“Should we go hunting?” Mike said with his characteristic lopsided, gap-toothed grin.

“Negative,” Cooper said, glancing at the crowded crew area behind him. “We’ve got to get the President the hell out of here. Just keep an eye out for me. Your new toy may come in handy if we need to clear the road.”

“Roger that,” said Mike. He stood up in the turret again. “Ready when you are.”

“Sparky, see if you can figure out comms. We gotta reestablish contact with...someone.”

“On it.”

Cooper looked at his computer screens, showing everything in front of the APC through a video feed. He could see there were armor plates blocking the

actual driver's window. There was a solid, green light to the left of the armored plate. He pushed the button next to it and the light went dark, while the metal shielding the arrow-slit of a window retracted and he could see straight ahead.

“That’s better,” he said. Even if it was just a tiny glimpse of the outside world, he wasn’t sure if he could successfully drive the massive vehicle looking down at a screen instead of out a window.

Cooper grinned. “All right...does anyone know how to drive this bitch?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAD

Glacier National Park, Montana
South face of Mt. Vaught

CHAD WOKE to the sound of thunder booming in his ears. The world was warm and dark, punctuated by the flash of lightning and the ever-present, chest-rattling thump of thunder. He figured the storm to be right on top of him.

“He’s coming to!” Someone’s voice split the night. Chad twitched, surprised. He figured he was the only one out there on the vast grass-covered plains, watching the storm that night. *Strange, that voice sounds familiar.*

More thunder. “About time! Get ‘im on his feet and cover the right flank!” said someone else. The voice was close.

“Mr. Huntley, can you hear me?” asked the first voice, anxiously. “I need you to wake up, sir!”

Chad screwed his eyes shut tight against the violence of the storm. Even the ground was shaking now. Then he felt the wind buffet his shoulders. No, not the wind—someone was shaking him.

“Get up! Now!” bellowed the second voice. The shaking increased. Chad felt a sudden flash of pain across his face and heard the sound of flesh striking flesh.

Chad opened his eyes to an unreal pain that threatened to force his eyeballs

right out of his head. He screamed something unintelligible, even to himself, and clutched bruised hands to his face.

A loud crash and a deafening boom tore the breath out of his lungs. His chest clenched tight, trying to pull in air on an exhale. His lungs felt like they were on fire by the time the ringing in his ears stopped. At last, his chest relaxed and he could suck down a lungful of hot, smoke-filled air.

“What the hell is going on?” he heard himself half-scream. He doubled over, coughing.

Someone laughed. “You’ll be all right! You’re a tough one, for a civvie, sir,” chuckled a blurry shape in front of Chad’s abused eyes. “That was what we call *danger close*, sir.” More ragged laughter flitted around him.

Screaming and thunder filled his head, threatening to shake his skull apart. Above it all, smoke wafted over him, choking the air. Something hard and cold was thrust into his hands. “Here!” said the slowly coalescing shape in front of him. He looked down through gritty eyelids to see the blurry shape of his rifle.

“Can you see?”

Chad blinked, watching flashes just at the edge of his peripheral vision flare up to the accompaniment of thunder. “I think so...” He rubbed a grimy hand over his face and felt wetness on his palm. His vision cleared and he could just make out a mixture of white and red covering his hand. An overpowering cold suddenly swept over him.

Gunfire. The thunder was gunfire. Chad ducked instinctively as something exploded past his face. He looked around. He could see the Rangers that had accompanied him the night before all ducked down behind an expedient redoubt wall constructed of fallen logs, snow, and ice. Bits of bark and snow rained down on them from the impact of a cascade of incoming rounds on the other side of their temporary protective wall.

The memories of his hunt-gone-south, the flight from the North Koreans, the Rangers herding him out of the park...it all came rushing back to his tortured mind. He was flooded with snippets of fear, adrenaline, excitement, and dread. Floating over all of the swirled confusion in his mind was a frothy scum of the mystery flu; was the nuclear strike on Atlanta. His hands started to shake. It was

like waking from a nightmare, only to find you were merely dreaming inside a dream and were still trapped in the nightmare.

“What the hell is going on?” Chad repeated, clutching his lever-action rifle to his chest as he slammed his back against the redoubt wall in a cloud of snow.

“Ambush!” said Garza, the figure that had loomed in front of him as he’d regained consciousness now clear as day. He had blood smeared on his face and a scarlet swath on his white winter camo.

“There’s a lot more of them out there than we thought!” barked Deuce on Chad’s other side. He inched his way around the end of a log and let fly with a controlled burst from his M4. In the distance, Chad heard a scream.

Chad could hear the rhythmic *whup-whup-whup* of a helicopter’s rotors cutting the air, despite the din of the firefight, the howling wind, and the screams of men on both sides.

He saw Captain Alston stand farther down the line to his left, braving a hail of enemy fire, and wave for the dark shadow in the sky to come down. “Land already, dammit!” he roared. “I’ve got wounded!”

“Uh...Negative...we have new orders—” Chad heard in his ear.

“New orders? What the—get your ass down here before we’re all killed!”

“Negative, Hammer—hey! What’re you doing? You know our orders—get that—”

Chad heard some grunting and the sounds of a struggle over his headset. He followed the big Black Hawk in the sky as it fought the wind. The helicopter seemed to wobble and sway back and forth for a few seconds before a second of sharp static burst over his radio.

A sickening *smack* echoed down the line behind him. Chad turned to see the body of one of the Rangers fall backwards and collapse into the snow, arms spread out wide.

“Deacon’s hit!” someone yelled, out of Chad’s line of sight.

Garza left Chad’s side in a flash, ignoring bullets that traced his movement. He dove for his wounded comrade and struggled to get his gloves off and feel for a pulse. He tensed, hunched over, and then slowly dropped his helmet down to his fallen brother.

“Deacon’s gone, Cap.”

“*Goddammit*, you get that fucking bird on the ground *now* or so help me, I will shoot you down myself!” roared the captain, turning back to the wildly gyrating aircraft a few hundred feet above them. He ducked when the snow to his left exploded as a round buried itself in the white powder. “Anvil! *Come in!* What the hell are you doing?” A round clipped his shoulder and tumbled him into the snow. He landed face first with a grunt.

“They’re surrounding us!” someone called out.

“Cap’s hit!”

“Bastards!” another voice called out, followed by a long blast from a rifle.

“Tuck, watch our six!” said Garza.

Chad saw the captain struggle to get to his hands and knees and in the distance beyond, spotted a dark-clad figure move around a tree and raise a rifle. He tried to yell and found his throat closed with fear. He was deep in the middle of an honest-to-God battle and it seemed the North Koreans were no longer interested in just capturing him.

Something clicked inside Chad’s bruised psyche. Without thinking, Chad shouldered his well-worn Henry and racked the lever in one smooth motion. The scope came to his eye just as he saw the North Korean soldier raise his own weapon. Chad was just a split second faster and he knew it as he squeezed the trigger and felt the long gun buck against his shoulder.

The report from the .45-70 was incredibly loud compared to the sharper bark of the military rifles around him. When his vision cleared, the Korean soldier was on his back in the snow, one hand raised up in the air, clawing feebly at the wind. The hand slowly fell into the red-stained powder and lay still.

“Oh my God...” Chad said, hands starting to shake.

Captain Alston turned, still on his hands and knees, and nodded at Chad. In a hoarse, pain-filled voice, he pleaded, eyes skyward, “Anvil...you gotta do something...”

After some static, a different, younger voice replied from the helicopter, “Roger that, Hammer, I have the reins now, so keep your heads down, ‘cause we’re gonna plow the road. Danger close, boys!”

Captain Alston dropped his head down. With supreme effort, he bellowed over the din of the battle, “Rangers, hit the deck! Air support is danger close!”

“Bring the pain, baby!” replied Deuce.

The next thing Chad knew, Garza had tackled him. “Keep your head down, sir! This is gonna be nasty!”

“What—”

Chad’s question was cut short by the tremendous roar of a side-mounted mini-gun spewing fire and death from a hundred feet above them. Brass casings rained down on the Rangers through the snow as the sounds of the gun battle were quickly silenced by a throaty *bbrrrrrrrrraaaaaaaaaww*.

Chad lay buried under Garza but could just barely see the tongue of fire stretching from the side of the helicopter as it maneuvered along the line of battle and decimated the North Koreans. It was the most awesome and terrifying display of raw power he had ever seen.

Time slowed down for Chad. He could feel each heartbeat take what seemed like a minute as his mind processed the impossible scene. His vision focused tightly on the helicopter. He could see the snow gently swirling under the power of the helicopter’s rotors, the shiny brass casings tumbling through the air, the jet of fire, and the *noise*...it was simply surreal.

In a few seconds, it was over and the mini-gun wound down, its roar now overshadowed by the helicopter’s rotors once more. Time sped back up to normal and Garza rolled off Chad, laughing.

“That was fucking *awesome!* Beautiful!”

“Stand clear, Hammer 2, Anvil is putting down on your six. IR shows negative tangos.”

“Jesus!” said Deuce, peeking over the redoubt. “Bodies everywhere...*look* at that, man,” he said, gasping with laughter. “Blew the freakin’ trees apart like toothpicks!”

“Hoo-fuckin-*aah!*” shouted Zuka.

Chad, however, was quite simply shocked into silence. Garza and Deuce half-supported, half-carried him across the ten yards through the blinding maelstrom of snow kicked up by the Black Hawk perched delicately on the

frozen ground. They tossed him gently through the open side door. The side-gunner grinned under his bulbous green flight helmet and face shield, and pulled Chad into a jump-seat next to the door.

“So you’re the guy, huh?” he asked, shouting in Chad’s ear over the thrum of the Black Hawk’s idling engines. “Hang in there, sir, we’re gonna get you out of here.” He finished buckling Chad in and slapped him on the shoulder before moving to check on the Rangers piling into the aircraft.

Captain Alston, his white camo smeared dark red, struggled through pain to help lift Deacon’s limp body onboard the helicopter. Garza and two others climbed up to secure their fallen comrade. Deuce then helped his CO up into the aircraft. The last Ranger took one final look around and sat on the edge of the door, rifle trained out and gave the thumbs-up sign to the gunner.

“Back check, sir. We’re all set, let’s go!” said the gunner into the microphone stalk protruding from his flight helmet. He pulled a strap down from overhead and connected a large silver carabiner clip to the back of Deuce’s combat vest and slapped his helmet. The big Ranger gave a thumbs-up over his shoulder and continued scanning the snow for threats.

The gunner then swung the mini-gun he had used to annihilate the North Koreans back into position and kept his hands on the twin grips, ready to fire again as the Black Hawk began to power up for dust-off.

Chad guessed it’d been no more than a minute since the helicopter touched down before he found himself strapped to a seat. Less than another minute and he felt the rollercoaster sensation of being pulled straight into the air as the engines whined and the Black Hawk leapt into the sky.

“What’s his story?” yelled Captain Alston to the gunner. He pointed at the man in a flight suit sitting next to Chad. Chad turned his head and saw that the man had pilot’s wings on his uniform and was not just sitting, but was hogtied to the jump-seat and looked to be spitting mad. He’d been gagged and strapped tightly to his chair, a nasty black-and-blue bruise forming on the side of his head.

“Co-pilot commandeered the aircraft and brought ‘er down.” The gunner jerked a thumb toward the tied-up man. “He’s the pilot—said our orders were to observe and report, but not to interfere. That’s some bullshit, right there! He

replaced Captain Munn just before takeoff, really weird-like.” The man shook his head, the big green helmet making him look like a frog.

“Why’s that?” hollered Captain Alston.

“Something about last-minute order change,” the gunner replied over the noise of the engine and the roaring wind. “I don’t know what the whole story is, but he,” the gunner said, pointing at the tied-up pilot, “sure didn’t want to pick you guys up. The Co-Pilot Lt. Travers cold-cocked him with his sidearm and took command. Ain’t never seen shit like *this* before,” he laughed, shaking his head. With a nod toward the cockpit, he continued, “The LT had me light ‘em up for ya.” The man grinned and patted the mini-gun affectionately. “That was *fun!*”

Chad could feel the pilot suddenly stiffen again. Someone was laughing now.

“I don’t think he’s going anywhere, sir,” yelled Garza, pointing at Chad with the universal *stop* sign.

Chad looked down and noticed his rifle was casually draped on his lap. The nearly half-inch-wide barrel was positioned just under the pilot’s chin. He was looking down the open maw of the Henry .45-70 with eyes the size of softballs.

“Sorry,” Chad said with a grin. He shifted the rifle so the butt rested on the cabin floor, muzzle pointed toward the vibrating cabin roof. Only when the big rifle swung away from the pilot’s face did he relax.

Chad stared out the window in a daze as the helicopter raced away from Glacier National Park. He assumed they were heading west toward Spokane, but didn’t know for sure. He was used to seeing all the mountains from the ground, not the air. It was making him dizzy, the way the pilot was hugging the ground and swooping over hills and valleys, constantly going up and down to follow the terrain. But Chad didn’t want to look around inside the cabin. All he could think about was the sight of that North Korean soldier falling backwards into the snow, one arm raised, seeking help that would never come.

I killed a man. He’s dead in the snow out there. His family’ll never hear from him again. Because I pulled the trigger...and... Chad tried to focus on the landscape blurring by his window. *Did he have kids? Did I just destroy a family, not just a man...?* He could feel his hands start to shake.

Chad was only vaguely aware that the Rangers grieved for their comrade and

tended wounds. Captain Alston had removed his outer layer of camo and was letting Garza field dress his shoulder where a round had clipped the meaty flesh of his deltoid. Every one of them had been wounded somehow, either from bullets or from splintered logs. They all had cuts and scrapes from the mad stand at the redoubt.

And it's all my fault. Chad looked down at his slightly shaking hands and realized he too had cuts and scrapes on his cold-red fingers. He smiled ruefully, happy that at least for all the grief he'd caused in the last few days, he hadn't escaped unscathed. That was something, he figured.

They'd come to bring him back to civilization and tap into his blood to save lives again. They had fought the snowstorm, the North Koreans, and now their own people. As a result, most of the Rangers had been injured and one had paid the ultimate price. Chad wanted to throw-up—he didn't know if the nausea he was feeling was from the motion of the helicopter or guilt that tormented every fiber of his being.

"I know what you're thinking," hollered Captain Alston. "But it's *not* your fault, sir."

Chad shook his head. "It *is*," he yelled back over the muted roar of the big engines on the Black Hawk.

"Mr. Huntley, these men are Rangers. We all knew the risks when we signed on the dotted line. I am just as heartbroken about Deacon as the rest of them, but the time for mourning is not now. We are still very much in danger. We will grieve for him in our own way, when there's time. But right now—"

The helicopter angled nose up sharply, throwing everyone inside to the rear of the cabin in a jumble of equipment, bodies, and curses. The floor quickly leveled out and Chad, restrained by his seat harness, could feel the helicopter had stopped moving and was hovering. He saw a look of surprise appear on Captain Alston's face as he untangled himself from Garza and looked toward the cockpit.

"We got a problem!" said the gunner, tapping his helmet and pointing forward.

Chad sensed movement out the cabin window about the same time he heard

someone shout, “Holy shit!”

He saw out the small window to his right—maybe a hundred yards away—an Apache attack helicopter slowly rise through a cloud of kicked-up snow from behind a ridgeline. The menacing-looking helicopter was unmistakable, even to a civilian like Chad. Hanging off its stubby wings, Chad could see an assortment of missiles. The big gun underneath its nose swiveled to the left and right, as if looking for a target. Above the spinning rotors was a bulbous object, like a pancaked balloon.

“Got another one over here!” called out a voice from the other side of the cabin. Captain Alston moved over to look, then returned to the front.

“Longbows!” Garza observed.

“What do they want?” Deuce yelled.

“They’re asking us the same thing!” replied the gunner, tapping his helmet.

“Tell ‘em you’re carrying Rangers. Give them my rank and tell them we’ve been fighting the North Koreans and have WIA and KIA onboard.”

After what seemed like forever, hanging there in the sky surrounded by attack helicopters, the gunner whooped in relief and leaned in close to Captain Alston. “They’re requesting permission to join your task force, sir!”

The tall Ranger sighed and dropped his head down in relief. Chad exhaled, not realizing that he’d been holding his breath. He watched as the Apache out his window sidled-up in formation next to them and the pilot waved and flashed a thumbs-up sign.

“Tell them we’re damn glad they’re on our side and that we’re heading for Spokane,” Captain Alston yelled. He looked toward his men. “Nice to have a little more firepower, huh?”

“Hell yes, sir!” The jubilant gunner pumped his fist, then relayed the message to the pilot, and returned the response from the cockpit. He shook his head and grabbed the mic to keep from screaming in his pilot’s ears.

“They say Spokane is a no-go. NKor ground forces have swept clear across the state. That pilot out there,” he said, motioning toward the Apache out the window, “isn’t sure if they’ve taken Spokane or not but there’s enough SAM activity to make it a suicide run. They just came from near there, an Air National

Guard base just across the border. The last of their battalion. Most of 'em didn't make it out when the NKors landed on 'em. They were ordered to make a break for it and try to regroup."

"Dammit!" said Captain Alston as he pounded his fist on the metal airframe of the helicopter. "We need a place to set down and regroup."

The gunner nodded. "A couple of them are bingo fuel. They say there's a small airport just a few miles south of here; it's about as far as they can reach."

Captain Alston nodded. "Sounds good! Let's do it."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

COOPER

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

“TALK TO ME, BEAVER,” said Cooper. His hands gripped the steering wheel of their stolen APC with white knuckles.

“They’re facing away from us. No idea we’re here, boss.”

Cooper thought for a moment. They had successfully navigated the streets of Los Angeles, creeping farther and farther from All Saints, heading south and west. So far they had escaped detection from the Koreans but he was doubtful their luck could hold much longer.

He glanced down at the bloody helmet that was plugged into the comms panel. Someone was bound to realize that an APC wasn’t responding to hails and would go looking for it. *He* would.

They had driven through crowds of panicked civilians, streaming in all directions away from downtown, away from the attacking jets and missiles. Cars were struggling to move on the major roads. He grimaced, thinking of the shouts of the civilians who’d spotted the Korean APC and run in terror.

At least it helped clear the road for us. Thank God we’re not stuck back in that mess. Like a sea of parked cars.

The crowds eventually thinned out as the wave of humanity escaped the chaos of downtown. Cooper had been driving for over an hour now, and he was

seeing an alarming number of casualties on the streets not related to combat. There were no signs of violence and the doctors in the crew cabin behind him confirmed that the unprotected homeless would be hit by the flu first, *and* with most lethal effect.

A jet roared overhead, its noise muted by the North Korean APC's thick armor—an unpleasant reminder of the war zone into which L.A. had descended.

Slowly, they crept through the side streets and thoroughfares, making their way as quietly as possible south, following the Harbor Freeway. Twice, they turned corners and saw a gaggle of North Korean soldiers gathered in the street, officers shouting orders.

The first time, the North Koreans had barely glanced at the APC before running off in the opposite direction.

The second time, one of the officers broke away from his squad and approached the APC with a smile. Just as Cooper was about to give him a six-ton kiss, he touched his helmet and nodded, then waved before running back to lead his men deeper into the chaos.

At last, they'd cleared through the rubble of the ring of destruction surrounding downtown and emerged onto the unscathed Harbor Freeway corridor. The freeway was essentially deserted, yet the eight miles they had to travel to reach the 105 took them nearly 45 minutes.

"Looks like everyone remembers the Blue Flu pretty well," mumbled Mike from the turret. "Everyone stayed home or already headed for the hills."

"That didn't take long, this time," replied Cooper. For that, he was grateful—it kept the civilians out of his way for the most part. He took the exit for the Glen Anderson Freeway West.

"Okay, what's next?" They were still a long way from safety.

"ROADBLOCK UP AHEAD, COOP—'BOUT A MILE," said Mike.

Cooper cursed the traffic snarl that'd forced them off the Glen Anderson in Hawthorne and slowed the rumbling APC to a stop facing the ocean at the

intersection of West 120th Street and Oxford Avenue.

He tried in vain to stretch his tight back muscles in the cramped driver's seat but knew he'd get no relief until they could all get out of the stolen APC. Instead, he used a joystick on the dashboard to manipulate a little external camera so he could see on the night-vision screen what Mike was looking at up in the turret. The street sign at the intersection read *Hawthorne Blvd.*

Power outages had spread rapidly after the initial assault and now the entire city—at least as far as he could tell—had been plunged into darkness. The green-tinted screen showed no activity; only a few bodies on the street and abandoned cars. There were some dim, glittering lights in the homes that were packed along both sides of West 120th Street. *Someone* was still alive around here.

He manipulated the controls and zoomed in farther west down the street. Cooper figured they were only about two miles from Los Angeles Air Force Base, now. The roadblock at the intersection up ahead had to be the outer edge of the invading forces.

“They’re looking north, man. Looks like no one knows we’re here, yet,” said Mike.

“All right, everyone,” said Cooper, loud enough to be heard in the crowded cabin. “I think we’re almost home-free. Looks like one last road block before we get out of OZ.”

“What’s OZ?” a female voice asked faintly from the rear of the APC.

“It’s a movie. Judy Garland? You know, the wizard...?” replied Jax in his Texas drawl. After a chuckle, he said, “Naw, it stands for Occupied Zone.” When his joke was met with silence, Jax cleared his throat and muttered, “Tough crowd.”

Cooper suppressed a grin. “Right now, that line of cars and North Koreans in front of us is the only thing separating us from a straight shot to the Air Force base on the other side of the San Diego Freeway, and hopefully, safety. Everyone hold on tight; we’re gonna hit ‘em hard.”

“Yo, Coop, I got some chatter,” said the team sniper, bent over the comm station. He shook his head. “I don’t know what they’re saying, but they’re awful excited about it.”

“Got movement at the checkpoint. They’re looking around...” warned Mike’s voice from the turret. “I think they know we’re in the area...”

“I see the searchlights,” said Cooper. “This is it, people. Hang on!” He pushed the throttle wide open and felt with satisfaction the heavily armored vehicle lurch forward.

“Clear the road, Beaver!”

“Hooyah!”

There was a deafening roar and Cooper felt the steering wheel buck violently as the APC’s main gun spoke. Cooper focused on the view out the armored window in front of him. He was vaguely aware of muted screams and commotion behind him over the ringing in his ears and the pounding of his heart.

The APC lumbered west on 120th, picking up speed. As the smoke down the street cleared, he saw one of the two civilian cars that the North Koreans had parked across the ramp nose to nose—it was now on its roof about ten feet behind the roadblock. The other had been flung back off the road and was in flames in the drugstore parking lot on the corner.

There were bodies on the ground: some moving, some still, and some in pieces. On the sidewalk and behind the other vehicles, Cooper could see scurrying forms illuminated by the burning wreckage. The rest of the North Koreans at the roadblock were seeking cover in a panic. On the night-vision screen, they looked like so many cockroaches, scattering in the light of the main gun as it belched fire from the top of the APC.

As his hearing returned, Cooper recognized the distinct, yet quiet sound of rounds bouncing off the thick skin of their captured APC.

“They’re returning fire!” yelled Mike, one hand on his ear.

“Shoot back! Let ‘em have it,” replied Cooper. He took aim at the corner of the burning car still blocking the westbound lanes. “Hold on back there!” he shouted over his shoulder.

The APC rocked a bit as it smashed into the flaming car at full speed, ignoring the random and ineffectual return fire of the ground troops. In a flare of burning fuel and crumpled steel, the APC barreled down the street and lumbered west, leaving the wreckage of the roadblock in its wake. Once the screams and

shouts had died down in the back, Cooper asked, “Everyone all right back there?”

“We’re fine!” someone hollered back. “But take it easy up there; the President can’t take too much more of this!”

“Yo, Coop, we’re gonna have company!” said Mike after he turned the turret around to face to the rear. “I got two vehicles full of bad guys on our ass!”

The APC was rocked by another shot from the main gun. Though he was at least a little more prepared for the shock of the blast, it still left Cooper’s ears ringing.

“Make that one vehicle!” Mike yelled in between laughs. “I *love* this thing!”

“I’m getting a lot of chatter, man,” said Sparky from the comm panel. “It’s a good bet they’re calling in reinforcements...”

“Damn, this thing’s a slow pig...” muttered Cooper, foot to the floor. He willed the big APC to go faster, but it just wasn’t built for speed. The speedometer registered a paltry 50 miles an hour. He winced as the APC smashed into another parked car, flinging it aside as if it were a toy.

“Whoa!” said Sparky, gripping the armrests of his seat to keep from falling. “I’m getting some...wait—it sounds like there’s an A-10 driver up there that noticed our little fireworks display.”

The pavement in front of them erupted into a shower of smoke and fire. It sounded like they were driving through a hailstorm as the fragments of the road rained down on them.

“Enemy bird, port side high!” called out Mike. “He’s moving too fast for me to get a good shot.”

“Sparky get on the horn and ask for some assistance...” said Cooper, swerving to avoid an abandoned car.

“Roger that—U.S. air assets this net, come in!” Static was the sniper’s only response. “I say again, U.S. air assets this net, come in! Mayday, mayday, mayday!”

After a moment of static, a strong voice with a southern drawl came over the speakers in the cabin. “Uh, you are broadcasting on a restricted military frequency. Identify yourself.”

“This is Striker 2, authentication Charlie-Victor-Niner-Five-Seven-Alpha. You see that explosion on West 120th?”

There was a moment of silence. “Come on...call it in...*call it in*...” muttered Cooper. He knew that the unique authorization code Sparky had provided would inform the pilot that they were a naval special warfare unit. Of course, if anyone had enough sense to be monitoring the channel and had access to the codes, they’d know that now, too.

He flinched as his vision was obstructed by another shower of pavement and debris caused by the chasing helicopter. “Dammit, this guy’s really on our ass!” He swerved again, eliciting a howl of protest from the back. A car exploded just to their left, where the APC would have been a second earlier.

“Okay, roger that, Striker, pretty nice show down there. This is Snake Lead, the A-10 above your position.”

“Can you see the NKor APC hauling-ass southwest? That’s us—there’s pursuit vehicles, including a Korean helo.”

“You tellin’ me you Squids carjacked an APC?” The pilot laughed. “That’s some funny shit, right there!”

The sniper laughed. “Hooyah, brother. We sure could use some help—”

The APC jerked to the left after a tremendous roar. Warning lights flashed and a red emergency light flashed. “Christ!” said Cooper, trying to regain control of the speeding armored car.

“Roger that, Striker 2, I see ‘im. Wait one...”

“We’re taking direct fire from that fucking helo—take it out!”

The little armored window went white. “Holy shit!” Mike exclaimed, his laughter drifting down from the turret. “Nice shot!”

Cooper gritted his teeth and held the wheel tight as the APC careened through the cascading debris from the dead helicopter, dodging chunks of flaming metal and running through what he couldn’t dodge. In a matter of seconds, they were through the debris field and still rolling west.

“Striker, you still with me? I’m swinging around for another run.”

“Roger that, Snake, thanks for the assist. Nice shooting.”

“Country boy can survive,” was the chuckled response. “Listen here, hold on

to your butts, Striker—you got multiple ground vehicles closing on your position. Looks like they're still a few clicks north of your location. Maintain course and speed and I'll give y'all some covering fire."

"Oh man...Coop!" cried out Mike. "I can see 'em, in between the parked cars up ahead. We're gonna have trouble in a minute!"

"I see 'em!" said Cooper, spotting two vehicles approaching from side streets a few blocks ahead. The headlights turned and bounced as the vehicles crossed the divided freeway and aimed straight for them. "Can't tell what they are... uh...anyone know what can plow through concrete barriers like that?"

"Maintain course and speed, Striker," warned the A-10 pilot. "You got a couple T-72s in front of you."

"Shit, shit, shit, *shit*," said Cooper. "How the hell did they get tanks here so fast?"

"Dropping into the slot and coming up fast on your six. This is gonna be danger close. Wait one..."

"Come on...do something!" said Cooper through clenched teeth as he gripped the wheel with white knuckles. "They're gonna fire..."

"Wait one..."

Cooper felt a strange vibration through the seat before he heard the roar. It sounded like a dragon or something—right on top them—as flames shot over the roof of the APC in the direction of the tanks.

One of the T-72s in front of them disappeared into a fireball; then its partner died in an even brighter flare of light. Other North Korean vehicles entering the westbound lanes through the holes the tanks had made in the dividers were likewise transformed by the awesome firepower of the A-10 Thunderbolt into flaming, scrap-metal heaps. The smoldering hulks looked like so much charred Swiss cheese as the APC rumbled past.

Cooper only exhaled when they swerved through the last wreck and pulled onto a clear stretch of freeway. He had to hold his tongue until the overpowering noise of the A-10's turbines pulled away. Cooper figured the pilot must've been flying only 30 feet off the deck for it to have sounded that loud. The APC actually shook as the tank-killer soared overhead.

“The Vulcan, she’s a mean bitch,” the pilot said.

“Hey Flyboy,” Cooper called out. “Much obliged.”

The pilot chuckled over the intercom. “You bet, Squid. Looks like the road is clear a good ways. I’ll be in the area while my fuel lasts. Dogfighting in this ol’ girl eats up the gas. We’re holding our own, though.”

“Keep on ‘em. We surely appreciate the assist. Striker 2, out.” Cooper glanced over his shoulder.

“Mike, see anything else?”

“Negative. We’re clear as far as I can see. Looks like we made it. We’re trailing smoke, though. I think the helo got a lucky shot.”

Cooper looked at the array of lights and dials in front of him. “Yeah, there’s a few of these indicators up here telling me something is wrong, but I’ll be damned if I know *what*.”

Another light blinked from green to amber. “Whoa...hey...I think we’re getting low on fuel. Sparky, you still getting a lot of chatter?”

The sniper shook his head, one hand on the headset held to his ear. “Nah, it’s dying down. Or we’re getting out of range. I don’t know, man—maybe they think that A-10 took us out?”

Cooper thought while he scanned the road ahead of them, weaving the wounded APC through the maze of abandoned cars on the freeway. More than a few were on fire. As they moved forward, the lights on the front of the APC illuminated empty streets.

“Man...that’s just creepy out there,” said Mike from the turret. “It’s like everyone is gone...”

“Look at all the bullet holes and burned-out cars,” said Sparky. “Damn NKor fast-movers must’ve strafed ‘em on their way downtown.”

“Poor bastards never had a chance,” muttered Cooper.

“Like fish in a barrel,” added Jax.

Cooper had to slow the shuddering APC down to a crawl. “This is *no bueno*, guys.” He winced at the noise of the armored vehicle’s dying engine. “We’re gonna be trapped if we don’t get out of this thing.”

“Got the San Diego Freeway coming up—everything looks pretty clear,

man,” said Mike.

Cooper glanced at the dial that had turned amber. It was now red. “Okay, we need to ditch this thing, anyway. I think we’re leaking fuel.” He pushed an abandoned Prius out of the way as if it were a piece of paper. “Mike!”

“Yeah, Coop.”

“Keep on the lookout for another vehicle we can use. If that radio silence is any indication, I think the Koreans are going to come looking for their toy soon. This thing’s gotta have a GPS tracker or something on it, like ours would.”

“You want multiples or something big?”

Cooper hit the brakes and the APC squealed to a halt, the big engine gurgling and sputtering. He pointed out the window. “Something like that bus at the intersection right there. Got any movement?”

“Negative on IR...I’m getting no movement, no heat signatures,” said Mike, swiveling the turret all around.

Cooper unstrapped and turned in his seat to face the main cabin. The pretty auburn-haired doctor watched him with wide eyes. “Okay—Brenda, right? Get back there and get the President ready to move. We’ll go secure that bus and then we can make it to the air base—it’s just on the other side of that freeway...”

It was all over in a minute. The SEALs rushed from the APC wraith-like, secured the area, and stormed the bus. Like all the other shot-up vehicles, only the dead remained. Holding their breath, the SEALs pulled the few dead passengers off and, at the behest of the doctors, quickly sprayed some disinfectant around the cavernous interior.

“It’s mainly for the smell,” said the old doctor. He rubbed a hand through his ring of white hair. “By now, we’ve all been exposed to the mystery flu—either we catch it or we don’t. I just don’t know.”

Dr. Alston pulled Cooper aside. “Did any of your men catch the Blue Flu ten years ago?”

He nodded. “Me, Charlie, and Jax, I think. Pretty sure the others were deployed out in the middle of the Pacific...they weren’t allowed into port until...after.”

“Then you three have the best chance of fighting this round off.” She

lowered her voice as Charlie walked past, helping a wounded Secret Service agent board the bus. “Keep an eye on the others. Once they start presenting with symptoms, you won’t have long.”

“Well, it ain’t perfect, but it sure as hell beats walking,” said Charlie with a half-smile from the bus’ door.

Cooper took the driver’s seat and grinned as he spun the bus’ big steering wheel and backed up toward the dying APC. He was thankful to be back in a vehicle where he could understand the dash and focus on something besides the spine-tingling fear of catching the mystery flu and dodging North Korean aircraft.

The armored vehicle had black scorch marks all up and down the sides where he had smashed through flaming wreckage. There were hundreds of dents and dings from bullets and more than one reaction-armor panel had been blown off, sacrificing itself to save the vehicle. Thick, black smoke bellowed from the engine compartment on the right side, sending a column of darkness into the sky where the dawn was spreading rosy fingers into the cloak of night.

He urged the Secret Service agents to get the President onboard as quickly as possible. “Let’s go, guys...that smoke signal is going to attract a lot of the wrong kind of attention.”

Dr. Honeycutt was the last of the civilians to climb onboard, carrying a load of disposable gloves and masks. “That’s it, we’re all aboard. If the President sees the dawn tomorrow, it’ll be a miracle. Let’s try to drive a little more careful this time, eh?”

“Roger that, sir,” said Cooper with a grin. “Don’t worry, ‘careful’ is my middle name. And we’ve only got a couple miles to go.”

Charlie laughed.

The smile on Cooper’s face vanished. “Mike, Sparky.”

“Yeah,” replied the sniper’s relaxed voice over his bone phone. “Comin’ up on your six.”

Charlie did the final check around the perimeter of the bus and climbed up the steps, his rifle pointing out. “Lock n’ load, Coop. We’re ready.”

A small red car pulled up next to the bus, its garish little racing stripes

injecting a sense of triviality to the surreal scene around them. Cooper shook his head and grinned.

“Are you *kidding* me?” asked Charlie. He stood on the steps in the open door and called out, “A fuckin’ Mini?”

The tinted driver’s window rolled down and Mike’s gap-toothed grin greeted the SEALs on the bus. “Hell yeah. This here’s the souped-up model. Small and quick, baby.”

“Hey, isn’t that what your wife calls you?” said Charlie.

“Just try and keep up, asshole,” replied Mike with another flash of his characteristic grin. “We’ll lead the way.” The little car’s tires squealed and it shot down the long ramp toward Venice Blvd. like a scalded cat.

“One block lead, Mike; one block. I don’t want any surprises,” said Cooper as he shifted the charter bus into gear with a hiss of the air-brakes releasing.

“Roger that, Coop. We’re only about ten minutes out from the base.”

“Jax, keep on the horn, try to let ‘em know we’re coming.”

“Hooyah,” replied the big SEAL. He pulled out the main radio and began searching channels.

Cooper had to drive faster than he would have liked to keep up with the taillights from the Mini Cooper, but it was still a smoother ride than the APC.

“Man, this thing don’t have a turret but it sure is fun as hell to drive!” whooped Mike.

“Stay on target, Beaver. Find a way to that base,” warned Charlie, kneeling next to Cooper at the front of the bus. He scanned out the windows, looking for threats. Cooper grinned. Charlie would make a fine leader for his SEALs.

In a quiet voice, Charlie asked, “You think Allie...”

Cooper shot a look at his friend and XO. “They made it, man. Allie’s a smart girl. She knows what to do in an earthquake, right?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“But nothing,” said Cooper, eyes on the road. “That’s just a different type of emergency. When she realized what was going down, she probably headed straight to Coronado.”

“Yeah,” sighed Charlie. “I guess you’re right.” Charlie looked out the

windshield, lost in thought.

Cooper looked over at his friend. He could tell by the set of Charlie's jaw, the young father was deeply troubled. That could get him or others killed if Charlie didn't let go of the fear and doubt bottled up inside and focus on the mission.

"Hey," Cooper said. "When we get the President to the air base, we'll turn him over to the flyboys and we'll go find Allie and Junior. Okay?"

Charlie nodded. "Aye, aye, Master Chief." He exhaled and adjusted the rifle sling over his shoulder. "Mission first."

After a moment of silence, Cooper said in a serious voice, "Sir..."

Charlie turned and faced his CO with a raised eyebrow.

"I'm gonna have to ask you to step behind the line, sir," Cooper said with a jerk of his head toward the back of the bus.

Charlie looked down at the bright yellow line on which he was kneeling. The words painted on the floor read: STAY BEHIND THIS LINE WHILE BUS IS MOVING.

The two SEALs, covered in grime, sweat, and blood, running for their lives aboard a charter bus carrying the President of the United States on his deathbed, laughed until they had to gasp for breath.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DENNY

SALMON FALLS, IDAHO

“YET, it appears the death toll from this mystery flu-like illness will be highly unpredictable. When asked for an official statement, the White House has been silent.”

Denny paused in his work and watched the grainy picture on the television set. Since the cable went out yesterday, he'd been forced to rig up an old antenna he found in his basement in order to get any news from the outside world.

The internet, like his electricity, had been fluctuating randomly lately and it was increasingly frustrating to find out what was going on in the world outside Salmon Falls.

He shook his head as the picture on the screen shifted from a reporter in a surgical mask to the mess in front of a hospital in Chicago. There were bodies in the street, draped in what looked like checkered tablecloths. Men in hazmat suits slowly made their way down the street collecting corpses. They shoo-ed away the few bystanders who tried to take pictures on cell phones.

“Another National Guard patrol is approaching, so we'll have to sign off and move to a new location. This is Mike Thomas, reporting live in Chicago.” The image switched back to a studio, where a man and a woman, both sporting surgical masks and haggard eyes, picked up where their colleague left off.

“Thanks, Mike. In other news—” The anchor paused and looked off camera for a moment. He chuckled ruefully. “That was a phrase from happier times.” He cleared his throat. “As I was saying, the White House is still issuing no official comment on the recent violence and chaos on the West Coast, either.”

“We have confirmed with our sister stations in Portland, Seattle, and San Francisco, that in fact, North Korean land forces have invaded those areas along the Pacific Coast of the United States.” The female reporter shook her head. “Why the government will not acknowledge that we’re at war is beyond me.”

“The unexplained blackout on communications affecting much of the country west of the Rockies makes it difficult to know one way or another what is going on—let alone casualty figures,” said the male talking head. “The lists of missing people are starting to grow at an alarming rate. We here in Boise have been inundated with requests from family members, hoping for some news. As part of our continuing effort to support our community in this time of crisis, Channel 12 and all our sister stations will broadcast a list of missing persons, which is now scrolling across the top of your screen. Please, if you see your name, contact your families right away...”

Static turned the screen into a picture of snowy signal interference. Denny clicked the volume down, sighed, and returned to his task at hand.

Before him on the dining room table lay his hickory recurve bow and a dozen arrows he had set aside last hunting season. He had a large candle burning directly in front of him. Next to his right leg, he had a bundle of new arrow shafts that he’d been saving for winter work.

Last winter, he’d bought a chunk of Port Orford Cedar at a local lumber mill that had been drying for a year. Just a few weeks ago, he’d started to mill the lumber into half-inch square billets. Ever so slowly, as a kind of meditation after a long day at school, he would continue to turn the billets into round dowels.

He had clamped those rough billets to his workbench and ran his favorite hand plane along the corners. With every *schnick* of the plane, every curl of the aromatic wood that he sliced free, he was gradually turning those square billets into arrow shafts. It had, of course, taken much longer than it would have if he’d simply ordered a batch of arrows online, but these were handmade. These were

his.

Since he'd used a well-sharpened smoothing plane, the shafts that lay on the table before him were perfectly smooth—smoother than any sandpaper could've achieved. Now, he mused, his task was to make sure the nascent arrow shafts were straight and true.

Carefully, he rolled one of the new shafts along the length of the table, peering down along the surface to see if there were any high spots. There was a small hump a few millimeters in height around the middle of this particular shaft.

He picked up the shaft while glancing at the static-filled television, and carefully lowered the shaft over the flame of the candle. Working carefully so as to not scorch the wood, he applied pressure with his thumbs and fingers and as the heat of the candle saturated the wood, he bent the shaft in the opposite direction of the crook.

After pulling it away from the flame and letting it cool a minute, he again rolled the shaft on the table. The gap was gone. He smiled. That shaft would be added to the pile by his left foot, ready for fletching and an arrowhead.

The television returned and the screen flickered as he picked up the next shaft. He listened absently while he checked again for a bend in the shaft by sighting along the length as he rolled it on the table.

“—state of affairs when the President of the United States refuses to admit that our country is under attack.”

“Well, I can tell you—” said a voice clearly coming through a phone system. Denny looked up from the candle and saw a picture of some official in the government on the screen with the caption, *On the Phone, US Secretary of State, Alexandra Stonemyer.*

“—I can tell you unequivocally that the support from the World Health Organization is not only most welcome, but most needed. New York, as you know, is being hit hard with this mystery flu. The vaccines that were available during The Great Pandemic just don't seem to be working—”

“Madam Secretary, I thought most of the H5N1 vaccines were lost in the nuclear attack on Atlanta last week?” asked the female reporter. “Are you telling

me that is *not* the case?”

“I’m telling you, Alice,” the Secretary continued, “that the French contingent is bringing their own vaccines, equipment, emergency food, and even power generators to Queens, an area especially hard-hit. Even in Boston, where our German friends are assembling, the relief is quickly flowing. This crisis is a true example of how the nations of the civilized world can and will help each other in times of need.”

“Madam Secretary, what can you tell us about reports of paratroopers landing hundreds of miles from the coast in South Carolina, setting up roadblocks and cordoning off government buildings? We’ve had word that Russian soldiers were threatening American citizens who attempted to contact their state representatives. Can you comment on this?”

There was a pause on the phone and the screen flickered momentarily in static. Denny hoped it would hold steady for the Secretary of State’s answer.

“I think that the good people of South Carolina are very happy with the help our friends from Russia have provided. Food, medicine, power—”

“But these reports of Russian soldiers waving machine guns at—”

“Alice, let me finish, please. These reports, I think when it’s all said and done, will be nothing more than the fantasies of some bored people who want to make a name for themselves. It’s utter hogwash. My counterpart in the Russian Federation has assured me, just this morning, that there are no Russian forces outside of Charleston, at this time.”

“So you’re denying the multiple reports—”

“Of course! There is nothing to worry about. President Barron himself invited the W.H.O. and its accompanying security forces to assist us with making this country safe and helping us to fight this—”

Static returned and killed the transmission. Denny sighed again and turned back to his arrow shafts, his mind troubled. Another shaft finished, he reached for a third, glancing at the television.

The little handheld Garmin Rhino radio/GPS unit his neighbor John had given him two days ago broke squelch. “You watching TV?”

Denny picked up the black radio and pushed the transmit button carefully.

He'd never used this type of two-way radio before—he'd always used his cell phone. But lately, cell reception seemed to have vanished, or replaced with a computerized message that said, *Due to unusually high call volume, this network is down. Please try your call again later.*

"Yes, I was. Until I lost the signal again."

"I think you'd better come over."

Denny looked at the pile of unfinished arrows on the floor. He was about to sigh and make a comment about his Mormon neighbor being paranoid, but then the confrontation with his students flashed back in his mind. The world was changing.

Two weeks ago, he would've laughed at John's urging him to retreat into their bunker. Two weeks ago, he wouldn't have thought he'd have to put his tomahawk against a high school student's neck to keep him from killing his elderly neighbor. Two weeks ago, people weren't dying of some super flu—again.

Two weeks ago, the nation wasn't at war.

"Okay," he said. The power flickered, causing the TV to shut off, as if to validate the ominous tone of John's voice.

It wasn't hard to lock up the house and head across the yard. The night that he'd confronted Jeb Townsend, Denny had a premonition that the hothead and his father would come looking for retribution. The easiest target was his truck, parked out in the open on the driveway slab. Therefore, the day after the incident, he'd pulled his truck around behind the house and backed it up to a back door off the living room.

The truck was currently parked there, next to some big pines along the back of his house and up under a metal, open-enclosure garage roof. It was completely hidden from the street.

He checked the lock on the front door again and made sure the windows were locked and the curtains were drawn tight in the windows facing the street. Since the power had been going on and off at random for the last few days, he had simply left everything off and unplugged. He hoped that made his house look deserted. Maybe it would encourage Jeb and his friends to look elsewhere

for trouble.

Walking back through the kitchen, he paused long enough to shut off the TV, blow out the candle on the table and pick up his tomahawk. Once slipped onto his belt, he picked up the radio, clipped it on the other side of his waist, and headed out the back kitchen door.

A plan had been evolving in his head lately, to load up his truck with all the gear he needed and head up into the foothills of the Bitterroot Mountains, directly west of his house. It would be a simple thing, he thought as he crossed the yard. Just load up and drive away from the chaos that was enveloping Salmon Falls.

He stepped on a fallen pine tree twig and paused at the loud sound. The snow from the early storm last weekend had long ago melted, but the ground was still cold and beginning its long sleep for the coming winter. Moving quickly, he crossed the side yard and arrived at the backdoor to the Andertons' house.

John was there, waiting for him. "We need to talk." He ushered his neighbor over to the kitchen table. Ruth was busy preparing a meal from what looked like a half-dozen cookbooks spread out on the counter.

"Hello, Denny!" she said with a bright smile and came across the room to smother him in a grandmotherly hug. "I'm just fixing an early supper. Won't you join us?"

Before Denny could do anything but smile, she turned, nodding and humming to herself. "Of *course* you will. I'm making my world famous kitchen sink chili and cornbread!"

Denny sat down in the proffered chair and accepted a glass of ice water. He raised an eyebrow at John. "It's because she puts everything in it but the kitchen sink," the old man laughed. "It's a ritual she goes through. Every time there's a blizzard, ice storm, or new baby, she makes a *huge* batch of this chili, using everything she can get her hands on—"

"That's *right*," she said, nodding her plump, smiling face. Her hair was silver-gray and coiled neatly in a tight, proper-looking bun on the back of her head. The laugh-lines around her eyes made her look like an off-duty Mrs. Claus, Denny thought, hiding a smile.

She nodded again to herself and went back to mixing in the big silver cauldron on the stove. Over her shoulder, she said, "You never know in one of those situations when you're going to have time to eat, or if your power will go off and you'll lose the food in your fridge. This solves *both* problems. Ready when you are to heat it up and eat, and uses up a little of everything so you don't lose it *all* in a power outage."

"Anyway," John said, turning back in his seat to face Denny, "I asked you over here to see if you've changed your mind."

"I haven't, John," said Denny, shaking his head. "I'm not made to hide under the ground. No offense," he said quickly.

John raised his hands. "None taken. I'm too old to go tromping off into the woods, hunting and fishing." He chuckled and shook his head. "Besides, maybe this will work out for both of us. With that radio I gave you, I can feed you information and you can keep an eye on things topside for us."

Denny nodded. "That's what I thought. But..."

"But you're wondering why I asked you over here." The old man sighed. "I think something bad is coming."

"What do you mean?" Denny asked over the top of his glass.

"You remember the smoke we saw yesterday?"

"Yes," said Denny. He remembered seeing a dark smudge on the horizon, topped by a large plume of smoke to the northeast, in the direction of the main part of town.

"It was the school and City Hall."

"What?" Denny said, sitting up. "Who—*how*?"

John shook his head. "I don't know, but a HAM friend of mine on the other side of town could see it burning and called me just now. He could see from his ranch a group of people heading from the school to City Hall, and then on down Main Street."

"Doesn't make any sense," Denny said quietly.

"I think we know who was behind it."

"You think the Townsend boy—"

"I think it's his *father*," said John with a knowing look. "He's the town

drunk; you said it yourself. He's always been a rabble-rouser and since he was laid-off last year, he's been out of work and looking for something to do." The old man took a sip of his own water. "I don't know. But, it sure wouldn't surprise me."

"What about Sheriff Bridger?"

"From what I hear, he's got the new super flu. Sounds like some of the kids from the school have actually died. Now their families are sick. It's just horrible."

"Oh no," Denny whispered. "Bob was right—" He saw the questioning look on his neighbor's face. "The principal. He thought the kids from the sophomore class brought the flu back from California last week. He had to close school that first day." He shook his head again. "This is going to be *bad*, John."

"Don't I *know* it. HAMs all over the country are reporting how serious it's getting. There's *bodies* in the streets in Chicago and New York. Can you believe it? It's like..." John paused, looking ashamed. "I'm sorry, Denny, I know how you lost Emily in The Pandemic. This has got to be hard on you."

Denny was quiet a moment. Then, softly, he spoke, "It's okay, John. I made my peace with her a long time ago."

John nodded.

Denny took another sip from his drink. He savored the hearty smells from the cooking chili. "Have you seen the Townsend boy again?"

"No," said John with a dismissive wave of his hand. "It's the *war* I called you over to talk about."

"What war?"

"The North Koreans have invaded California, Denny!"

"But, the news said—"

"I'm not talking about the bullcrap you see on TV. I'm talking about what I'm hearing with my HAM gear from people on the West Coast who are there; right there in middle of this mess! The stuff they're telling me is *scary*, Denny, *very* scary. A few bodies on the ground in Chicago is *nothing* compared to foreign jets and tanks blowing up buildings and killing people left and right in Los Angeles. They're pushing inland, Denny. Taking land!"

“I don’t understand,” Denny said, shaking his head slightly.

“The North Koreans started a war in the middle of this flu outbreak. You think that the television signals are screwed up for no reason at all? Think about it, Denny—these guys I’m friends with, a lot of them were in the military back in the day. They know what they’re talking about when they say a tank rolled down their street with twenty guys carrying rifles following it and ransacking houses. And that’s just the West Coast.”

“What do you mean?”

“Out east, they’re being real sneaky.”

Denny swallowed. “The U.N.?”

“Yes,” said John sadly. “All the reports we hear about how these doctors from Europe are bringing medicine and food and generators to restore power. They *should*! How many times have we spent American blood and treasure on Europe?”

Denny nodded. “World War I, World War II, the Cold War...”

John pointed at Denny and nodded. “That’s *right*! Time and time again, we go to help them. And now it’s their turn. Well, they’re helping, but they’re helping *themselves*.”

“Pardon?”

“Did you hear the reports about the Russians in South Carolina? Basically took over that town? The doctors brought along ‘security forces’ as well.”

“Yes, but the Secretary of State—”

John hissed, “She’s a *liar*. Always has been. A hack for the new president. I’ve been in contact with a HAM I know who lives near that town. He saw the transport planes; he saw the parachutes. Then he saw the smoke and took in some of the people that fled. The Russians didn’t bring food and medicine; they brought guns and death. They *took* that town. Now it’s cordoned off and under a military blockade. Our own people tricked into letting the Russians take over—I bet you we’ll hear it’s ‘under quarantine’ next.”

“John...” said Denny, still not sure.

“From what I hear, the Germans are doing the same thing Boston—but the people are fighting back. Civil disobedience, riots, that sort of thing.” John

shrugged. “They’re doing what they can, I guess—they had all their guns taken away years ago.”

“Wait—South Carolina never jumped on the gun control bandwagon—”

John sighed. “The HAMs I know said the Russians hit like a tornado in the middle of the night. No warning—no one had a chance. Lots of shooting and shouting and next thing you know, the town’s under their control. Then they started rounding up people they didn’t like—the ones with guns, the outspoken ones, the young men, that sort of thing.”

“Then what?”

John shrugged. “I don’t know. No one does. Shoot, even some of the HAMs were rounded up—big antennas sticking up in your yard are kind of a giveaway. That’s why mine are hidden in the trees,” John said with a wink. He sighed again. “Anyway, everything I’ve heard suggests those people were marched off in the night and just...*vanished*. I’m assuming they’re just being held at the local school or something...”

“So where’s the Army? The Marines? The Air Force? Why aren’t we fighting back? I cannot believe Washington would sit back and let all this happen.”

John stared at his glass of water. “Believe it, Denny. I think they’re in on it. Okay, so maybe most of our military is spread around the world and has been since...well, really since 9/11, but *definitely* since The Pandemic and the war with Iran. I get that.”

“Yes, but surely not all—”

“Oh no, not all of it. We’ve got Reserves and the National Guard...but we’ve had a string of presidents now that have kept cutting the military and Denton has been one of the worst of ‘em since Clinton. There’s no need for such a big military machine, right? Isn’t that what they’re always telling us? H5N1 reduced the world’s population and made a lot of threats just disappear.” John shook his head. “Now look where their bleeding-heart policies have left us. Protecting the whole world, and almost defenseless at home. It’s *scary*, Denny. Real scary.”

“John Anderton, you stop getting so worked up over this,” ordered Ruth from the stove. She had both hands on her matronly hips. “You remember what

the doctor said. You need to keep your blood pressure down. Besides,” she said, smoothing out her apron, “Heavenly Father will provide. He always has, and always will.”

Denny took a long, slow drink, letting the cold water soothe his emotions. He put the glass on the table carefully, to conceal his unsteady hands. “John, do you think they’ll come here? I mean, there’s nothing of value here...no military base, no large population center...we’re halfway up the mountains.”

“I wouldn’t have thought that Creekwater, South Carolina would’ve been all that important to the Russians either, but...” John spread his hands in a gesture of uncertainty. “Nobody knows why they went there. I just wanted you to know the truth before you headed for the hills, Denny.” He looked over his shoulder. “Ruth and I spend every night in the bunker now and only come up in the mornings.”

“Rightly so,” said Ruth, her back to the men. “If nothing else, we may as well get our money’s worth out of it.”

“Well, if what you say is true, then I think I may want to head up Old Leesburg Road a bit at first light.”

“Where will you go? You just can’t go sit in the woods all day.”

Denny thought for a moment. “Well,” he said with a sigh, “I normally camp up on Morning Glory Peak ‘cause it’s so close to my house. But, there’s that old ranger station up by U.P. Lake. I think there’s a helicopter pad or something up there, too. At any rate, there’s a fire observation tower—you know the one I’m talking about? Off Ridge Road?”

“Sure, sure. I used to hike up along the ridge with my son before we moved to town.”

“I’ll have a pretty good view of the town from there. It’s good hunting ground, fresh water from the lake, and fishing, too. If something does happen, I’ll be able to warn you.”

“That radio I gave you will have plenty of range for that. The lake is only about two miles from town—granted, it’s almost straight up the ridge. We’ll hear you loud and clear.”

The lights in the kitchen flickered and went out, plunging the room into

twilight darkness. Ruth gasped and slammed the lid on her chili.

“It’s all right, just another power out—”

“John, *look!*” Ruth said, hands to her mouth, looking out the kitchen window toward Denny’s house.

Denny jumped up and in two strides was next to Ruth. He saw the front half of his house in flames. The light cast terrifying shadows that danced across the yard and into the kitchen. He saw a figure dressed in black race away from the front of the house down the driveway. Two more appeared on the other side of his house and joined the first.

Without a word, he turned and raced out the backdoor, pausing only to check around the corner of the Andertons’ house and make sure there was no one waiting there for him.

“Denny—” John said from the open door.

There was a crash from inside the Andertons’ house and Ruth shrieked. “Get in the basement! *Go!*” Denny waved him back.

He sprinted across his backyard and made it to his truck unseen. The roar of the fire was increasing now at a mind-numbing volume. He could hear a car horn honking faintly in the distance and what sounded like hoots and laughter. He ducked quickly into his backdoor and started grabbing the gear he’d accumulated there in the living room. Without thinking, he tossed them into the back of the waiting truck and went for more.

Satisfied he had his critical gear, he raced into the kitchen and grabbed his unfinished arrow shafts along with his hunting bow and arrows. The living room was a wall of angry fire. The heat was incredible. Tendrils of flame licked the ceiling and snaked down the hallway toward him. He was running out of time.

Through a gap in the flames, he could see the pictures of his wife and grandfather on the mantel, the frames melting and burning in the searing intensity of the fire. His heart ached, seeing the images of his loved ones being consumed by the fire. If only he’d acted sooner...

Part of the ceiling collapsed by the front door in a roar of fire and sparks. The abrupt and surprisingly intense wave of heat and smoke drove him stumbling backwards into the kitchen. He fell on his ass, got to his knees while

coughing, and tried to clear the smoke from his eyes. He crawled on hands and knees as he struggled to drag his bow and arrows out of the kitchen and onto the back porch.

He lay there for a moment, gasping the clean sweet air and watching the acrid smoke boil out of the porch door over his head. He could hear his grandfather telling him to run.

After a supreme effort, he hauled himself up to the driver's door and climbed in, tossing the bow and arrows onto the seat next to him before starting the truck. He could see, in his side mirrors, that the roof of the house was in flames now and soon the entire structure would be engulfed.

Using the fire as a screen, he started the truck and pulled straight away from the house in a cloud of pebbles and dust. He wiped the tears from his eyes with the back of his arm and tried to aim toward the rear gate of his yard.

Denny skidded to a stop and was about to get out to unlatch the gate when a hole appeared in his windshield. He heard a loud crash and his passenger door window exploded in a puff of broken glass. The thought that someone was shooting at him wafted through his mind and urged him forward without restraint.

Denny shifted into 4-wheel drive and floored it. The truck dug deep and crashed through the gate. He careened over a small ditch and disappeared into the brush land dotted by stunted pines and a few cedars. About halfway to the summit of Morning Glory Peak, he pulled off the access road and parked.

Moving quickly, he slid out of the truck and found his hunting backpack among the gear in the bed. Pulling out his binoculars, a compact 8x12 set, he crept to the top of the hill and peeked through a small juniper bush at the maelstrom that an hour ago had been his house.

The pines next to his house were aflame, like giant candles. The deserted house next to Denny's was now also aflame and broiling smoke. He could see that the roof on the Andertons' house was on fire as well.

There in the street, he spotted a collection of trucks and cars, all pointed toward the burning houses. There were figures moving back and forth, some looking like they were carrying drinks—others clearly had guns. They were

taking pot shots at the houses. The pops and cracks of their weapons echoed over the sound of the house fires.

He suddenly remembered his radio. Fishing it off his belt with shaking hands, he pulled it to his lips and said, "John, John, can you hear me?"

There was a moment of silence, then the radio broke squelch. "Yes," the old man panted. "We're here. We're in the bunker, but that was a close thing, Denny."

"Are you injured?"

"Ruth busted her ankle getting down the stairs...but she's proud to say she saved the chili and brought it down, too."

Denny laughed. "Good, I'm glad."

"And you?"

"My house...it's totally on fire now. I got some of my gear and escaped just...John, there's people out there shooting at our houses. They shot my truck."

"We thought we heard gunfire, but didn't stick 'round to find out. I have us sealed up tight now. I'm sorry, Denny."

"John," Denny said, panning his binoculars over his neighbor's house. "Your house is on fire. The roof."

John laughed. "Oh, don't worry about that, it's insured. We got a mess of filtered air intakes, remember? I've already closed off the house line and opened a few of the others. We're getting nothing but clean fresh air down here."

Denny put his face down in the dirt and coughed, happy. He looked up again, clearing his throat. "John," he said. "I see at least six cars and trucks in the street. There must be twenty people down there. It looks like a party."

"I suppose to them it is." There was a pause, then he spoke again. "Denny, listen to me. Get away. Don't wait till tomorrow. We'll be fine. Really."

Denny slid down the hill a ways and rolled over onto his back to cough some more. His lungs burned from smoke inhalation; his eyes were watery. His house, all his memories, everything he and Emily had built together, it was all dying right in front of him. And there was nothing he could do.

When he cleared his eyes and looked toward The Ridge, looming ahead of him in the gathering darkness, a gentle calmness washed over him like a warm

shower. The summit of the ancient massif was still in twilight, the sun glinting off the remaining snow from the last storm. Farther down the slope, Morning Glory Peak and the town down in the wide Salmon River Valley were both bathed in the inky cloak of early night. He could see the pinpricks of light that proclaimed the death song of his house.

Denny raised the radio to his mouth. “Stay safe John. I’ll let you know when I make it to The Ridge.”

“Will do. Take care of yourself, *m’wewa*.”

Denny smiled. He clipped the radio to his belt and climbed back into the truck. He sat there a moment, the truck idling. The thugs back there had set fire to his house and tried to kill him. They had failed.

But they had killed all the last pieces of Emily. The Blue Flu had taken her body, but her pictures, her clothes, the perfumes she wore...all of that was still there in the house. Gone now, forever. He had only the memories of his wife in his heart.

When the tears came, he made no effort to stop them and let the wracking sobs flow through him. *Bend like the tall grass in the wind, but never break*, he could hear Grandfather say. The grief, anger, and pain he felt caused him to grip the steering wheel tight and close his eyes. It was like losing Emily all over again.

Soon enough, he was drying his eyes. The people back there—he was sure the Townsend family was behind this—thought they were the hunters, driving their prey to ground. They had destroyed his home, chased him off into the night, and shot up his truck.

Denny stared at the image of his burning house in his mind’s eye. They were wrong. He was going up into the mountains to lick his wounds, to rest, to gather his spirit about him like a suit of armor. Then he was going to come back.

And then *he* would be the hunter.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BARRON

Washington, D.C.

The White House

Presidential Emergency Operations Center

“I TAKE it everything is to your satisfaction?” the President asked in the voice of a beaten man.

“So far, yes. My employers wish to express their most sincere gratitude for your...cooperation, thus far, Mr. President. However, there are a few concerns that have been raised to me. Specifically about the resistance to our efforts to help your people. The riots, the lawyers, the press...the situation is nothing like we expected.”

“What, did you think that the American people would just welcome you with open arms? This isn’t Rwanda. People weren’t quite starving to death before you showed up.”

Reginald continued, ignoring the President’s statement. “There have been a number of deaths and more injuries than I would care to see, thanks to the reckless policy of allowing people to arm themselves in an urban—”

“Don’t you think that we’ve *tried* to take the guns away?” the President said, his anger rising. “For decades, we’ve tried to ban guns, ban bullets, and make

more restrictions. I hate to admit it, but the damn conservatives were right—the only ones left with guns in our cities are the criminals, and they don't really give a damn about what *I* want, let alone what *you* want. On top of all that, people are dying left and right from this damn flu. They're scared and liable to lash out at anyone. Even people sent to help."

"I see." The silence on the secured telephone line was telling. Clearly, this had caught Reginald by surprise. The thought almost made the President smile.

"Look. Just...just, tell me what to do about this mess," pleaded the President. "I can't get any cooperation or even communicate with the damn the Koreans, and I can't just let them conquer the West. The country will lynch me, then demand someone nuke North Korea. And what am I supposed to do about these U.N. troops—"

"As I told you, the U.N. answers to me," replied Reginald, cool as ice. "But in order to secure their loyalty, certain measures must be taken, and quickly. The military governors are not pleased with the response we've received from your ungrateful American citizens. Doctors shot at and mugged...medicine and food stolen in mobs that roam the streets looking for loot or drugs. Stricter measures must be taken to restore order. Immediately."

"*'Military governors'*? Is that what you're calling them? Wait—what kinds of measures?" asked the President. Without waiting for a response from Reginald, he sat up, the phone forgotten. He couldn't be sure, but thought he could smell a familiar fragrance at the edge of his perception. It was like a sound drifting through a winter fog: one second it was there, then it was gone. His heart quickened. Was Jayne there in the darkness somewhere?

"The large urban centers are increasingly desperate for food, clean water, and medical supplies, correct?"

The President had to push thoughts of Jayne out of his mind long enough to concentrate on the question. "Uh, yes, yes. Boston..." He rubbed his head again. It was so hard to *think* when he smelled her perfume. What was it about her that made him so...distracted?

"Yes...?" prompted the voice on the phone.

"Uh...Philadelphia, New York, Charleston...the big ones. The chaos North

Korea is causing out west is *nothing* compared to what we're dealing with, thanks to this damn flu. It's completely disrupted the national distribution of food and supplies by...by..." *Why is it so hard to think?*

"...Train?" prodded Reginald's voice.

"No...the highways. Trucks." The President shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. *Dammit all, why is it so hard to concentrate?* Another image of Jayne flashed through his mind when he inhaled. The worries of the country faded to a pulsing throb instead of an urgent flare.

"To secure the help of the member nations, you will have to suspend your Constitution in those areas controlled by—"

"What?" he asked sharply. "What do you mean, suspend the Constitution?"

"These are *European* soldiers, *European* doctors, and *European* commanders. Come now, Mr. President, surely even you cannot expect them to just throw away thousands of years of traditions and laws overnight to appease a country that can't take care of itself?" the voice on the phone said sweetly.

"They will police and secure the urban areas, feed, heal, and protect the people, in their own manner. The times ahead will be trying and—quite honestly—they will not be able to operate effectively if they are constantly worried about lawsuits, threats, protests, riots, and random gunfights. The French are already making sounds that they are ready to leave. You understand what must be done...?"

Reginald continued to talk, but the President wasn't listening anymore. It seemed that Jayne's fragrance was even stronger than ever now. Almost like the air itself was pregnant with her scent. It was intoxicating. The President figured he'd agree to anything right about now. Suspending the Constitution and letting foreign troops handle things their own way seemed so easy. Just say the words... little words...

"Yes, of course," he said, his voice dull and lifeless.

"Good. Remember, this is all for the survival of your nation. When this is all over, we will discuss repayment to the member nations. Oil rights, water rights, land rights, and so on. Mere details."

Details? Harold's mind reeled in shock. *Did Reginald seriously just ask me*

to give up national sovereignty as repayment?

“For now, I suggest the following: after your upcoming cabinet meeting—”

“How did you know I was—”

“You will give a speech detailing our new agreement and use your executive powers to impose temporary martial law nationwide. That should give you something to do with all your homeward-bound military forces—that is, those that survive the journey, of course.”

“What do you mean, ‘survive the journey’?”

“Oh nothing, really. It’s just that it seems such an awfully long commute for so many of your men and women in uniform...it seems only natural that a few of them wouldn’t make it home. Perhaps local warlords in some of the more unsavory areas your military has previously controlled by threat-of-force, may take a few shots at your collective backs...I’m just thinking off the top of my head, mind you.”

“This is—”

“Of course, you will talk up your decision to suspend the Constitution in all major cities under U.N control—you need to make the people understand how hard it was for you to come to this decision, after all. Then be sure to announce that the people enforcing the martial law will be U.N. personnel. It will make the transition after all this is cleared up that much smoother. Trust me, we’ve done this before. In the meantime, I strongly suggest you remind your citizens that in times of martial law, summary justice may be used to quell riots. I understand your people will be...reluctant...to accept these new policies, but if you remind them that this is a temporary measure, and only applicable to the cities on your list—”

“Are you *serious*?” gasped the President. “You realize that even if this works in the cities, you’re going to start a civil war, right? The rural areas of this country are simply infested with gun-toting, Bible-thumping conservatives that are just looking for an excuse to overthrow the government. There’s militias everywhere!”

“Please, Mr. President, save the party rhetoric for your political hacks. You and I both know that is just political...bullshit. The so-called conservative

movement in your nation is simply not waiting for an opportunity to start a war. They are more set in their ways, true, and they will take more time to adjust to the new facts of life. However, they are by far the more practical of your citizens. We have seen it time and time again in Europe over the years. It is the conservatives that learn to embrace the new order first. The cities are the areas on which we need to focus. Enclaves of the liberal minds. The liberals are what founded your nation. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson...were these men not what you would call liberal?"

"I...well, they were *classical* liberals, not modern...but..." Harold stammered. He could not think straight. There was just too much—

"As to your mischievous North Koreans," said Reginald thoughtfully. "You shall continue your course of action. Fight them vigorously. You may pull your troops from the eastern half of your country to reinforce those in the west. Trust me, from what I have seen, you are going to need the help. My employer believes the Koreans are going to invite their overlords, the Chinese, to settle your West Coast rather quickly. My sources in Pyongyang feel once they have settlers occupying the land your people have abandoned—"

"No one has abandoned anything!" the President hissed. "They're killing innocent Americans and taking the land."

"Ah, but is the flu not killing many times more than the North Koreans? They seem to be immune...and when the Chinese civilians arrive, if you attack them, the world community will be hard pressed to give you their support. You will have your own Gaza Strip!" Another sadistic chuckle.

"We've figured that out, thank you very much. I've seen the photos of the fleet. But, as long as we get the Source to safety—"

"Ah yes," purred Reginald. "The young man who carries around in his blood the salvation of a nation. Someone should make a movie about that."

"Well, from what I hear, Hollywood has been destroyed."

Reginald's laugh sent a shiver down the President's spine. "Regardless of your movie-making capabilities, I know how to solve this situation as well. We have been tracking your Source," he said smugly. "As well as the Koreans. In fact, I have personally dispatched a special Russian outfit that is en route as we

speak to a location in Idaho.”

“Idaho? Why—”

“Because we have evaluated the Korean pursuit and we’re confident they will drive your man right into our open arms. Which, by the way, will be the best outcome. We will then handle the North Koreans, and your men can stand down.”

“How...?”

“Oh, a little code we came across allowed us access to your HD-GPS tracking network...” Reginald chuckled.

The President closed his eyes. *That damn code again. How long will it torment me? What further damage can it do?*

There was a soft knock on the door to his private suite. “Yes!” he called, covering the cell phone with his hand. He winced at the harshness of his voice almost as soon as he said the word.

“Uh...they’re ready for you in the conference room, sir,” said a muffled voice.

“Thank you,” he replied. He put on his jacket and adjusted his tie in the mirror before opening the door. As the President walked with a purpose down the corridor flanked by Secret Service agents, he spoke again to Reginald.

“So the speech...” prompted Reginald.

“If you think that is the best course of action, then I’ll do it, of course,” said the President, trying to sound more authoritative than he felt. He had to at least put on a show for the agents.

“Very good, Mr. President. We will weather this storm together. You will see. I very much look forward to watching your speech, and meeting your new Vice President.” The line went dead.

“I haven’t told you—” The President looked at his secure mobile phone, turned it off, and shook his head in disgust, then dropped the phone in his jacket pocket.

How the hell does he know so much? He glanced suspiciously at the agent on his left. *Who’s the mole?*

Reginald still didn’t give me anything on the Koreans. Or China, other than a

civilian wave is coming...what does that mean?

The President let the agents open the door to the conference room and stepped inside with a mumbled thanks. One wall of the room had an enormous screen displaying a mix of international news stations. The American media had gone silent at his request.

“—that President Barron is clearly losing control of the situation in America, and I for one am glad that the United Nations are acting so swiftly to secure peace for our dear friends across the pond,” said the grainy picture of the British Prime Minister. He leaned in closer to the microphone thrust in his face by an unseen reporter. “Let me be clear. His Majesty the King is dreadfully concerned about this business with the North Koreans as well. We are pursuing every diplomatic avenue with Pyongyang regarding the rumors of their invasion of the American Pacific Coast.”

The President stood at the end of the conference room table, next to his big executive chair and watched the screen with a sinking heart. Even the British were onboard with the U.N. invasion. He had hoped that at least America’s most stalwart ally would see through this move by the United Nations.

“Prime Minister,” shouted a reporter off-screen. “Can you confirm, then, that there are indeed North Korean ground forces operating in America at this time?”

“What about the Russians taking over towns in the southern United States?” called out another. Brilliant flashes erupted across the screen from cameramen in the background.

“Can you hear yourselves?” asked the Prime Minister. “America is a superpower—we all know that their country is filled with gun-toting cowboys and gangsters. Do you honestly think that another country would want to invade such a place? I believe, as does His Majesty, that there are plenty of real problems to deal with. Namely, the communications issues revolving around the loss of America’s satellites. Those satellites have affected the entire world, from communications, to security, as well as global finance and trade. And I, for one, am more than amazed that it has taken until now for the rest of us to realize just how much we depend on the United States. They have been the Atlas to western civilization for how many decades? Maybe this is the wakeup call that we all

need to start pulling our own weight, what?”

“What about the Russians?”

The Prime Minister shook his head. “Ludicrous, all of it. Just because Great Britain has not donated blood and treasure—at this time—to this peacekeeping force does not mean that the Crown is oblivious to the unfortunate needs of the Yanks. That is patently false; don’t believe everything you hear, old boy. Now if you’ll excuse me, I am quite sorry,” he said, holding up his hands. “But I must be off—I do have a country to run. And that job has become much more difficult of late.”

President Barron turned off the monitor in disgust as the reporters began shouting questions over each other. *Thanks to the Yanks...as if it were our choice to have the damn Koreans invade and let the U.N. take up residence on Long Island...*

He listened to the silence in the conference room, broken only by the gentle whisper of the air filtration system and the drumming of his fingers on the polished walnut slab of a table.

An aide approached silently and placed a cup emblazoned with the official White House seal in front of the President. “It’s time, sir,” he whispered while pouring the gourmet coffee.

“Very well. Thank you.” The President picked up the remote in front of him and clicked a big red button. On the other side of the room, the floor-to-ceiling monitor switched on and the image was split into eleven portraits. His government.

There was the Speaker of the House, the Joint Chiefs, the NSA head, his CIA spymaster, the Director of the FBI, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and the Secretary of State. A door at the other end of the room opened and the Secretary of Defense stepped in, carrying a stack of papers and sat down on the President’s right.

When he was sure he had everyone’s attention and all the cameras were working, he started the meeting. “I’m glad you all got to your secure locations without incident. I hear it’s starting to get bad out there.”

The red-faced Army General was apoplectic. “*Starting to get bad? Starting?*

Mr. President, the Russians have taken three towns in South Carolina—that we know of—as surely as the Koreans have sacked Los Angeles, Portland, Sacramento, and Seattle! It’s a goddamn disaster, is what it is!”

All the heads displayed on the wall-screen began talking and shouting at once. The President sighed and rubbed his temples. Reginald—the puppet master, as the President was starting to think of him—had tried to prepare the fledgling president for this meeting. They were reacting with fright, anger, and impotence, exactly as Reginald had promised.

As his cabinet argued amongst themselves, the President thought back on Reginald’s words. He had said that everything was going according to plan. Everything was back on schedule, now that President Denton was confirmed dead and Harold himself was secure in the Oval Office.

The President looked up. *Or at least underneath the Oval Office*, he thought with a wry smile. The smile faded as a small voice in the back of his head asked, *How does Reginald know if Denton is really dead?*

“Mr. President, have you selected a VP yet?” asked the Director of the FBI, outshouting his colleagues. The room went quiet.

The President thought a moment before he answered. He had desperately wanted to nominate Jayne, just to see the looks on their faces. There was no Constitutional requirement that a president appoint a career politician as VP when he assumed power. It was just expected.

The sobering thought that she would be spirited away to her own bunker, likely never to see him until the crisis was over—*that* was really what deep-sixed the notion of Jayne as Vice President.

“I have,” he said, addressing the assembled floating heads on the wall. “I have nominated Sandra Hillsen.” He raised up his hand to forestall the deluge of opposition. He knew very well what he was doing—Sandra Hillsen was the most rabid, foaming-at-the-mouth liberal senator the good people of California had ever elected. She would be the perfect enthusiastic enforcer for his radical policies.

Senator Hillsen hailed from southern California, ground zero for the Korean invasion, and having her on his team would shore up political support from both

sides, regardless of ideology. She was California and if nothing else, people would associate her nomination with his determination to secure peace for the West Coast, and roughly half of his political base. If nothing else, he figured, she had the largest Chinese-American constituency, with the most contacts in Beijing. And that fact might just be able to create a real impact in the crisis.

We might have to rely on China to rein in North Korea...God, they're really boxing me in on this. As payment for stopping North Korea, the Chinese will demand rights for their fleet of civilians. Dammit! He could feel his fists clench in an impotent fury. Then a thought occurred to him, *Maybe Hillsen can pull it off.*

Even the Republican leadership had admitted that they would not oppose her too strenuously, though he could see it in their faces that they would like nothing better than to spit on her grave. To oppose a VP nomination in the middle of a national crisis over political ideology would be suicide for the conservatives in the upcoming midterms, and they knew it. No, Harold had them exactly where he wanted them.

If we have midterms, he thought darkly. Another thought struck him. If we don't have midterms, what will that do to the conservatives? Without the distraction of the election...How can I take advantage of that? He filed that thought away for future pondering.

"I've already spoken with Alan," he said, motioning toward the screen with the Senate Majority Leader's sour face. "And he's confident we'll have no trouble getting her sworn in."

"Jesus H. Christ," muttered the Commandant of the Marine Corps.

"Is there a problem with my nomination, General?"

The old Marine's face remained as impassive as a lump of granite, his gray eyes boring holes through the President like power drills. A hint of color crept up the old man's neck. "You might say so, yes, Mr. President," he said in a clipped tone.

"I'm all ears. Why do you feel the need to criticize my nomination in the middle of this crisis?" He smiled inwardly, proud of having skewered the Marine. It was the same tactic the Democratic Party would use on anyone who

said anything but “yes” to Senator Hillsen’s nomination.

“Permission to speak freely, sir?” asked the Marine.

“Go ahead, general.”

“That woman,” the Marine said with a sneer, “is one helluva large part of why we’re in this mess to begin with. She’s the one who has sponsored the reduction in arms year after year, cutting our budgets and affecting our ability to defend this nation. She and her friends,” he said, fairly hissing the word, “have over the years done more to destroy the fabric of this nation and its ability to defend itself than North Korea has in a hundred years. By the way, the North Korean flag flies over City Hall in Los Angeles thanks to her. And the Chinese haven’t done shit to keep their little brothers in line, have they? ‘Course, from what I hear, Hillsen’s plenty friendly with the ChiComs, too, so she probably knows more than we do—am I right?”

The President ground his teeth, seething in anger. The general had hit a nerve. Yes, Senator Hillsen had been involved in a few scandals with Chinese dissidents, involving arms technology transfers, but she had been cleared on three separate occasions by Congress itself. But that had nothing to do with North Korea.

Of course, Congress was run by her friends...that small voice in his head whispered, almost as a giggle. She’s grossly irresponsible, always getting a free ride, and essentially accountable to no one. Will she listen to me?

He had to control his emotions and maintain an even keel. He knew the senator had some skeletons in her closet. Hell, it wasn’t the skeletons she had in her closet, it was the ones she had in the ground. Rumors flew about how dirty she played the Little Rock-Chicagoland political game.

The worst part about the old general’s words was that they were true. The President knew it; they all knew it. Senator Hillsen was as anti-military as she was pro-labor, pro-amnesty for illegal immigrants, and pro-global government. It wasn’t her stance on the military that the President wanted to manipulate, it was her ability to get votes, her ability to intimidate junior senators, and reach into the House to gather support around her like a cloak. Always making promises—or more often, threats—but always getting what she wanted. He would need her

support in the coming days when he started laying down the new law of the land.

But first he had to survive the North Koreans *and* the United Nations. Perceived invasions on both coasts. *Well*, he told himself, *Reginald promised me the U.N. wasn't invading. He told me he was in charge of them...what does that mean when this is over and the U.N. controls the major cities of the Eastern Seaboard?*

Out loud, he said, "I appreciate your thoughts, General, but the matter is closed. Senator Hillsen will be the first female Vice President of the United States by this time tomorrow. Get used to the idea."

Before the crusty old general could respond, the NSA director spoke up. "Sir, I may have some good news for you."

"It's about time!" the President said, eager to change the topic. "What have you got?"

"It's about the satellites. We've locked down the backdoor-access to the older generation satellites and have secured rudimentary communications with most of our globally deployed forces."

The President slapped the table in sincere happiness. "First good news I've heard all day, *outstanding*. So...the recall order?" He glanced at the Secretary of Defense, sitting next to him like he would rather be anywhere but where he was.

"Mr. President, Apache Dawn has been successfully activated. We have an 80-percent confirmation rate, sir," reported the Secretary of Defense. He smiled, giving the President the distinct impression that the old man scared Death itself.

"Mr. President, I must protest again," started the Secretary of State. She looked exhausted. "This worldwide recall of our forces is going to leave power vacuums and cause chaos all over the planet. Our bases in southeast Asia are not responding to communications and Taiwan is now under attack by the Chinese and requesting immediate assistance."

"Does that surprise anyone?" asked the Admiral. "I could've told you as soon as our satellites died that Taiwan is going to take one on the chin. President Denton had us pull the 7th Fleet out-of-theater last year—it was just a matter of time. Our West Coast will be the icing on the cake."

"Okay, okay," said the President. "One thing at a time. We have at least,

limited communications. Correct?”

“Yessir,” said the NSA director with a smile.

“Good. We need to make sure that our returning forces know to not engage the United Nations troops. I have the personal assurance of the Secretary General—”

“Excuse me, Mr. President, but I’ve seen nothing on—” began the Secretary of State.

“You have your channels, I have *mine*.” The President grinned. “The U.N. is *not* our enemy. *North Korea* is. I want *all* our resources pumped into the western theater.”

“So that’s what we’re calling it now?” asked the Army Chief of Staff. His face was not red anymore. Just...sad looking. “We have lost the western coast of the United States. Shall I be the first to admit it? That we have failed in our sacred duty to protect our own homeland? That we were so goddamned concerned with every little piss-ant shithole in the world, we were stretched so thin, so emaciated by Congress, that we let California, Oregon, and Washington fall to foreign invaders? On our watch.”

“Well, the flu had something to do with that,” offered the mealy mouthed Secretary of State. She pushed her glasses up her aquiline nose again.

“He’s right,” said the Air Force General. “My boys are barely keeping even. With reduced strength, reduced communications...those red bastards just keep pouring more and more into the area. I don’t know how they’re doing it. More ground forces, more air assets. I had reports of strategic bombers north of Los Angeles. That implies that China is really pulling the strings here.”

The Air Force Chief of Staff shook his head. “North Korea doesn’t take a *piss* unless Beijing says it’s okay. Besides, the Koreans don’t have any bombers worth a damn and the Chinese H-6K is capable of reaching Hawaii, but not California. So these bombers we’re seeing had to fly over Canada to reach us.”

“So our friends to the north left the backdoor open?” asked the President.

“Hell, sir, we left the front door open...” muttered the Marine Commandant. “We’ve been letting anyone from South America across the border scot-free for decades now. Who knows how many diseases and sleeper cells we let walk

across our borders.”

“That was a policy enacted *years* ago,” said the President. “Before I graduated *high school*, General.”

“Your boss sure didn’t do anything to change it though, did he?” shot back the Commandant.

“Mr. President, if the North Koreans have been using Chinese strategic bombers in-theater, they must have supply bases, support personnel...That little Chinese diversion in Taiwan has to be part of a larger strategy. I think we’re looking at an honest-to-God conquest. They’re just using North Korea as a proxy.”

“You’re telling me the North Koreans—no, the Chinese, or *both* are here to stay?” the President asked innocently. *That confirms what Reginald said.*

The general looked like someone had just put a dead cat under his nose. He stared at the President, the color rising on his neck. He opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out, then closed it. An awkward silence descended on the meeting.

The Secretary of State cleared her throat. “Sir, North Korea is claiming they struck back against us—supposedly for an attack by U.S. forces that took place last week. They have video and pictures they’re releasing to the press this afternoon. It’s all doctored, of course. They’re insane. I’ve tried contacting the Chinese, but I’m still getting nothing but silence on the matter from Beijing, despite my repeated attempts at personal communication...”

“Understood. Options? Everything but nuclear is on the table.” The President leaned back and waited for his military advisers to speak up. This was their one golden opportunity. *The funny thing is that I’m serious. It’s going to be an all-out war. Never thought I’d hear myself say that...*

“Well, we all know the North Koreans are batshit crazy. I say we wipe Pyongyang off the map and see if *that* gets their attention,” said the Air Force Chief of Staff.

“Can you reach—”

“Mr. President, even with substandard communications capabilities, we still maintain—by a long shot—the most sophisticated and powerful air force this

world has ever seen. In a word, sir: yes. We can be wheels up and over Pyongyang in—” He checked his watch. “Eight hours.”

The President considered this. “Opinions?” he said, hands up, offering the floor to anyone. He wanted consensus on this move. He would be the first to admit that he was completely ignorant in the realm of military matters. He was a social activist, and a lawyer. A *civilized* man. He had no need to dream about bombs, missiles, and planes. His whole goal in entering the political world had been to reverse that peculiar, aggressive American tradition.

“Sir, I believe we should have contingency measures in place. We can deploy a dozen or so conventional cruise missiles from subs in the South China Sea. If the bombers fail—”

“They won’t, Admiral. *Our* pilots don’t ‘go rogue.’”

The Admiral flushed, but held his tongue. After appearing to calm himself, he said, “Sir, I strongly recommend we do a full-scale strike on Pyongyang. Warn them that if they don’t stop their offensive campaign on U.S. soil—right the fuck now—we wipe out their next largest city, and so on, until they do. Pardon my French, sir.”

“Don’t worry about it, Admiral.”

“The Admiral has a point, sir,” agreed the Army Chief of Staff. “If the bombers somehow run into difficulty, a few waves of missiles won’t. It will send the message that nowhere in North Korea is there a safe haven from the air or the sea forces. Should be a wake-up call for Beijing, too.”

“If Pyongyang isn’t safe—or Beijing—neither is Colorado, Chicago or Dallas, for that matter,” said the Secretary of State. “Gentlemen, you realize that if the Chinese are indeed pulling the strings or aiding the Koreans or even setting up shop on the West Coast, they’ll be able to hit targets farther east...”

“Of course,” said the Marine Commandant. “It would be tactically stupid to waste such an opportunity. Mr. President, Washington itself—”

“—Is no longer a concern,” interrupted the Homeland Security director. “Now that COG is in play, the chances of them taking enough of the upper echelon of our government out at the same time is just not there. Surely they know that. This may simply be a land grab.”

“Well, the Koreans are suffering from overpopulation,” offered the Secretary of State. “And China has been for a hundred years or more.”

“Let my boys break out the big guns—we’ll fix that problem in a jiffy,” said the Air Force general. He wore a smirk that made the President want to slap the man. The arrogance!

“*Enough*,” said the President. “General Andrews, Admiral Bennet, I want mission drafts within the hour, and updates every 30 minutes until the strike is completed. You’ve got the green light. Make it happen. In the meantime, every available asset is to head west. We will hold the line and take back what is ours. I have just reached an agreement with the U.N. We can pull out from the east to prop up the defenders in the west. Understood?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Now. On to the Source. Have we made any progress in bringing him in? Now that we’ve lost Spokane, we’re going to have to take him...where?”

“Johns Hopkins, sir,” said the Homeland Security head. “It’s the best bet for replicating a vaccine. From there, we can transfer the vaccine to just about a dozen different locations and mass-produce. But the trick will be bringing in the Source.”

“My boys have him—”

“Yes, General Harrison, they do, but your Rangers haven’t brought him *in*, yet, have they? We’re still tracking him by the GPS chip implanted in his shoulder and he’s making a zigzag path roughly southeast through the mountains of central Idaho. That’s the wrong direction from Spokane—or what’s left of it.”

The President stifled a shiver. It was exactly like Reginald had said.

“My last communication indicated that they had commandeered a squadron of Apaches—”

“General, I do not want your men gathering an army. I want them to bring that man in so we can save our country. You are to order them to get him in, post haste. *Is that clear?* Their mission is *not* to rescue orphaned soldiers along the way.”

“Yes, sir. Of course, Mr. President. The problem, sir, is that the Koreans, or maybe the Chinese, have been on their tails since the get go. I’m tracking reports

of incoming light ICBMs. They're dropping down near where my boys are on a regular basis. Installations thought to be well behind the occupied zone are coming under attack, always when the Source comes within about a hundred or so miles."

"Are you suggesting that the Chinese have his HD-GPS locator code?" the CIA chief said, incredulous.

"*Jesus*," muttered the Secretary of Defense. He nervously shuffled some papers. "Sir, we can't take the risk that the Koreans are tracking him—if we take him to Johns Hopkins—"

"We could lose the last major facility at our disposal that is already set up to handle the vaccine production," finished the President. "I understand your concerns, but we have to take that risk. That young man is our best hope for turning the tide against this flu. If we can stop the flu, we can turn our full attention on the North Koreans. But the death toll..." He glanced at the Secretary of Homeland Security.

"Sir, my people are getting worried we've reached the tipping point."

"Tipping point?"

"Yes, Mr. President. The point at which individual people infected with the flu are just infecting one person—who then infects one more person. That's the normal case for seasonal flu; that's why it dies out every year. A one-to-one infection ratio is not sustainable for very long. What we're facing now though... well, we think we're approaching—if we haven't already passed it—is the point where one person will infect two or even three people, who then infect two or three more, each. The infection rate grows exponentially and before long..."

"Wildfire," said the President. *Jesus. The Great Pandemic, Part Two.*

A sweaty sheen reflected off the Secretary's forehead. "Sadly, yes, Mr. President. We're starting to see disturbingly large infection reports from most of the major population centers, nationwide. It's now spreading into the suburban and rural areas."

"So maybe this thing will burn itself out?" asked the Secretary of Defense. "We should be focusing on the North Koreans, sir, or there won't be a country left to—"

“If only that were true,” interrupted the Secretary of Homeland Security. “In the 1918 pandemic, the rural areas of the country and more isolated areas of the world saw a huge increase in fatalities. We’re talking, it went from a 4 percent mortality rate in Philadelphia to 85 percent in Alaska. Entire towns were erased from existence.”

“Holy God...” said the Secretary of Defense.

The President thought back to his conversation with Reginald. *The conservative base in the country moved to the rural areas decades ago. They still have their guns and Bibles, but now they have the biggest target on their backs for the flu.* He had to try hard not to smile. *Goddamn Koreans may have helped me out more than they’ll ever know...*

“Okay,” said the President. “Is there anything we can do about the flu *right now?*”

No one said anything.

“Very well, then, keep working on it. Bring in the Source. But in the meantime, Al is right, we need to get a handle on these North Koreans. Do we know where they’re launching their ICBMs from?”

“Sir, *they* don’t have missiles that are land based and capable of hitting targets in the CONUS, unless the Koreans have shipped mobile launchers in-theater...” said the NSA chief. “Either that, or China is launching them.”

The President turned his eyes on Admiral Bennet. “Admiral, it’s time to take the gloves off. I want that invasion fleet—*whoever* the hell it belongs to—on the bottom of the Pacific, and I want it done *yesterday.*”

“Sir—”

“Everything but nuclear is at your disposal, Admiral. Do what it takes, be *ruthless*. I want the North Koreans to suffer for this. Everyone knows we have the most dangerous navy on the planet—I want you to *prove* it.”

The oil-slick smile that spread on the Admiral’s face chilled the President to his core. “Sir, you call down the thunder and we’ll reap the whirlwind. We’ll make those communist bastards sorry they even thought about pulling a stunt like this.”

“You’ve got a blank check, Admiral. Get it done. Make an example of

them.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll issue new orders to the Pacific fleets at once, sir.”

“If you need air support, let General Andrews know and coordinate. General, I expect full cooperation in this.”

“Of course, Mr. President. SAC is ready and able to assist.”

An aide stepped into the room and got the President’s attention. He pointed at his watch and held up his hand, fingers spread wide. *Five minutes.*

“Am I the only one that doesn’t like where this is going?” cried the Secretary of State. “As long as this is contained on our shores, it’s manageable. Sir, opening the floodgates on North Korea...it could start World War III.”

“Open your eyes, Madam Secretary. We didn’t start it,” said Admiral Bennet.

The President stood, silencing opposition. “All right everyone, we’ll meet again this evening. I want status reports on the hour. If you’ll excuse me, I have a speech to make.”

God forgive me, he thought as the screens started to go black. *I’m about to turn over parts of this country to foreign powers. How did I get roped into this? This wasn’t how I wanted it to go. Not at all.* As his mood darkened, another thought crossed his mind like a bolt of lightning splitting the dark of night. *Where’s Jayne?*

With pleasing thoughts of his mistress flitting about in his imagination, the cares of office drifted to his periphery once again. Once the nasty business of the speech was over with, he would find her and get a little stress relief.

For the first time in days, the President smiled.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHAD

Northern Idaho

Near the Oregon Border

“THIS ACTIVATION of the Emergency Alert System covers all states and territories of the United States. Stay in your homes during this health emergency. If you must leave, do so only to find food, water, or medical supplies. Keep your mouth and nose covered—wash your hands immediately—avoid contact with anyone not in your immediate family. All unnecessary travel by nonemergency personnel will result in arrest and prosecution in federal court. Keep the roads clear for our first responders.

“This message is especially important in the following cities: Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Norfolk, Raleigh, Charleston, Savannah, Jacksonville, and Miami. Do not be alarmed. The soldiers you see on your streets are from the United Nations peacekeeping force and are here to help. If they require assistance, you are ordered by law to render aid to the best of your ability...

“Constitutional rights and privileges have been suspended in these cities until such time as the President and Congress deem the crisis to have passed. Please be patient with the peacekeepers. Not all of them speak English. If you have any

concerns, please contact your local FEMA office. Repeat. The President has activated the National Emergency Alert System. The following announcement...”

“Ain’t *that* some shit?” asked Captain Alston.

Chad rubbed the fatigue from his face and noticed again the bristle-like stubble on his face. It had been days now since he had seen the inside of a hot shower and a warm bed. He sighed and handed the gunner a wrench as the man tried to adjust a stubborn part of the Black Hawk’s guts. National crisis aside, he just had no energy left to worry about what was going on a thousand miles away anymore.

It was the second time the little squadron of helicopters, five Apaches and the Black Hawk, were safely parked at one end of a small civil airport. *Well*, Chad told himself as he looked around, *at least this place is deserted*. The little airfield was populated with three hangers and a few small, single-engine planes chained to the tarmac in storage parking.

Chad watched as once again, the Rangers sprinted off to secure another airport location. He marveled at their ability to function without sleep for so long. Since he had nothing else to do, he had hung around the Black Hawk and helped prepare the helicopter for refueling. That’s when the gunner had asked for help fixing something Chad couldn’t even pronounce.

Chad heard footsteps on the tarmac and turned to see the shortest of the gunship pilots approaching him. He was wearing a sweat-stained, olive-drab jumpsuit and carried his helmet under his arm, along with his flight gloves. He had jet black hair cropped into such a tight buzzcut, Chad thought at first the man was bald. He stopped short of Chad and looked him up and down, his face completely emotionless.

“Hi,” said Chad. The pilot’s gaze was unnerving. It was like he was a wounded bird on the ground, being watched by a cat.

“So you’re the Source, huh?” the man asked. The other pilots walked up and gathered around.

“You’re why our entire base was wiped out? You’re the one the Koreans are after?” asked a second, taller pilot with blond hair and a haggard look to his long

face.

Chad tensed, his anger building. He dropped the duffel bag just handed him from inside the Black Hawk. “Look,” he said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about, okay? I was just minding my own business—”

“But you’re some sort of *freak* that can cure the world or something, right? That’s why the President said we were supposed to find you.”

Captain Alston had followed the pilots over and stood in the background, watching. He made his way to the front of the little group to look at the short pilot. “Say again,” he said, glancing at the pilot’s name patch. “*Lieutenant?*”

The pilot stiffened and stared over the head of Chad. “Sir, last confirmed orders from HQ were to locate the Source.” His eyes flicked to Chad. “And assist ground units with capturing him.”

“Then all hell broke loose and my crew was slaughtered right in front of me,” said the second pilot. “Damn mortar went off, right on the flightline.” He shook his head. “Whole base was overrun in a few minutes. Koreans everywhere, man.”

“Then missiles started raining down out of the sky. We were scrambling for cover when the orders went out to get in the air,” added a pilot in the back of the group.

“We were already airborne on a patrol run to test out some new software on the guidance computer,” said a woman with her shoulder-length brown hair pulled into a tight bun. She too had a look that did not gush friendliness toward Chad as she faced him with her hands on her hips.

“My wingman took a SAM as I was talking to him. We’ve been flying together for six years.” She shook her head. “It came out of nowhere. Base CO got on the horn and said we were under attack, and ordered me to take my squadron south and regroup.” Her eyes were red with emotion. “I told him that we were circling back to counterattack. You know what he told me?

“He told me,” the female pilot continued, staring at Chad, visibly on the edge of breaking down, “that it was no *use*—we were overrun. We should save ourselves. That was when our comms went out.”

“So what makes you think Mr. Huntley here is the problem?” Captain Alston

asked, arms folded across his chest.

“Because it’s all over the civvie-band radio, sir,” she replied. “Washington activated the EAS and it’s broadcasting hourly that Mr. Huntley,” she said with a nod toward Chad, “needs to be brought in, safe and sound, whatever the cost. That makes him a wanted man—”

“Which makes *us* expendable. And *that*, Captain, makes him the problem,” said the tall pilot.

Chad took a step forward. “You think this is all *my* fault?”

The short pilot looked around. “You see anyone else here the Koreans *and* Washington got a hard-on for?”

“We oughta take him in—” began the angry woman.

“We oughta give him to the Koreans,” said another. “I heard that the NKors are only here because we wouldn’t give them any more vaccines. They can get all they want out of his corpse.”

“That’s a big negative, warrant officer. The Koreans are also saying that we attacked them last week. You believe that, too?” Captain Alston put his hands on his hips now as he faced down the half-dozen pilots. “That kind of talk will get you shot in this man’s army. You want to give an American citizen to the people who have invaded our country? What the hell is wrong with you?”

The other pilots shied away from the last one to speak. The Ranger continued, “This man is *my* responsibility. I, too, have lost men trying to find and secure him. My orders come from—”

“The President himself said we need to bring him in and that anyone helping him avoid capture was a *traitor*,” said the pilot with bloodshot eyes. Her tone wasn’t exactly hostile, but it wasn’t friendly, either. She shook her head. “I don’t know what the hell is going on, anymore, sir.”

Captain Alston was about to reply when Chad heard, “Perimeter secure, Cap.”

The captain stepped away for a second to reply. It still seemed surreal to Chad that he could hear someone’s voice over the headset and see that person talking at the same time.

“Roger that. Keep an eye out—”

“Wait one—I got movement by the control tower!” barked Deuce.

“Come with me, Mr. Huntley,” the captain said through clenched teeth as he walked past, reaching for his rifle.

Chad grabbed his lever-action Henry from where it was leaning against the helicopter and followed Captain Alston. He avoided the dangerous looks from the pilots and skirted their little group. He saw the captain making a beeline for the rather small-looking control tower on the other side of the runway. There were two other white-clad Rangers making their way along the sides of storage hangers, all converging on the tower.

By the time he caught up with the others, the confrontation had already started. “Hands in the air! Now!” roared Deuce’s tinny voice.

Chad heard Captain Alston’s voice as next man on the scene. “Sir, drop that weapon unless you want to be buried with it.”

As he approached the corner of the control tower, Sergeant Fryer, the one the Rangers called “Tuck,” motioned for Chad to stay next to him. The two of them then cautiously moved around the opposite side of the tower in order to approach from behind the individual the captain was confronting. Chad could hear a faint, mostly inaudible though heated conversation over his headset—but the man Captain Alston was addressing was just too far away for Chad to understand what he was saying.

“Be that as it may, sir, you don’t have much of a choice here. Drop that weapon or we will drop you,” was Captain Alston’s reply. “Sir, we’re both Americans, and I have no wish to do you harm—believe me, I have bigger fish to fry.”

“Moving into position,” whispered Tuck. He nodded at Chad to stay put. Tuck then trotted across a walkway to a corner of a nearby supply building. Chad, now in sole possession of the control tower, risked a quick look around the corner and saw Deuce with his rifle aimed squarely at the chest of an old man holding a shotgun. The old man was aiming at Captain Alston’s stomach and appeared to have no fear at all.

“Look here, son, you ain’t proved one damn thing to me. For all I know, you could be some damn Russian sent in with them Gooks. I was in Grenada, ’83—

the Commies threw a lot of shit at us, but did I run? Hell no. Some kids with their little pop-guns don't scare me, Jack."

Chad acted before the rational part of his mind could scream, *What the hell are you doing?*, a sentiment that matched the look on Tuck's grimy face when he saw Chad step around the corner. He racked the lever on his Henry. The sound was loud as it echoed between the tower and the supply building.

The bearded old man turned and spotted Chad approaching with his Henry held casually at hip-level. "How about *this* one, old timer?"

The gray-beard grinned, showing a few missing teeth. "Well, I'll be. A Henry lever-action. Ain't seen one of them in a coon's age. Octagonal barrel." He nodded toward Chad. "That a .308?"

Over the old man's shoulder, Chad could see Captain Alston signal his Rangers to stand down and lower rifles. He grinned and nodded at Chad to keep going.

"No sir, it's .45-70," replied Chad.

"Ah..." the old man said wistfully. "My daddy had one when I was growin' up." He reached a hand out. "May I?"

When he noticed the older man begin to drop the barrel on the shotgun, he lowered his as well. He turned the rifle away and offered it forward. The old man held the Henry reverently and examined the bluing on the barrel, the walnut stock and polished brass lever, the corners worn smooth with use.

"This here's a real man's gun, son. Not them rapid fire pop-guns your soldier friends got. Ain't no Commie-bastard I heard of would carry one of these." He nodded to himself and handed the rifle back. "Mmmhmmm, that's a fine gun you got there, Jack. *Damn* fine. Does me good to see one again." He turned around to face the captain and Deuce, who'd swung their rifles behind them now on tactical slings.

"All right, hey, I suppose you fellers can land."

Captain Alston nodded gravely. "Thank you, sir," he said with a smile.

"Still, I think I could've taken you young-pups down a notch—or at least slowed you down some," the old man continued, as if he hadn't heard the captain's reply. "You got some real pretty choppers out there, Jack. I woulda

given my left nut for a few of those back in the jungle. Damn Commies woulda shit their pants if they'd ah seen one of *them* bad boys let loose on 'em, yes sir!"

Captain Alston smiled broadly. "Hammer 2, stand down. Secure the perimeter and make sure the pilots are ready..." He stepped forward and shook hands with the old man.

"I'm Captain Derek Alston—"

"Army?"

"Yes, sir, Rangers."

The old man nodded again as he shook Captain Alston's hand. "Name's Greg Dixon. I was a lance corporal in the 8th MEU back in the day."

"Sir, if you don't mind my asking, what the hell are you doing out here, by yourself?"

The old man sighed. "Well, Jack, money's tight now." He shook his head and scratched behind one ear. "Look here, with all the flu scare comin' back, I offered my services to guard the airport for a while. I had the damn Blue Flu, see? So I figure I'm safe now. Anyway...most folks are scared to travel now but someone needs to watch over their expensive toys. So here I am. Now that I heard the damn Koreans are pushing east—"

"How did you hear that?" asked Captain Alston quickly.

"Oh, soon as I figured I'd be out here by myself a while, I rigged up my HAM gear," he said, jerking a thumb toward the control tower. "Free power and a helluva antenna setup, yes-sir-ee," he said with a chuckle. Just as quickly as the laugh came, it disappeared.

"Press ain't said shit about the invasion, but HAMs been spreading the word now for anyone who'll listen." He shook his head sadly. "Them slant-eyed sonsabitches...They've damn near conquered L.A., burned a whole slew of towns to the ground up the coast, and marched straight into Spokane not too long ago. Lotta people dying all over the place, Jack, but the worst seems to be L.A. and up here. No one knows why they'd attack now, what with the super flu killin' people left and right. Idiots." He spat into the gravel at his feet. "I tell ya, North Korea: land of the cheap sliding-doors and even cheaper slant-eyed whores." The gray-bearded old man laughed at his own joke and slapped a thigh.

“Son of a bitch,” said Deuce as he shouldered his rifle.

“You can say that again, Jack,” said Dixon, pointing a craggy finger at the big Ranger. “What none of them HAMs can figure is, why? There ain’t no secret bases or anything in Spokane, Washington, fer cryin’ out loud. The hell they want with us anyway? They just had a need to get rid of an army? Gotta figure all their boys’ll be dead from the flu within the week, anyway, am I right?” He shook his head again. “Ain’t no sense in that, Jack, none at all.”

“They took Spokane?” asked Chad, his voice a mere whisper.

“Son,” said the old man, placing a fatherly hand on Chad’s arm. “Don’t you know there’s a war on? Why the hell you want to go to Spokane?”

“They took out the CDC facility,” said Captain Alston sadly. He glanced from Chad to Dixon. “That’s where we were trying to go...”

Chad slumped his shoulders and leaned against the control tower. “Because of me. They were trying to get my blood to the labs there so they could make a vaccine for the flu. The CDC did that ten years ago.”

The old man shook his head, his unkempt, gray hair making a halo around his head. “Well, I don’t know nothin’ about that. But from what I hear, Charlie’s got Spokane under wraps. I don’t think you’ll be going there, son,” he nodded absently toward Captain Alston, “Rangers and choppers or not. There’s just too many of ‘em, boys. Same story back east, only it’s Russians, Germans, and Italians.” The old man spat his contempt.

Captain Alston stood still, lost in thought for a moment, looking right over the old man’s head. Chad felt himself slide down the wall until he was squatting on the ground, his rifle between his legs. He leaned his head forward until his forehead rested against the cold steel of the Henry’s barrel. He was so tired.

Days of running from the North Koreans in Glacier National Park, hiding in the waystation, hiking through the blizzard, the ambush at the landing site, finding out about Atlanta and the flu and now an invasion...it was all too much.

“Well, that settles it,” Captain Alston said. He keyed his mic, “Zuka, tell the pilots to refuel and get ready to leave.”

“Roger that.” The voice was tinny but clear.

“Now listen here, Jack—they pay me to guard this place and I don’t think I

can just let you take all the gas...”

“Sir,” said Captain Alston in a deadly serious tone, “our country is being invaded by North Korean forces—and the United Nations—whether anyone in Washington or the press want to call it that or not. The President—the *real* one—is under siege in Los Angeles and my sister is with him.” He struggled to regain his composure and when he spoke next, it was through clenched teeth.

“The Vice President has seized power and is giving away entire cities to foreign troops. The Koreans have been on our ass for three days now and we have a classic, royal, clusterfuck of a situation on our hands. Without a comm-link to HQ, we are totally on our own.” He turned around, looking at the airfield and rubbing the back of his head angrily.

“My last orders were to get Mr. Huntley here,” he said with a gesture toward Chad, “to the CDC, then get my ass back to my commanding officer and take the fight to the enemy. The only commander I know about right now is my Commander in Chief, who’s sick with the flu and being chased by an army of North Korean soldiers.”

Captain Alston took a breath and continued in a calmer but more ominous tone. “I have at my disposal one group of badass Rangers and,” the tall Ranger waved an arm toward the airfield where the Apaches were clumped together, “a few of some of the most lethal aircraft ever created. I am not going to sit on my thumb and cry. I intend to fight back. And I will *not* be stopped in my mission, Mr. Dixon. So. You have two options.”

The crusty old man cocked a bushy, gray eyebrow, hooked his thumbs under his belt and rocked back on his heels, clearly unimpressed. He sucked his lip thoughtfully and seemed to chew on a nonexistent plug of tobacco.

“One: you give me the aviation fuel I require to complete my mission and help me bring some pain to the Koreans...”

Dixon nodded sagely and puckered his lips, watching the ground at Captain Alston’s feet.

“Two: I *take* it. I would rather not have to do that, one veteran to another. But understand me, sir, there is nothing on God’s green earth that is going to stop me from reaching the President—the *legitimate* President—and my baby sister.”

Dixon rubbed his chin, seemingly lost in thought. He scratched an ear and examined his fingers for earwax. Finally, he looked up at Captain Alston and squinted. "Sounds fair enough, Jack. Since you put it that way..." The old man fished around in one of his pockets. "Here's the keys to the avi-fuel. Take what you need, boys. Give my regards to Charlie, willya?"

"We surely will. Thank you, sir," said Captain Alston, reaching for the key.

"One question, sonny," said Dixon, pulling the key back. "What do you mean by the real President bein' in L.A.? He's in Washington."

"President Denton got the flu in L.A. and my sister is one of the doctors treating him."

"Ha! Denton's dead, Jack. Yep. I heard it on the news. Or that *beep-beepity-beep* announcement thing they keep making." He shook his shaggy, gray head. "They done sworn in Vice President Barron in some secret ceremony. Anyhow, he's the *new* president. I heard his little 'stay calm' speech. Martial law across the land. Suspendin' the cotton-picking Constitution in them big cities back east." Mr. Dixon spat emphatically at the ground. "Wants all the military boys around the country to report in for new orders. Even callin' up us old vets. What a load of BS. Like I'm gonna drag my tired ass into a recruiting station—"

"Are you *sure*?"

"Hell yes, that new president is a slick-looking shyster if I ever seen one. I don't like him a lick. Look here, didn't like Denton much, neither. Bunch a lily livered liberals." The old man spat again. "But they said Denton's been dead for what, four, five days now? Got the super flu or some damn thing. Guess I can't blame Barron for takin' over. But damn if I'll be happy he nominated that crazy bitch Hillsen to be his VP. Washington done gone insane, Jack." He blew a raspberry and shook his head. "Whole damn world gone crazy."

"That's impossible. I got a phone call from my sister less than 36 hours ago. Denton was alive. They said he's been dead for four or five days?"

The old man rubbed his scruffy chin whiskers. He cocked an eye at Chad, then at the captain. "Yep. Dead as a doornail. But if what you're sayin's true, Jack, we got a problem. Two Presidents. One's a liar."

"Hell, they're politicians—they're both liars," muttered Chad.

The old man laughed. Then he shook his head and grew serious. “Boys, somethin’ around here sure stinks like catfish bait, but we ain’t fishin’.”

THEY WERE NEARLY FINISHED REFUELING the Apaches when the first missile fell on the far end of the airfield. The shockwave knocked over most of the soldiers. Chad found himself on his back looking up at the blue sky. Something hard was pressing painfully into the small of his back. He shifted to remove the offending rock, as his lungs clenched tight from the blast of air that accompanied the explosion. He coughed until his eyes watered, but shortly he was able to breathe normally again.

“Cap, we got unknown rotors inbound!” called out Garza’s voice from atop the control tower. “Just crested the horizon. We don’t have much time.”

“They found us *again*?” moaned Chad in a hoarse voice.

“Stow it, civvie, this is your fault anyway,” growled one of the Apache pilots as he dusted off his flightsuit. “Captain Alston, we’re not done refueling—”

“Forget it! We gotta get in the air,” said the Black Hawk pilot. “We’re sitting ducks, man.”

As the pilots rushed to their helicopters and the first turbines spun up to speed, the Rangers streamed back from their positions around the airfield toward the Black Hawk. Chad spotted all of them except Garza, who had to climb down from the control tower.

“Get in, sir,” said Captain Alston over his shoulder at Chad, eying the sky to the northwest.

“This *is* all my fault,” muttered Chad, as he raised himself off the ground and up onto an elbow. He sat there watching the black mushroom cloud expand over what used to be one of the storage hangers.

“How the hell did they find us again?” asked Deuce as he rushed past, hauling a bag of supplies.

“They can’t track what they can’t see...” said Garza’s voice. “It don’t make any sense.”

“Oh my God,” said Chad in horror. He quickly got to his feet and stared at Captain Alston. “The medical implant they gave me...”

“What implant?” said Captain Alston, glaring at Chad.

“They told me it was just to monitor my health...after...The Pandemic...”

Garza trotted up. “I’m last man,” he announced. He looked at Chad. “Why the long face? Was it something I said?”

“You mean to tell me they’ve been tracking your ass with an implant?” asked Deuce. “That’s just fucking *great*.”

“That would explain a lot...” The captain looked back toward the northwest, toward Spokane. He sighed deeply. “They knew we were coming here.”

Did all those people in Spokane die because the Koreans knew that’s where I was headed? Oh my God...the chip.

Garza pulled a wicked looking knife from his combat vest. “Where is it?” he asked, pointing the tip of the knife at Chad. “I’ll be quick, man, I promise.”

“Oh my God,” said Chad, staring right through the short Ranger, instinctively taking a step back from the large blade. He stopped abruptly when he bumped into Deuce. Large hands wrapped around his arms in a vice-like grip.

The engines on the Black Hawk began to spool up, whining to life. Over their heads, the big rotors started to move lethargically. Captain Alston turned around to face Chad. There was a grim resolve on his face that the civilian did not like.

“Where is it, sir?” When Chad only shook his head, the captain spoke again, firm, but not unkind, “Mr. Huntley. Chad. I have already lost a good man because of that chip. Our lives are in danger at this very moment. I will ask you one last time,” he said, raising his voice to be heard over the helicopter. “Where...is...it?”

Garza smiled. “We do it here, *esse*, or we do it in there,” he said, pointing toward the open door to the Black Hawk. “Trust me, when it’s buckin’ and rockin’, this here knife could get real shaky. Might cut off something you want to keep. Mmmm?”

Chad slumped and sighed. “My right shoulder, there’s a little scar.” He winced as he felt his jacket and shirt hastily ripped from his body by the big

Ranger behind him.

Captain Alston pulled out a piece of leather from a pouch on his vest. “Here, bite down. It helps.”

Chad opened his mouth and bit down hard on the rolled-up leather. The taste was salty and sour, but he concentrated on grinding his teeth through the tough material. Behind him, he heard Garza whistle.

“They did a pretty good job covering up the scar, my man. But I can see it. Right there. Shouldn’t be too bad!” he hollered. The wind from the spinning rotors was starting to make Chad a little wobbly, despite being held by two Rangers.

“Okay! On three, ready?” said Garza. “*One!*”

Chad felt a searing pain in his shoulder and tensed, screaming into the leather in his mouth. It felt like Garza had speared him with the knife. The pain intensified—he could feel the tip of the knife probing into the meat just below his deltoid muscle, seeking the little HD-GPS beacon that was causing them all so much grief. Red hot poker seemed to be stabbing the insides of his eyes.

Chad spit the leather out with a groan. “Just get it out of me! Dammit!” he screamed.

Suddenly, the pain was gone and there was a cold, empty feeling where the hot sensation had just been. Garza slapped a field dressing on the wound and pulled Chad’s shirt back down.

“Let’s go!” he yelled into the wind.

Captain Alston pumped his fist at the pilot who nodded, then they all climbed into the helicopter. Chad could feel the queer sensation of rapid, vertical acceleration even before he found his jump-seat. His shoulder ached like something out of a nightmare.

He leaned over toward Garza. “Did you get it? Tell me you got it!” he yelled.

The swarthy Ranger flashed a white smile and held up a bloody hand, cradling a Lima bean-sized piece of plastic and metal covered in gore.

“Got it.” He handed it to Captain Alston, who promptly threw it out the open door into the forest below. Chad saw there was a swift-moving little creek down there in the trees—he hoped that’s where the damn thing landed.

“Sir!” hollered the gunner. He tapped his helmet and yelled, “Pilot says the Apaches didn’t get fully fueled. We won’t get very far. NKors are right on our asses, sir!”

Captain Alston nodded and looked at the map he held in his hands. Chad watched him trace his fingers over the mountains and roads of the local area of Idaho, looking for a refuge and fuel. He stopped, finger pointing at a small dot on the map. Chad couldn’t be sure, but it looked a little south of where they were. Fairly close.

“Here!” He showed the gunner the map. “Looks like there’s a Park Ranger helipad here. They may have fuel. And if not, at least it’s a safe place to land!”

“Where is it?” asked the gunner. He tapped his helmet again, indicating it was the pilot asking the question.

“Salmon Falls!” yelled Captain Alston.

CHAPTER TWENTY

COOPER

El Segundo, California
Los Angeles Air Force Base

“I DON’T LIKE THIS, MAN...” said Charlie as their charter bus slowly roamed through the obliterated Air Force base. “This place is deserted. It’s spooky.” He adjusted the grip on his rifle and cleared his throat.

“You scared of ghosts, now?” grunted Cooper. He kept his eyes moving. The buildings that weren’t outright piles of smoldering rubble *were* deserted. He had to admit to himself that the small base had a certain creepiness about it, lit only as it was by the buildings on fire. “I thought you were a *SEAL*, not one of those Delta weenies.”

“Fuck you, old man.” They both laughed weakly. It felt good to hear Charlie laugh—it went a long way toward alleviating Cooper’s concerns over Charlie being able to focus again.

Cooper sat behind the wheel of the commandeered charter bus and surveyed the land in front of them. There was smoke and rubble everywhere. Buildings that had once been an active part of a bustling Air Force base were nothing but blasted shells. Cooper had known where the base was located—even without the GPS signals—by simply following the thick columns of black smoke that

stained the sky for miles around. Cooper saw a shot-up sign that proudly named the base as the headquarters of the U.S. Space Command.

They had driven—slowly—right through the main gate, which had been smashed open by a damn big explosion. Cooper gave silent thanks that the blast had cleared a path through the debris just wide enough for them to navigate the cumbersome bus through the base grounds. There were abandoned cars, resupply trucks, HumVees, and civilian vehicles of every sort scattered willy-nilly as far as could be seen through the smoke.

Cooper was glad for the darkness. There were bodies, too. They seemed to twitch and move by the firelight. It was an unsettling scene and he was happy to keep moving.

Many of the dead were clustered just outside the main gate. Some had been killed in the explosion that had torn the massive gate wide open. Others had burned to death, their skin charred black and all too visible from inside the bus—judging by the gasps and choked screams coming from the passenger area.

Cooper noted many, many bodies—usually clumped together by the entrance to buildings—slumped on the ground as if sleeping.

“Most likely, those are flu victims,” said Dr. Alston, suddenly at Cooper’s shoulder. He felt a soft touch on his arm and lightning shot down his spine in tickling waves. She pointed out the large windshield. “See how they’re clustered by the doors to that building?”

“Yeah,” said Cooper, trying hard not to let his heart rate increase because of her proximity. Either he was feverish or he needed a cold shower.

“They were trying to get in when the smoke from the fires hit them and overloaded their lungs. The viscous fluid this bug produces makes it really hard for you to breathe—if you threw ash and soot in there...they probably didn’t last long.”

“Horrible way to go...” Cooper observed. When it was his turn to punch out, he wanted to be taking out some bad guys in a ball of fire. Drowning in his own snot was *not* high on his priority list.

Within the base, there was a disturbing *lack* of bodies. A few in Air Force-gray BDUs were near the destroyed guard shack. Some were slumped over in

vehicles. There were not nearly as many as they expected to see for a base this size.

It made no sense.

“Where the hell is everyone?” Jax’s voice boomed over their headsets. He had been sent with Swede and Beaver on a recon run. The three SEALs went in different directions, looking for survivors, supplies, and shelter. So far, they had found none.

Charlie, riding shotgun in the stairwell, replied, “Keep looking. They gotta be here *somewhere*. The NKors don’t seem to be taking prisoners. They couldn’t just vanish.”

“Hooyah.”

“How’s the President?” Cooper asked over his shoulder at the auburn-haired doctor. His eyes met hers and he had to look away quickly or risk crashing the bus.

Dr. Alston sighed—even that sounded pretty. “He’s not doing too well back there. He’s in and out of a fever and keeps talking about needing to give a speech. Something about clearing his conscience.”

Cooper nodded and looked out the driver’s window, hoping to see something, anything. The only thing that moved was the smoke that seemed to be all around them now. A black fog. “Does he know what’s going on?”

The cute doctor sighed again. “We tried explaining to him about the Koreans...but...I don’t know if he really gets it. He was...” She paused and a little wrinkle between her eyebrows appeared. Cooper tried not to grin as he watched her face in the rearview mirror. “He was pretty pissed off when we told him about Barron.”

Cooper grunted a laugh and shared a look with Charlie. “Yeah, I *bet* he was.” He checked his dive watch. Holding up a hand to warn the doctor he had to have silence for a moment, he spoke into the air, “Sparky, you gettin’ anything yet?”

His bone phone broke squelch in his ear. “Negative. This place is dead.”

“Coop, turn on the bus’ radio, man. We got a problem,” said Jax’s deep voice, drawling the words with his Texan twang.

“Roger that. Find anything?” he said, while flipping the switch to activate the

charter bus' radio.

"Parking garage on the northwest corner is only partially destroyed. There's a lot of HumVees out front, like they were circling the wagons here or something. Lot of bodies, man."

Cooper's follow-up reply was cut off as the EAS message on the radio kicked in, "...unsubstantiated. Spreading rumors can be dangerous. Remember, see something, say something. Report any suspicious activity. Anyone could be an enemy sympathizer." The obnoxious, spine-tingling beeps that interrupted the message made Cooper grip the wheel tighter.

"This is an emergency alert message. In this time of crisis, President Barron asks all citizens to remain loyal. Rumors of President Denton surviving in Los Angeles with doctors and Secret Service agents are just that: rumors. Likely spread by the North Koreans in an effort to distract efforts to fight this war.

"If you see anyone that claims to have seen the President or know of his whereabouts, alert your local or federal authorities immediately. Anyone talking about President Denton could be a Korean agent and should be considered extremely dangerous. Reports of Korean sympathizers along the West Coast are increasing. Stay in your homes. We are coming to rescue you. Care for your families. Pray. Remember, President Denton's survival is completely unsubstantiated. Spreading rumors can be dangerous..."

Cooper slowed the bus to a stop and switched off the radio in disgust. He threw the gear shift into park and stood up in order to turn around and face the passengers. The hushed busy-sounds from the doctors, nurses, and agents vanished. Everyone had heard the EAS message.

"Someone mind telling me who the hell talked?" he demanded in a dangerous tone.

Two of the nurses in the back looked at a third who shrank down and tried to hide behind a scowling Secret Service agent. Cooper sighed and leaned against a seat.

"Ma'am, who did you tell and what did you say?"

"I...I-I just called my husband..." she stammered, glancing at the people around her. From the doctors and nurses, she received sympathetic looks. From

the agents, nothing but glares. “I...there was no signal for so long...I just—I thought we were going to d-d-die...” She broke down in sobs, hiding her face in a cloud of curly black hair that had come undone from her headband.

Cooper made his way to her and knelt in the aisle. Gently, he took one of her hands away from her face and waited for her to stop shaking. “Ma’am, I need you to tell me what you said. We’re not going to do anything to you, but I have to know, in order to make sure we all survive this mess. Okay?”

She nodded, sniffing loudly. “I told him...told him that I was alive and that I was—” She looked around nervously. “I was with—with Dr. Honeycutt and...the President—”

“Oh, Jesus Christ,” muttered Charlie from the stairs. Cooper glanced over his shoulder to silence his XO.

The nurse’s words spilled out in a torrent, “And that he was alive. That there were Secret Service agents here and...and...soldiers.”

“Soldiers? Really?” scoffed Charlie from the front of the bus. “You think we’re just soldiers?”

“Stow it,” growled Cooper. He turned back to the woman and patted her hand as gently as he could. He was just as mad as Charlie. “Go on, ma’am.”

“He...my husband...he told me that on the news, they had said President Denton was dead. That anyone who was spreading rumors about him being alive was a traitor or something. He said they were going to offer rewards...for information...” Her voice trailed off. A look of despair settled on her otherwise not un-pretty face.

“So you told him where we were...” prompted Cooper.

“What have I done?” she whispered. “I’m so sorry...”

Cooper stood, glancing at the agents. “Well, what’s done is done. They—and that means our government, which for some reason doesn’t want President Denton alive, and the North Koreans—now know he’s alive and maybe where here is.” He took a moment to let that sink in.

“A harmless call to a loved one.” Cooper put his hands on his hips and looked at the other nurses and doctors. “Do we know if her husband told anyone else? Who knows? They’re probably listening to all cell phone calls anyway.

Either way—it's out and now we have a big, fat target on our backs. All of us. You think about that the next time you get the urge to call home." His expression dared anyone to argue. He was met with hangdog looks and silence.

"I trust you all understand the gravity of the situation now?" After he saw enough head nodding, Cooper turned to Agent Sheffield.

"All right, thanks to our friend here, all phones and communication devices need to be turned in." He gestured to a few other weary agents who stood and started collecting the phones.

"But—" someone said.

"Now," Agent Sheffield replied. "The President's life is in jeopardy and I will *not* allow him to be injured on my watch. Hand 'em over or we will take them."

Cooper returned to the front of the bus and accepted Dr. Alston's phone. "Battery's dead anyway," she mumbled.

The radio in his ears broke squelch as he reached out to take the phone. "Yo, Coop, I got a survivor here at the garage. He's with base security. Says the rest of 'em retreated underground. Some sort of secret bunker. He was sent up to bring us down there before the Koreans come back."

Cooper looked at Charlie. Charlie shrugged. "Sounds reasonable. What else we gonna do? Try to scrounge up gas and make it back to Coronado—if it's still there?"

Cooper stared thoughtfully out the window at the smoke and destruction outside. If they made a break for Coronado—for home—there was a good chance they'd be picked off from the air. If they stayed here...

Suddenly, the bus trembled under their feet. Someone gasped in the back and a woman screamed, "Earthquake!"

Cooper shook his head and pointed out the bus' doorway. A cloud of smoke was growing into a mushroom shape in the distance to the east. "Bomb. Over there. I'd say about a mile." A jet streaked overhead, rattling windows. That settled it.

"All right, everyone hold on, we're moving." He keyed his throat mic. "Jax, stay with your airman. We're on the way." He jumped into the driver's seat and

kicked the charter bus into gear.

The bus raced across the base and lurched to a shaky stop in front of a large, block-like hangar building. Cooper noticed the six-level parking garage was caved-in but was glad to see Jax sitting with the Air Force security guard on a substantial pile of rubble. He grinned to see the two men sharing an MRE, despite the fact that bodies littered the ground all around them. Jax had his respirator on and looked rather gruesome in the dim light. Jax was suspicious by nature, however, so if he was at ease, Cooper was at ease. They jumped up and waved him over to the side of the building in the reflected light from a nearby burning structure.

“What took you so long?” asked Jax, leaning in the doorway of the bus.

“Took the scenic route. That him?” Cooper asked. He shined a flashlight on the airman’s face.

“Yep. Sergeant Lopez. He’s five-by-five, boss.”

“I hope so,” Cooper said, watching the airman put a radio to his ear. His tanned face suddenly went pale.

“Hey, hurry it up! I got word radar picked up a group of targets heading in from the northeast. Could be ground transports as well!”

“*Shit*,” muttered Cooper. He stood up and addressed the people in the rear of the bus. “Everyone listen up! It’s a good bet the Koreans know we’re here,” he said with a glance at the nurse who had called her husband. She buried her face in her hands again. “We only have a few minutes to get the President off this bus and down to their emergency bunker. Let’s be careful, but move *fast*. Got it?”

“We understand,” said Dr. Honeycutt, adjusting his glasses.

“We’ll carry the litter,” said Agent Sheffield. “You get the gear. Thompson, Sanders, Bailey, with me.”

The beehive sufficiently stirred, Cooper grabbed his rifle and exited the bus into the warm, late afternoon sun. The garage structure was a mess. Great slabs of reinforced concrete had crushed dozens of cars that’d been parked inside. The smell of gas and oil stung his nose. Smoke poured out of the other half of the building, obscuring the view to the northeast.

“You guys really built an underground bunker here—in Los Angeles? Over

the San Andreas Fault and all that?” asked Swede cynically.

The airman looked the big SEAL up and down. “We went to the moon—what, sixty years ago? This place—Space Command—tracks over 200,000 objects in orbit above the Earth, every second of every day—some as small as your fingernail. And you find it hard to believe we couldn’t build a box underground and protect it from an earthquake?”

“Well...” said Swede, looking at the ground. “When you put it *that* way...”

“Come on, the entrance is over here behind that pile,” the security guard said. “We gotta move, man!”

“Hold your horses, Lopez,” said Cooper calmly. “We don’t go anywhere till the President is off-loaded.”

“It’s true?” asked Lopez, eyes wide. “I heard rumors and we all heard the radio but...” He shook his head. “Damn, that’s wild. Never met a president before.”

It took longer than Cooper wanted, but at last all the doctors, nurses, agents and SEALs were off the bus, along with the President in his litter, and all the medical equipment needed to keep him alive. Cooper glanced toward the east again, sure the North Koreans would appear at any second, guns blazing.

“Let’s move—follow the sergeant there,” he said, pointing at Lopez. “There’s an entrance to the bunker over there. Jax, Swede, you take point.”

Cooper stood back and watched as Lopez, Jax, Swede, and the agents and doctors carefully but quickly maneuvered around the rubble and disappeared down the exposed stairway through the bunker entrance.

“Beaver, Sparky, stay with Slipknot.”

“Hooyah,” said the shortest SEAL as he strolled past.

A sense of uneasiness continued to grow and intensify down Cooper’s spine even though they were finally secure behind the massive, closed blast doors underground. Arrayed before them in an enormous entryway were a dozen or so Air Force security guards, all with weapons, all standing in awe at the sight of the President being carried by Secret Service agents. He could hear the mumbled talk and see the excited gestures. Someone whispered “President” loud enough for him to hear. He frowned. Like it or not, their cover was officially blown to

shit.

Two of the guards were huddled over a radio, keeping wary eyes on the newcomers. Cooper tensed when they whispered into the device, then quickly made their way down a corridor. “Where are they going?” he asked Lopez.

“Lopez, what the hell were you thinking, bringing these guys down here? Jesus, they’re probably all infected—” barked another man. He raised his M-4 up and pointed it at Charlie.

“Hey, I’m just following orders, man!” protested Lopez.

“Not the colonel’s orders!” The man with the rifle jabbed it at Charlie’s chest. “Who are you? And what the hell—”

“Lopez, tell your friend there to lower his weapon before I shove it up his ass,” said Cooper, his voice controlled and calm.

The man turned his attention to Cooper, and moved the rifle barrel slightly away Charlie’s chest. It was all the distraction Charlie needed. In a blur of movement, his hands shot out, one deflecting the muzzle of the M-4 off to his left so it pointed between him and Cooper, while the other snapped-out and delivered a sharp chop to the nervous guard’s throat.

The airman guard fell to the floor on his back, gasping and grabbing at his neck. Charlie slung the captured rifle over his left shoulder and stepped back, smiling.

“Jesus!” said Lopez. “You didn’t have to do that!” He knelt by his stricken comrade, who roughly shoved him away.

“Anyone who puts a gun in my face either gets that,” said Charlie, “or doesn’t live to talk about it.” He drew his sidearm in one smooth motion. “Want me to give him option two?”

The man on the floor, eyes bulging, shook his head and waved for Charlie to put the gun away. He gasped and choked, trying to talk, but the color was draining from his face. Sgt. Lopez helped him to sit up.

Finally, he took a deep breath and growled, “You assholes are in *deep* shit now, bunch of traitors!”

Charlie looked at Cooper, a bemused smile on his face. “You know, that rifle was still on safe. Want me to hold him while you shove it up his ass?”

The sputtering man on the ground turned red. “When the colonel finds out you’re here, he’s going to hang you all.”

“The hell’s he talking about?” asked Swede.

“It was on all the civvie bands—Washington found out we have the President and the new guy in the Oval Office doesn’t want him alive. So we’re all traitors now.”

“Oh,” said the big SEAL with a frown on his broad face. “Awesome.”

“Who’s this colonel?” asked Charlie.

Lopez shook his head. “He’s the base XO. General Nadina is in charge, but he was wounded during the attack. Colonel Molton is acting CO now.” He leaned in between Charlie and Cooper and whispered, “He’s a real bootlicker. Got a hard-on for promotion. He thinks if he toes the line from Washington in all this and manages to keep Space Command in operation, he’ll get his star.”

“And you didn’t think he would have an issue with us joining your little underground party?” asked Cooper in a dangerous tone.

“Aw, shit,” muttered Charlie, making a sour face at the man on the floor.

“I didn’t really believe all that traitor bullshit they were talking about on the radio. I thought it had to be misinformation—you know, to throw the Koreans off your trail or something? Look guys,” he said, hands spread wide. “All I wanted to do was help protect the President.”

The man on the ground staggered to his feet, glaring at Lopez. “So you’re a traitor, too, huh, Lopez?” He spat on the ground. “Shoulda shipped your ass back across the border where you belong.” He turned and pulled a knife from his belt and made for the President’s litter.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” asked Lopez. He tried to step in front of the big airman and got shoved roughly aside.

“There’s a reward—”

Cooper and two of his men had weapons up and beads on the airman before he could blink. He paused, holding the knife like a dagger with the point down, and looked at the men aiming weapons at him. “You don’t have the balls.”

A thunderclap erupted in the windowless room. All the Air Force guards ducked and covered their ears. Cooper glanced over his shoulder as Agent

Sheffield lowered his sidearm and looked down at the man on the floor who was writhing silently in a spreading pool of dark blood.

“Not on *my* watch, son,” said the Special Agent in Charge of the Presidential Detail. He stared at the man on the floor with eyes completely lacking compassion.

“Shit!” yelled Lopez, one hand on his ear.

Sheffield got a respectful nod from Cooper who then turned to the rest of the group and said, “Gentlemen, this shit is real. These guys apparently want our blood.”

A door down the corridor opened and a woman in Air-Force-gray BDUs opened the door and stepped out. She took in the scene before her: the doctors, the President, the agents, the SEALs, and a bleeding man dying on the floor. Without a word, she stepped back through the door and slammed it shut.

“We’re in it now,” moaned Lopez. “Why did they have to tell me to go up topside...”

“We gotta get outta here, man,” said Jax, leaning over to Cooper’s ear. “While there’s still time.”

“Alert One: the Koreans have returned,” blared hidden loudspeakers. “All personnel, general quarters. Get to your preassigned defensive positions. Repeat, all personnel get to your preassigned defensive positions!”

The big Texan sighed. “Or not.”

Cooper stepped forward to address the rest of the guards. “Anyone here want to help President Denton?” That seemed to snap them out of their apparent momentary paralysis.

He got a few immediate shouts of “Hell yes!” and mostly nods. It was good enough.

“Then someone get us to a secure location where we can let the doctors keep him alive. Anyone know of a place where your colonel will be hard-pressed to overtake us?”

“Confess!” yelled the President. He thrashed against the cords and tubes sticking out of his arms and chest. A coughing fit ensued. He blinked and gasped for air, making a wheezing, sucking sound. He reached out a skeletal hand

toward Cooper. “The nation...I need...talk to them...” Doctor Honeycutt placed a breathing mask over his face and silenced his delirious thrashing.

Cooper looked at Lopez as he led everyone down the right-hand corridor. “Is there any way,” he said gesturing toward the ailing president, “he can get some airtime?”

One of the other airmen spoke up from behind Cooper. “Uh, yessir. The old communications room.” He caught up to Lopez. “It’s on Three-C. Probably hasn’t been used since Reagan was here...”

“I know where it’s at, man,” said Lopez. He pulled Cooper aside as the rest of the group continued forward. In a lower voice, he said, “Look—that old comms room up there, maybe can get you some bandwidth—but there’s only one way in or out of that room. You go in, you’ll be trapped and the colonel will—”

The loudspeakers in the corridor erupted with ear-splitting audio again. “Attention all base personnel, we have been breached by a group of armed men. They have someone infected with them. Consider them armed and dangerous. Do *not* approach them—stay clear of the infected. If they resist, base guards are authorized to use deadly force. Repeat, deadly force is authorized...”

The message repeated, accompanied by flashing lights at the ends of all corridors. Cooper frowned. “Your comms room is looking better already. Let’s go everyone! *Move!*”

Lopez led them deeper and deeper into the bunker, always taking stairs and access hatches to lead them three floors down from the main level. They could hear shouting and footsteps all around them but never saw anyone.

After what seemed to Cooper like an hour of sneaking around the various, wide-ranging passageways in the subterranean chamber, Lopez finally held the group up at an access hatch and whispered to Cooper, “This is it, man. We go through that hatch and straight ahead. The door at the end of the corridor is the old comms room. But there’s no way out except right back this way.”

“Got it. Let’s move.” He stood guard at the access hatch as the agents and doctors and nurses filed past into the darkened communications room. As the President was carried through the hatch, he reached an arm out to grab Cooper.

The ailing president ripped off his ventilator mask and gasped, “Thank you, son.” He dropped back on the litter and was carried in by the agents.

Doctor Alston was next. She too paused at the entrance to the room and looked at Cooper. “Are you sure about this?” she asked softly. She tucked a stray lock of auburn hair over her left ear.

He nodded and felt his neck grow warm at the sight of her in the dim light of the corridor. “You heard the announcements, ma’am. We’re *traitors*. And from what I can gather, this colonel is some sort of hard-ass that’s going to use our blood to get a promotion. Our options are to stay in here and try and figure a way out after we’ve rested, or head up to the surface now and deal with the North Koreans.” He looked over her shoulder at the stragglers. “I don’t know, maybe we can get the President on the horn and clear things up with the base CO.”

She nodded. “Rock and a hard place, that’s for sure.”

“SSDD,” he mumbled. Gently, he put a hand on her shoulder and nudged her forward, secretly thrilled at the simple touch. “Let’s go, now, we need to get everyone in and seal this up. It won’t be long before—”

“I got movement!” echoed down the hall behind them.

“Let’s go!” Cooper grabbed the last two agents and shoved them through the hatch after Dr. Alston. “Move!” Switching his mic on, he called out, “That’s everyone. Jax, Beaver, get your asses in here!”

“Already on the way.”

Gunfire rang out in the distance and echoed like cannon fire in the hallway.

“Sparky, get up here and man this hatch. I’m moving ahead for covering fire.”

“Hooyah.”

Cooper moved back to the closest intersection and crouched, peering low around the corner in the direction that his men were coming. Flashes of light and more gunfire signaled their imminent arrival. “Stay to the right!” he called out. Laying prone on the floor at an angle to the corner, he took aim down the hallway and shot past his men into the crowd of airmen coming into range. Two men fell, adding their screams to the maelstrom of noise.

A round impacted the wall above his head, but Cooper didn’t so much as

twitch an eyelash. His men were being pursued by those he would've called 'brother' two weeks earlier. Cooper fired off two more bursts as he ran and another airman tumbled to the ground shrieking in pain.

What am I doing? These men are Americans... Mortified that he was shooting at his own comrades, he pulled a smoke grenade from his vest and called out, "Popping smoke!"

As the wall of smoke enveloped the end of the corridor and blocked his view of the airmen, his men arrived and dove around the corner, gasping for air. Satisfied that the pursuit had slackened for a moment, Cooper scurried back to his men. A brief sprint down the hallway under cover of the team sniper at the door and they were all safely sealed up in the dusty communications room.

Cooper leaned against the heavy steel door and pounded a fist in blind rage. "What the hell, man? Our own people shooting at us like we were the goddamned NKors."

"I told you," said Lopez, examining some of the old communications equipment on the far side of the large room. "The colonel's a hard-charger. He's the President's man, to the bone." A glance at President Denton's unconscious form made the airman frown. "Not that president. No offense, sir."

"Doc, how's he doing?" asked Cooper, striding across the room toward the cluster of medical professionals. Dr. Honeycutt looked up, stethoscope hanging from his neck, and pulled his surgical mask down. The haggard look on his face broadcasted what news he was about to give wasn't good.

"He doesn't have much time. Too much movement, too much stress. I'm sorry." He sighed. "Honestly, I don't see how he managed to survive this long without the vaccine. He didn't have much of a chance from the get go."

"Strength of will," said Dr. Alston, her voice muffled by a cloth mask. She stood at the President's head, gently smoothing the sweat-soaked hair on his forehead with her gloved hands. Every breath he took resulted in a faint moan.

"Son," the President said weakly. Cooper heard the room go silent. Everyone leaned in a little to hear the next words. The President shook his head feebly. "Do not...blame yourself. You did what you could."

Cooper slung his rifle on his back and knelt at the side of his Commander in

Chief. He took the offered mask from a nurse and held it to his face. It didn't feel like much protection, but it felt better than nothing, he supposed.

The flu was destroying the man right before his eyes. The President had traces of dried blood on his earlobes, and bloody tears from the corners of his eyes. His nose was a pink-stained mess and dark dried blood stained his linens and clothes. The skin around the older man's ears and eye-sockets was turning a blue so dark, it was borderline indigo. The sheen of sweat on the President's forehead and pink cheeks indicated he was still suffering from a high fever.

"Sir, I'm sorry." He looked down, truly ashamed he had failed the mission. "It wasn't enough. If we had known..." He looked around for encouragement. Most of the doctors just looked tired and sad. A few of the nurses were crying softly. The agents were stone-faced, but it was clear that they too were trying to hide their emotions.

The President patted Cooper's arm in a weak gesture. "Thank you, son, for what you have done. For your sacrifice. What's..." He started coughing and gasping for breath. After a nurse reattached his oxygen mask, he took a few ragged breaths and pushed it aside. "...Name?"

"Master Chief Cooper Braaten, Mr. President."

Tears started to roll down the President's cheeks. "It's all my fault, Master Chief..." he wheezed. "Everything..."

"Sir, how could you possibly have known the North Koreans were going to invade?"

"That..." The President gasped for breath again. The wet sucking sound made Cooper flinch. "...sniveling *bastard*. Barron." He shook his head, with more vigor. "Never should have nominated him as my VP." The President growled and coughed bloody phlegm on the concrete floor. "He wants to be king..."

Cooper looked around the room. Everyone watched the President. *What the hell do we do now?* His thought was mirrored on many of the tired, sweaty faces that surrounded the President's litter.

The President grew quiet and after a while, looked at Cooper with eyes clear of pain and fear. His body was weak and dying a slow, painful death but his eyes

were sharp, clear, and strong. “I need to address the nation one last time. To explain things.”

“Out of the question,” said Dr. Honeycutt immediately. “Sir, you—”

“Please,” the President whispered, his eyes boring deep into Cooper’s soul.

Cooper swallowed hard and looked into those eyes and the skull-like face that surrounded them. He nodded. Taking hold of the President’s shriveled and clammy hand, Cooper looked at the airmen standing farther back. He nodded toward the banks of screens and control panels.

“You guys know how to run this stuff?”

One of the airmen looked at the communication equipment, a doubtful look crossing his face. “It’s old, but...I *think* so.” He reached up and flipped a switch. A screen glowed to life and a row of computers turned on. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure I can get this to work.”

“Master Chief Braaten, the President is in no condition—” began Dr. Honeycutt.

Cooper’s look silenced the old doctor. He surveyed his little group of refugees and turned back to the airmen who had spoken.

“Fire it up. The President needs to make a speech.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DENNY

Salmon Falls, Idaho
The Ridge

DENNY CROUCHED low behind the bush and smoothly pulled his bow to full draw. He held it there for a moment. He felt his heartbeat, the gentle breeze through the pines, and savored the slight warmth on his cheek from the afternoon sun as it filtered through the forest canopy. His eyes focused on the deer some fifteen yards away, blissfully cropping the stunted vegetation on the forest floor. She raised a graceful neck and casually looked around, delicately sniffing the air. The doe presented Denny with a near-perfect broadside profile. The animal chewed placidly, her ears swiveling in an attempt to identify any possible danger. The doe blinked and bent back down to take another bite.

Denny let his fingers straighten and held his left arm stiff, almost pushing the hickory bow forward, as if he could add a little extra speed to the arrow. In a heartbeat, the arrow cruised across the fifteen yards of open space between hunter and prey.

His mind's eye was already picturing the perfect heart-lung shot, guaranteed to put his quarry down. A fraction of a second before the arrow hit flesh and fur, those sensitive ears stopped swiveling and seemed to detect a sound that Denny's

hearing could not hope to register. The doe flinched in response to the unknown sound, and in that moment of panic, the arrow notched a harmless groove through the fur across the top of her shoulder, impaling itself in the pine tree just behind the lucky deer.

Denny stood and sighed as he watched the white rump and tail bounce away through the undergrowth and vanish into the forest to the sounds of broken branches and rustling leaves. He was about to utter some colorful commentary on the day's hunt when he also perceived a barely audible sound off in the distance. Denny cocked his head and listened, trying to determine the direction of the muffled noise. It was a very low rumbling, somewhat like a continuously undulating thunderclap, but still not very loud.

He looked farther upslope toward the thinning tree line and could see clear blue sky in the far distance. Denny was below U.P. Lake, halfway between the burned-out husk of his recent home and a Forest Ranger's manmade "lodge" higher up on the mountain slope. The "lodge" was really just a cave that had been commandeered by the Forest Service to serve as a dependable lookout post for fires during the dry months of summer. The cave had formed in the side of a curved wall of granite at the crest of The Ridge, overlooking U.P. Lake. It faced east and had a nice view of the Salmon River Valley and Salmon Falls two miles below.

Denny had successfully moved his meager possessions into the Forest Ranger facility after his home had been destroyed. In the austere lodge, he found a little fuel and a good quantity of potable water—even survival rations left over from the previous season. He thought he might even prepare himself for winter there, provided he could bring in enough meat.

Denny sighed. He worked his way toward the arrow embedded in the pine tree and ripped it free, angry at himself for missing such a beautiful shot. That doe would've kept him in jerky for months. He then continued eastward for a few minutes until the trees thinned and he stood on the edge of the mountain itself. The precipice he stood upon offered an unparalleled view of the valley, but what he saw sent a chill down his spine and explained the noise that had spooked his doe.

Circling over the still-smoking remains of City Hall was an alien-looking helicopter. It reminded him of the famed Apache that the Army flew, but it looked bigger, uglier, and more insect-like, to Denny's eye.

Other helicopters, their sides swollen as if pregnant, dropped lines to the ground. Overhead, he saw three large transport planes, wings glinting in the afternoon sun. The transports looked to have been circling the town; now, they were beginning their descent.

With slightly trembling hands, he pulled his small binoculars from a leg pouch and focused on the hovering helicopters. Clumps of something began sliding down the lines hanging under the...

Soldiers. Those are soldiers rappelling out of helicopters onto City Hall.

Denny took a knee, leaning against a tilted pine tree to make sure he didn't tumble down the mountain as he watched the activity below. He could see some residents moving toward City Hall from down the street in small groups. As he swept over the town, he could see others standing in their yards, holding children or leaning on fences, watching the air show.

He sensed a growing roar similar to the sound when approaching a waterfall. He swung the binoculars up and quickly spotted one of the huge transport planes exposing its belly to him as it banked to the north, and dropped quickly out of the sky. Denny watched transfixed, because he knew there was no airport in Salmon Falls. Wondering where the big beast was going to try and land, he spotted a few symbols on the slanted tail fin. Whatever they were, the letters were not English. The blue, white, and red flag symbol was wrong, too. Try as he might, he could not spot the expected USAF emblem, nor a star, or an American flag on the dull-gray plane.

He quickly lowered the binoculars when the first shot rang out. The transport forgotten, he listened as more and more gunfire commenced, sounding like a lot of puny firecrackers from this distance. When he again glassed the area around City Hall, he felt a heavy, sinking feeling in his gut. There were bodies in the street. The soldiers were charging confidently forward, running into the remains of City Hall and the adjoining buildings. There were people running in all directions to get away—stumbling, falling, crashing headlong into parked cars

and bystanders too shocked move.

A change in pitch from the airplane's engines tore his attention away from the horror unfolding on Main Street. The giant airplane left dozens of parachutes in its wake. Dangling under each one was a man with a rifle.

Denny tried to calm his racing heart. He racked his brain in an effort to understand the mysterious symbols on the aircraft. They just didn't make sense. Then, all of a sudden, it came to him—they were letters—just not English letters. It was *Cyrillic*. He was dead sure of it now.

“Russians!” he hissed.

As he watched, the helicopters disgorged more and more soldiers. The plane, finally finished with its deposit of armed men, closed its doors and angled higher into the sky, heading east. The second plane roared overhead, the rear door already starting to open. He didn't need binoculars to see this one. But it didn't drop off men. Big crates with three parachutes slipped out the back. Two large vehicles came next, and many, many smaller boxes—all with the same white parachutes.

The third plane dropped off more men. Denny shook his head. In a matter of only ten minutes or so, he had counted at least twenty men from the helicopters, another sixty or seventy from the planes, two big vehicles, and two dozen crates of all sizes. There was no contest. The town belonged to the Russians in a matter of minutes. They hastily set up barriers across all the roads surrounding City Hall. As time progressed, there were less bystanders and more bodies in the streets.

He watched as the paratroopers dropped by the planes landed and gathered their gear. The vehicles were starting to move—lumbering towards the center of town. One had landed on the high school baseball field. He watched in horror as it rolled right through the high fence surrounding the field as if it were made of paper. The vehicles moved slowly, allowing the soldiers to follow along like so many armed, camouflaged ducklings.

One group of soldiers peeled off from behind their vehicle and started kicking in doors to houses unfortunate enough to be just across the street from City Hall. He saw a family emerge from the rear doors of one house and rush

into the backyard. He could feel his hands gripping the binoculars tighter as he saw the parents try to usher their children toward the back fence and a row of trees and bushes. If they could make it in time, they might have a chance to escape—

He lowered the binoculars as the popping sounds that signaled the death of the family reached his perch on the side of the mountain. The family had died together in a hail of bullets as the Russians poured out of the house, kicking lawn furniture and toys out of the way as they went. Without stopping, they scaled the chainlink fence and moved methodically on to the next house. The scene was being repeated all through the town.

Denny had seen enough. John was right. His hand moved toward the radio at his belt and clenched air. Looking down where John's radio had been before he went hunting, he saw nothing. Then he remembered he'd left it back at the ranger station. Denny had been worried he'd drop it or the damn thing would go off with one of John's requests for a little conversation. He could visualize the little radio sitting on a dusty crate back in the ranger station.

It would take him about thirty minutes to get to the ranger station if he was just casually hiking. Sprinting back up the slope, even through numerous bushes and trees and over some loose gravel, it only took him ten minutes.

Denny opened the door to the ranger station and collapsed on a camp stool in a cloud of dust. He picked up the radio and tried to calm his pulse. He took a deep breath and activated the radio. "John! *John*...you there?"

He counted thirty heartbeats before his neighbor's voice crackled over the radio's speaker. "We're here, Denny. What's going on? You sound out of breath? Are you okay?"

"Yes," Denny said quickly. "But you've got trouble. I just watched a whole bunch of—I think they were Russian soldiers get dropped into town."

"I know," John said sadly. "I heard it on the HAM net."

"They're killing people! I just saw them shoot an entire family..." Denny suddenly felt the urge to vomit.

"Listen to me," John said. "I want you to promise me, that whatever happens, you will stay up there in your fortress of solitude, son. Okay?"

“John...”

“Denny, I don’t know what is going on—it’s like the end of the world. But I do know that this country will need men like you soon. Men on the outside, men not willing to give up the fight. Promise me you won’t give up, Denny.”

Denny could feel something heavy rising in the pit of his stomach, a feeling of general rage he'd not felt since his teenage years when he'd been consumed with anger that his people had been put on reservations. He had been a hot-tempered youth, young Denoyan Tecumseh. In college, he'd learned to control his anger and use it, instead of letting it turn him into a tool of blind rage. He'd pushed that fury he felt on behalf of his ancestors down into the deepest part of his heart. Instead of acting on his anger, as some of his friends and relations had—they had been arrested or worse over the years—Denny decided to strike at the Anglos in another way.

He'd focused all his energy on becoming a teacher. A history teacher. He taught young Anglos the real truth that their parents and government tried to cover up. He taught that the United States of America was the only western power to get away with genocide. Millions of Native Americans murdered at the hands of Uncle Sam but no war crimes trials, no international outrage, no war of liberation for his people.

Denny had impressionable youths in his classes. So he had always lectured about the truth: about the Trail of Tears, about the families destroyed, the lives ruined and taken, the villages burned down, the death, the diseases, the heartache, and the injustice. And the powers that be had loved him for it.

Political correctness run amok had ushered Denny into the open arms of apologists at the local, state, and federal level. He got raise after raise, tenure, promotion, sabbaticals, anything he needed for his classroom. It was a dream come true.

And then one day, it was over. The anger that had driven him to succeed, to indoctrinate the supple, young Anglo minds with the truth, to fight back and strike at the soft underbelly of his enemy in the only way he could...was just...gone.

One day, he woke up and the voice full of burning desire to strike back for

his ancestors was silent. The anger was all used up. He backed off on his zealot-like quest and just enjoyed his job for what it was. He was a history teacher, and he was good at it. He brought a passion for the past that never failed to spark some interest or excitement in his students.

Now, for the first time in years, that anger had awakened. It was yawning and stretching his previously subdued limits of tolerance. He wasn't sure who to focus it on—the Russians for murdering his fellow residents, or his own government for allowing it to happen...regardless, the anger was awake.

He closed his eyes and counted twenty heartbeats. "I promise, John."

"Good," was the immediate reply. "I think we'll be okay. A burned-down house sits on top of us, remember? I haven't tried to open the door yet, but I think we're pretty well hidden."

"But don't we need to tell someone? The sheriff? The Army?"

There was a long pause. Denny was about to try again when the radio broke squelch. "I don't know son. It's hard to imagine they don't already know. Why they're not here protecting us...well...who knows? What with all the craziness back east and the Koreans in California..." His neighbor sighed, static breaking up his sad voice.

"It just doesn't make any sense. Ruthie is real tore up about it all," he whispered. "It does her good to know you're at least safe. We haven't had word from the children yet..."

Denny could hear the worry in his friend's voice. Before he could speak, he heard another sound, and it nearly made his heart stop. He put the radio to his mouth and keyed the transmit button. "John, I gotta go. I think someone is landing a helicopter nearby!"

"Go, run, Denny! Stay safe and call me when you can!"

The unmistakable sound of rotors slicing the air reverberated in the ranger station. He raced to the large wooden wall that spanned the entrance to the cave and threw open rough-hewn door. Almost as an afterthought, he snatched his bow and quiver on the way outside. Without a glance at the sky, he fled downhill toward the edge of the lake and made for the shadows and pines of the surrounding alpine forest. He didn't stop until he was a dozen yards inside the

tree line and dropped down behind a partially rotted log.

He lay there panting, listening to the sound of the helicopter reflect off the curved ridge of granite surrounding U.P. Lake. It seemed to be coming from the left, then behind him—the rock formation acted like an amphitheater.

He's circling, checking to see if anyone is home, the voice of Grandfather Red Eagle whispered.

Denny closed his eyes. *Now I'm hearing things. Mishe Moneto, hear my prayer—make my sight straight, my arrows fast, my aim true. Help me defend this place and protect my friends. Let me die well.*

The helicopter noise increased and remained steady. It was right behind him on the other side of the tree line. He peeked around the edge of the fallen tree and saw the great monstrous, alien-looking thing hovering there in midair, buffeting the closest trees and bushes with the downdraft from its big rotors. The spray kicked up off the lake swirled in a white mist directly under the helicopter. The noise was incredible.

It definitely wasn't American. The graceful lines of a Black Hawk were unmistakable to anyone who had ever seen a TV. This thing had a bulbous nose, longer wings than seemed prudent on a helicopter and a heavy belly. It was ugly, but it worked. The hallmark of Russian engineering.

As he watched, a side-door slid open and two black, thick ropes dropped out. Two men leaned over the edge and slid down the rope, followed by two more. It wasn't long before all four dark-camouflaged men were down on the rocky beach on the north shore of U.P. Lake. Once they'd moved safely away from the dangling ropes, one turned and waved to the waiting helicopter some thirty feet up. The evil-looking machine raised up effortlessly and moved on, trailing the ropes. It flew overhead and vanished behind him, flying east down the mountainside toward Salmon Falls. In a few moments, the serenity of the lakeside environment returned.

Denny watched, fascinated, as the four men raised rifles, pointed out in all directions. He could see the blue, white, and red shoulder patches with ease—that was *not* the American flag.

Whoever they were, the men wasted no time and scurried up from the north

shore of the lake to take positions on either side of the door to the ranger lodge. Two watched the trees. Denny had to fight the urge to duck. He had to remind himself, there was no way they could see him, as far back in the forest as he was.

Besides, unlike the Russians in their mostly black camo, he was wearing a woodland pattern and his green-and-brown face paint. He knew he looked like just another clump of greenery in the forest, but still, he had to force himself to stay calm.

The two men closest to the door nodded at each other and quickly moved inside. It only took a moment for someone to shout, and then one of the guards left outside went in.

They found my things, he thought to himself with a sickening fear in his stomach. *Now, they know someone has been here.* He could almost hear Grandfather's voice telling him to move deeper into the woods, to stay ahead of them.

He moved as slowly and silently as possible, deeper into the brush and crouched behind a pine tree some thirty yards from the lake. Even this far away, he could hear excited babble coming from the ranger station. He risked a glance around the trunk of the tree and saw all four Russians walking across the concrete landing pad, scanning the forest in all directions.

Now they hunt me, he moaned inwardly. Then he felt the anger stir again. His hand slipped down to the head of his tomahawk, ever present on his belt. The cold steel was reassuring and his mind cleared. *No—now I will hunt them.*

He waited, watching as the Russians talked among themselves, then the leader split them up into two groups. One two-man team turned and headed north into the tree line. The other headed south. On their present course, the south team would pass to Denny's left.

He crouched lower to the ground, trying to blend in as much as possible. Ever so slowly, as he watched the two Russians start down the slope, he pulled his bow up from the ground and carefully slid an arrow over his shoulder. They were moving systematically and cautiously, peering to their left and right. Step, pause, look. Step, pause, look.

Denny held himself still as a pond on a calm day and shifted only his eyes,

seeking the other two-man team. They had disappeared from sight on the south side of the lake, heading upslope to crest The Ridge. He turned his eyes back on his prey—they were almost even with him now, making a horrible amount of noise.

He grinned. They probably thought they were being stealthy. They had no idea. If he had his moccasins on, he would be no louder than the breath of a newborn baby. Slowly, he nocked the arrow and drew back the 80-pound bow to his cheek with his right hand. He held it steady there for one, two, three heartbeats. The Russians continued their search pattern walking close together: step, pause, look...step, pause—

Denny's first arrow took the soldier in the neck. The broadhead, sharpened to a razor's edge, sliced straight through, severing every vein and artery in its path before exiting the man's neck on the other side and embedding itself in the second soldier's left shoulder. The first man gurgled in surprise and went down spitting blood in a crimson fountain.

The second soldier screamed and a burst from his AK-47 split the silence of the forest. Birds exploded from trees overheard and bushes around them. He dropped to one knee, forgetting his rifle, and stared in horror at his comrade who was writhing on the ground, painting the plants around him in crimson. By the time the soldier noticed there was a 30-inch arrow shaft sticking out of his shoulder, Denny, still hidden in the bushes, had already drawn back his second arrow.

Denny figured he was only about fifteen yards from the second soldier, well within his bullseye range. He was an excellent archer and imagined his grandfather smiling at him as the second arrow hit home, right in the open mouth of the screaming soldier. The energy, transferred from his bow, blasted the hickory-shaft of the arrow straight through the Russian's oral cavity—the arrowhead struck the back of his helmet with a loud *crack*. The force of the impact jerked his head back, silencing his screaming and sending him toppling over to the ground.

Denny spared a moment for a deep breath and then noticed the first man was still; the second merely twitched in the silence of impending death. The second

arrow trembled like a nervous rabbit as it stood straight up in the air out of the doomed invader's mouth. Denny marveled that he'd just killed two men like deer and felt nothing more than admiration for his accuracy.

Not men, Grandfather's voice said. Invaders. Foreigners. Soldiers who came to kill and plunder. Remember what they did in town?

Someone shouted farther up the slope. The others were coming. Denny figured anyone with the sense God gave a rock would figure out where the arrows had come from. He needed to move. *Now.*

The shouting got louder, closer. He could hear someone crashing through the undergrowth upslope. He slunk back deeper into the bush and then began slowly, cautiously making his way south and west around the slope of the mountain, always keeping trees and bushes between him and his prey.

In the distance, Denny thought he heard a helicopter once more. He resolved to take care of this problem quickly, lest more Russians arrived. Then the sound changed. It wasn't one helicopter—there were two. One had a distinctly deeper *thrum* to the sound of its rotors.

Denny knew right away when the other two Russians found the bodies of their comrades; two voices cried out in surprise and anger. A few startled birds took flight, squawking in indignation. Denny watched as the Russians crouched low and started scanning the area, ignoring the approaching helicopters. As Denny had hoped, they looked back toward the general direction from which he'd fired his first two arrows. He drew back on his bow, keeping his body tight against the rough bark of a pine tree.

He examined his targets. They wore some kind of armored vests that looked similar to ones he'd seen on the news, with large rucksacks and helmets that had tubes and wires attached to the sides. He figured they were cameras and radio antennae.

Denny hoped the sound of the approaching helicopters would prompt one of them, at least, to look upslope toward the lake. Then, he thought of something. Grinning, he let out a Shawnee war whoop that split the silence of the forest.

One of the Russians shouted in surprise and dove for the ground. The other turned his head, confusion evident on his face. The arrow was already halfway to

him when he spotted Denny by the tree. The broadhead took him full in the face and he was dead before he hit the ground, spraying his comrade with dark blood.

Denny dropped and rolled to the right, behind the tree, and got to his knees to pull another arrow. The second soldier, larger than his comrade, had been face-down in the dirt when Denny had fired, so he didn't think the Russian had seen him. He slowly lifted his head and saw movement on the other side of the bush. The Russian had moved faster than he'd thought, and was nearly on top of him before he could get to his knees.

A shout of rage and a blinding flash of light coincided with incredible pain erupting on the side of his face. The next thing Denny knew, he was rolling down the slope through the loamy pine needles, his bow and arrows torn from his body by the fall. His ears were filled with the roar from the helicopters above. Soon, he figured darkly, there would be *dozens* of Russians on the hunt. He was quickly running out of time.

He tumbled to an abrupt stop against the side of a tree with a painful crash. His face throbbed, his back hurt, and everything was blurry. He was aware his mouth was filled with blood and pine needles, but he was still alive. Denny shook his head to clear his vision and spat a glob of blood onto the ground between his hands. He tried to keep his tears from blinding him. He heard some guttural speech and saw the remaining Russian swipe a tree branch out of the way with his rifle, his face a dark mask of anger.

Denny tried to get to his feet but the Russian was faster. He lunged the short distance between them and put a boot in Denny's stomach. Denny grunted in pain and felt himself crash into the tree again. The Russian laughed and said something that sounded offensive. It wasn't so much the words as the tone that Denny could understand.

When the Russian's rifle was tossed to the ground in contempt, Denny realized the man knew he was an Indian. Denny glanced up, blinking through his tears, and saw the big Russian grin as he slowly removed his helmet and unsheathed a big knife from his belt.

Son of a bitch—he wants to scalp me!

Steel with steel, Little Spear, Grandfather calmly whispered.

Charged with adrenaline, Denny's hand moved with lightning-speed and whipped the nearly forgotten tomahawk from his belt. As the knife came down, the tomahawk went up. Steel met steel with a spark.

The tomahawk won. The Russian gasped as Denny parried the knife and swung the tomahawk forward to gain a little respect and distance. Denny grunted with pain as he struggled to his feet. The Russian stepped back and chuckled as he swatted Denny's other arm away.

It seemed to Denny that the Russian had to be made of granite. The man was rock hard and incredibly strong. Soon, Denny began to realize that he was becoming fatigued, or perhaps he'd injured himself more than he'd realized during his tumble down the slope. Panic started to writhe its snake-like tendrils around his spine. Fear—paralyzing fear—tickled his senses and heightened them at the same time.

Bend, do not break, whispered Red Eagle.

Denny staggered to his feet one more time and rocked backwards, narrowly missing a haymaker that would have broken his jaw for sure. He felt the wind on his face as the Russian's massive fist cruised past his face.

Denny could see in the Russian's eyes that his enemy knew he was off balance, but the cocksure invader didn't seem to be worried about Denny mounting a counterattack. Denny saw only arrogance and contempt on the Russian's broad Slavic face. Suddenly, a burning spark of rage flared to life in his gut, shattering what concern he had for his own safety as he was consumed in a white hot fury.

Denny whipped the tomahawk up in a vicious arc and was well-satisfied by the choked-off scream the Russian let fly. The 'hawk sliced right through the invader's right arm at the bicep. It wasn't a fatal wound, or even crippling, but it put the Slavic bastard on notice that Denoyan Tecumseh was not about to go down without a fight.

Denny stepped back into a fighting crouch, left arm up and forward, right cocked back, the tomahawk waiting to taste flesh again. A new sense of strength flowed through his veins. He grinned at the surprised look on the Russian's face.

"I am Shawnee!" Denny roared. He stepped forward, thrust his chest out and

arms wide in a show of bravery and contempt for his enemy. *See? Here I am, unarmored, unafraid, unconquered.*

“I am a warrior like my fathers before me!” He lunged to the left, making the Russian dodge right, exactly where Denny wanted him.

Denny was fast, and the tomahawk flashed like lighting as it caught a stray beam of sunlight piercing the canopy above—but the Russian and his smaller knife were faster. Sparks flew as the knife glanced off the tomahawk. He had deftly blocked Denny, but only just so. Denny spun around and swung a backhanded blow to keep the Russian at a distance. Again the Russian countered, but just barely managed to block the tomahawk as it sung through the air. Denny could feel his confidence rising and launched his war dance in earnest.

Back and forth, twirl, upper cut, backhand—the tomahawk sang to Denny as it whistled through the air, coming closer and closer to its final kiss on the Russian’s neck. Again and again, the big European parried and dodged as he backpedaled and weaved to avoid Denny's sudden, furious onslaught.

When the Russian, panting with exertion in his fancy-looking ballistic armor paused to flip his knife into a reverse grip, Denny saw his chance and made to strike the man's wrist with his own blade. The Russian flinched just enough to miss the tomahawk’s bite, but that was what Denny wanted. With a flick of his own wrist, he brought the hard-as-iron hickory handle straight into the invader’s face and felt the satisfying crunch of the man's nose through the shaft.

The Russian grunted and staggered back, dark blood streaming down his face. He screamed, a low, growling primordial sound, and charged. Denny waited for him and held his ground. With his arm down there was not enough time to raise it and strike or parry, anyway. The Russian stabbed and Denny weaved, pulling his arm up and the tomahawk blade easily buried itself in the Russian's crotch.

An unearthly wail escaped the big man's face. He froze. Denny shoved him backwards and watched the arrogant bastard fall on his back in a cloud of pine needles. The wounded Russian cried out in pain as his shaking hands fumbled at his belt. He began to jabber away in Russian as Denny stood over him,

tomahawk raised for the killing blow.

Denny paused, catching his own breath, and realized his ancestors must've experienced the same thrill, fear, and anger. He wanted to savor the moment of victory, and truth be told, wasn't all that excited to bury the tomahawk in the Russian's neck and—

The Russian had pulled a sidearm free and had it pointed right at Denny's chest. The dark, open-end of the barrel—looking like a cave to Denny—wavered back and forth in the Russian's blood-slick, trembling hands. He smiled a red smile and spat something Denny thought was probably along the lines of *see you in hell*.

Denny sighed and closed his eyes. Deep down, he knew this was the end of his life. He had lost. His ancestors, as he had long feared throughout his life, would scorn him for wasting the gift they had bestowed upon him through countless generations of struggle and sacrifice. He accepted his fate and waited for death.

Stupid. Standing there, holding the tomahawk, and yet you let him pull a gun on you. Idiot.

A single shot rang out in the forest. He flinched, stunned he felt no pain. *Sometimes that happens, I guess.*

When he opened his eyes, he was *really* surprised. He'd fully expected to see Grandfather standing before him. All he saw was the forest: mountain pines, scrub brush, a sloping terrain, dirt, rocks, pine needles. *Wait, aren't you supposed to see your family when you die?*

He looked down, expecting to be floating above his body. Instead, he saw the Russian, dead, missing half his head. Bright red blood had sprayed out all over the tree trunk next to the body. It looked like someone had splattered cherry cobbler on the ground at his feet. Denny looked at his own chest quickly, but saw only his dirty, sweat-soaked shirt. No bullet hole. Then it dawned on him that the shot he'd heard had come from the *left*—upslope from his position, toward the lake.

The helicopters.

He turned slowly, tomahawk still in the air, ready to strike. Facing him were

three men in blood-splattered white camouflage, all with rifles trained on him. One stood in the middle, flanked by one crouched low, and the third, leaning against a tree. All three had snow-white balaclavas covering their faces. He could see no insignia.

Who the hell are these guys?

“Drop it, sir,” the tall one said in a commanding, if not unfriendly Midwestern voice. “After what you did to these Russian bastards, I’d hate to have to shoot you, too.” He could almost hear the grin in the man’s voice.

Denny lowered his arm. He suddenly felt very tired. The tomahawk felt as if it weighed a hundred pounds. He loosened his grip and heard the soft thump of the blade hitting the pine needles at his feet. In the distance, he heard more helicopters. The thunderous roar echoed around him—it felt like the forest itself was vibrating.

“Who—” Denny said. He swallowed and cleared his parched throat. “Who are you?”

The tall man lowered his rifle and slung it over his shoulder before stepping forward. As he did so, the two men with him turned in opposite directions and swept the forest around them, weapons pointed toward the trees.

The tall one approached and pulled his balaclava down, revealing a hard face and bright blue eyes under a white helmet. Denny could see the man’s shoulder was stained with dried blood and there was a tear in the camo jacket.

“Captain Derek Alston, US Army.” He extended his right hand.

“Rangers!” added the kneeling soldier.

“Hooah,” grunted the third.

Denny happily shook the proffered hand and said, “My ancestors will probably roll in their graves to hear me say this but...*Goddamn*, I’m glad to see you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BARRON

Washington, D.C.

The White House

Presidential Emergency Operations Center

“YES, general, I understand. I assure you—no...I see. Yes, sir. Trust me, General Korolev, I am just as saddened as you are over...no, it was *not*...it was a civilian action.”

The President listened to the phone for a moment, then frowned. “Yes, General, I fully understand the effort that goes into training your...yes, I understand, they...”

The frown hardened. Being chewed out by the Governor General of Russian forces in America was *not* on his list of items to accomplish today. “General, I sympathize with you, but my military had nothing to do with this. Perhaps if your soldiers were not so harsh with my citizens, they would not resort to such violent outbursts. Be glad you are not experiencing more of this!”

He hung up before the Russian pig could butcher the English language any further. Leaning back in his chair, he sighed and loosened the collar constricting his throat.

Next to him in the main conference room, the Secretary of Defense quietly

hung up his receiver. “Well, *that* went well.”

“Can you explain to me,” President Barron said wearily, eyes scanning the ceiling tiles, “why the Russians are so upset that they lost four men up in the wilds of Idaho?” He waved a hand.

“I’ve confirmed with General Harrison that the Source and his escort have yet to reach Salmon Falls. It was odd,” Secretary Troyes said, “he almost seemed happy that we’ve lost the signal from the GPS tracker in Mr. Huntley. At any rate,” he said, with a shake of his head, “the Russians are more than likely just as embarrassed a group of hunters took down four of their soldiers...”

How prideful these military types are... It seemed that sentiment was true across nationalities—his own Marine Corps Commandant was about as full of pride as the pompous Russian, General Korolev. The stuffed-up old goat had been nagging him daily about the occupation of American soil by U.N.-sanctioned troops.

As if they were a conquering army. Hell, we asked them...well, Reginald asked them to come here.

Still, Generals Harrison and Rykker will deserve watching, now. Everywhere I look, I see dissension in the ranks. I really need to make sure the Joint Chiefs are loyal to me. He jotted down a note to have replacements vetted.

The monitor in front of the Secretary chirped and lit up. The President watched the Secretary of Defense read for a moment. “Sir,” he said softly, “another riot has started. Boston.”

The President sighed. “When will they realize the Germans are there to *help* them?”

“I believe we’ll be ice skating in hell before that happens, sir.”

The President sighed once more. “Here we go again. Just like Philly. All right,” he said, bringing his attention back down to the conference table. “How bad is it, this time?”

“Looks like the Germans lost another eleven men last night. Three more this morning. The usual M.O.: Molotov cocktails, rocks, small arms fire, and a few snipers using hunting rifles from the distance. How they keep smuggling these damn things into the towns that are blockaded is beyond me...”

“Damn!” muttered the President. Reginald would not be pleased. He seemed to take a European death as a personal affront during this little adventure of his. Though it had been a few days since he had spoken directly with Reginald. All his communications of late had been through...

Jayne. The President had to force himself to not think of her and focus on the older man next to him.

“Okay. So what happened? How many American casualties?” the President mumbled.

“Well, let’s see...” Secretary Troyes said, perusing the report. “Says here the Germans report they were on a routine patrol...blah, blah, blah...bad neighborhood...uh...oh, here it is—they had to fire live ammunition into the crowd in order to effect a retreat to their outpost.”

The Secretary of Defense continued reading, then paused and suddenly looked very old and very tired. “Christ Almighty,” he whispered and removed his glasses. He rubbed his eyes and sighed. “This will not be good.”

“How many?”

The Secretary of Defense put his glasses back on to read the report. “The trigger-happy bastards killed 37 citizens and wounded another 129. My God—the pictures, sir...it was a bloodbath.” He peered at the President over the rims of his glasses like a constipated frog.

“Well...maybe these rabble rousers will have learned the lesson this time—” President Barron began. “I mean, I made the announcements, I signed the executive order—the U.N. has full legal and military control over cities like Boston, what more do I have to—”

“Sir, have you considered the possibility that actions like this,” Secretary Troyes said, slapping the gruesome report onto the table, “sanctioned by your administration, are literally pouring gasoline on the fire?”

“Albert, this is for the greater good—”

“Mr. President, these Americans are sick, hungry, and scared to death of the super flu. Then, they get news that the Germans are taking over Boston. Boston, sir. The very cradle of our nation. Do you realize there’s a group operating there calling themselves the Sons of Liberty? The Germans have already labeled them

terrorists, but the people in Boston are hailing them as heroes. Do you have any idea what an event like this—” He shook his head. “Then, you suspend the cotton-picking Constitution—”

“That was *only* necessary to maintain order and appease the German Governor, because the people—” Barron began.

“Sir, will you *listen* to yourself?” snapped the Secretary of Defense. “You are the President of the United States of America—the most powerful man on the *planet*! You don’t need to appease anyone! Let alone a bunch of pompous Europeans—right here, inside our own cities! Is it any wonder the people are good and pissed off?” He stared at the President.

“I...” President Barron cleared his throat. “I thought if we partnered with—”

“These people are just *looking* for an excuse to riot after the trucks stopped delivering food and supplies, thanks to that damn flu...and you’re handing it to them on a daily basis the more you get in bed with the Germans,” said the Secretary.

“Maybe if we had the National Guard on station—”

“Sir, they’d be more likely to shoot the U.N. troops than American citizens, even if they were rioting. And with good reason.”

President Barron clenched his teeth for a moment and decided enough was enough. “Is that so? Tell me, Albert—if we suggested that anyone in uniform that wasn’t loyal to my administration was summarily discharged, without pay, without food tickets, without base housing for their families...do you really think you’d have that many on our side just throw their hands up and walk away because a bunch of strangers decided to riot? I don’t think so—everyone in our military has access to the latest medical treatment, food, shelter, protection. Out there...” The President waved a hand, then checked himself. “*Up* there, the unwashed masses are fighting and squabbling over scraps of food and clean water. They’re losing reliable electrical power, they’re getting sick and watching people die all around them as this damn flu sweeps across the country—”

“I am telling you sir, putting American soldiers into this situation will just piss everyone off—”

The President’s heart hardened. “We’ll see who’s pissed off after they realize

that working for me and following my orders is the only way they and their families will have even a chance at surviving this shitstorm we're in right now. Order the National Guard to back up the Germans. The next time the rioters get out of control, we'll have American troops there to help crush it as well."

The Secretary of Defense gaped at the President like a fish out of water. "Sir...*sir*. I beg you to reconsider..." He looked at his hands and stammered incoherently for a moment, then regained some composure. "Sir, ordering American troops to fire on American civilians...in a situation like this..." He shrugged. "It could start a civil war."

The President wasn't listening anymore. He detected a faint whiff of a...a familiar sweet fragrance...gently circulating in the air. Something that sent his pulse racing. Absently, he lifted a hand, bored with the conversation. "Albert, you're as bad as that old-goat of a Marine. What's-his-face. The Commandant."

Secretary Troyes' face flushed, but the President didn't care. His eyes were open but he was remembering Jayne in the bubble bath. "I'll expect your resignation letter on my desk by three o'clock. If you won't carry out my orders and do your duty for your country, I'll just find someone who will. There seem to be plenty of people that want to help around here...Now leave me alone."

The Secretary of Defense's face darkened with anger. "You little...of all the arrogance..." he growled. "I've faithfully served the last three presidents, and you couldn't hold a candle next to any one of them—"

"What are you talking about, Albert?" The President laughed. "Candles? Are you senile?" the President asked dreamily. He giggled when the door on the far side of the room cracked open. Jayne gracefully leaned inside the door and smiled; the seductive look in her sensuous eyes were filled with promise. Her scent wafted in with the air from outside the room in a new wave—it made his body tingle with anticipation.

"Go on, Al, get out of here. I've got important things to...handle."

"You're destroying this country, you...you...fool! And you don't even know it. I had my doubts that you were fit to command...now, I know..." The Secretary of Defense stood up, gathering his papers in a huff. Another door opened and a Secret Service agent in black fatigues stepped in and waited. With

an angry glance over his shoulder, Secretary Troyes continued, “General Rykker is right; you are a pompous ass that never should've been on the ticket, let alone elected.”

The President turned his full fury on the older man in a sudden blast. “And *you*, sir,” he said, jumping out of his plush chair and pointing a finger in the Secretary’s face, “are dangerously close to treason. Get him out of here! Now!”

Before the Secretary of Defense could retort, the agent grabbed him by the shoulder and hauled him out of the room, sputtering like a wet cat. Papers flew through the air as the Secretary of Defense was twirled around and shoved through the open door. The agent, one highly recommended by Jayne, paused at the door and looked at the President, one eyebrow raised.

The Commander in Chief nodded with a half-smile. The agent grinned and shut the door quietly. The President ignored the cries of pain and surprise when the door shut and the beating began.

“Now you won’t have to worry about that resignation, you old fart.” A muffled crash ended the screaming in the hallway. The President’s briefing room was once again nearly silent, the only sound being the softly purring ventilation system.

“Finally,” murmured Jayne as she sashayed across the room and sat suggestively on the edge of the conference table. She pushed a hidden button and smiled as the room resonated with the sound of all the doors locking shut.

President Barron grinned. They were alone now, and it would stay that way until one of them unlocked the doors.

In an exaggerated move, she released her golden hair from the painfully tight-looking ponytail and shook her head luxuriously. The high-slashed skirt she wore fell away nearly to her hips, revealing a toned, yet supple thigh that begged to be touched.

The President’s vision blurred in time with his accelerated heartbeat. He stumbled forward, eyes on the bare, slightly tanned skin of her upper leg resting coyly on the table. He could almost feel the heat emanating from that skin—it drew him forward like a moth to the flame.

When he staggered into her embrace and felt the soft velvet of her lips on

his, it eclipsed anything he had ever experienced in his life. He was positively drunk on her, drowning in her scent, her presence. Breaking the kiss to come up for air, he stepped back. It was almost *too* much.

He clawed at the shirt on his chest. It was restricting his breathing somehow. Tiny black spots were flitting in and out of his vision, dancing around in a breathtaking view before his eyes. Even now, teetering on the edge of collapse, he found her irresistible.

“Easy now, sir,” she purred. In one graceful, feline motion, she stood and swept across the floor to him, entwining her slender arms around his neck. A quick nibble on his ear lobe sent a lightning bolt from the balls of his feet to his forehead. The black spots grew larger. His vision narrowed to a tunnel that encompassed Jayne and nothing else. And still, her smell enveloped him and caressed his senses.

She gently pushed him back into his chair. He did not resist as he sat heavily.

“You need to breathe...” she said.

At her soft words, every ounce of his concentration quickly went into breathing.

It was amazing, he noted, how much control she had over him. And he didn’t care. Not at all.

She pouted. “These people in Boston are causing all kinds of trouble.”

“I...I know...” he stammered, seeking fresh air for his lungs. Her perfume was like a thick fog. The bouquet was sweet and light, yet it was so dense he found it hard to breathe. Nonetheless, he wanted to drown in that fragrance.

He watched her as she perused the papers and files in front of him on the polished table. “These people,” she purred, her fingers caressing the graphic pictures from the previous night’s slaughter. “These Sons of Liberty—they are... some sort of resistance...right?” she murmured. Her hand left the picture and found his face, tracing a finger down his cheek and along the side of his neck. He shuddered in pleasure.

“Rabble...trash...” he muttered, eyes rolling up into his head. He tried to flip a hand to dismiss the very idea.

“Mmmhmmmm...” she cooed, her blue eyes reduced to mere slits. “And

you,” she whispered, leaning in over his chest. He could feel her bosom brush against his shirt and his arms twitched. “Need to crush them.” Another nibble at the ear. He groaned.

“Crush...”

“Yes, my love,” she whispered. “But first, you must destroy Denton.”

He fluttered back into consciousness. “Denton...what—?”

“I know,” she said with another school-girl pout. “He’s still alive...can you believe it?” He felt soft hands unbuttoning his shirt. His own hands gripped the armrests tight. Her hot breath on his bare chest sent his back rigid against the chair.

“We intercepted a phone call from a nurse to her husband...she’s with Denton now...”

“Need to...deal...with him...” *Wait...Who is we?*

“Oh, yes,” she said, barely audible. “He’s at some dreadful Air Force base in Los Angeles...” He gasped in pleasure as she put her mouth on his chest and delivered the gentlest of kisses.

“I...” he gasped. “I heard, yes. Just rumors.”

“The Koreans already destroyed it...oooooooh...” she said in a delightfully sinful voice, her hands roaming farther south. “But,” she said, “there were survivors. The North Koreans promised to remove this problem for us...in return for us not fighting their invasion. But it looks like they are failing, despite all our efforts to help them...”

The President gasped for breath. The black spots in his vision rendered him nearly blind, but didn’t care. *All our efforts? What’s she talking about? God bless her, she’s confusing...*

“The man in charge of the Air Force base,” she whispered, letting her hands walk up his chest again, “Colonel Molton...he is...a friend of ours. Give him the authority—”

“I’ll do it!” he hissed. “Do what it takes...”

“Yeeeeessssss,” she murmured. “Very good...” She pressed the length of her body against his, straddling him in the chair. They both leaned slowly back, the weight of her on his chest pinning him as if she were made of iron—not flesh

and blood, filled to the brim with desire.

He couldn't breathe. His muscles had tensed with panic. His vision was completely gone. The muscles in his chest tightened to the point of pain. Air, he needed *air*.

"*Help...*" he squeaked, using the last of his oxygen. She had to help.

She giggled, the sound drifting to him from a dream. He was falling now, deeper and deeper into a well. She was up there—at the top—looking down and watching him fall, slowly toward the...

"Breathe, my love..."

And he breathed, a great deep gulp of sweet air. His vision rushed back. He lay there, settled back in the chair with her laying on top of him, smiling at him from only an inch away. Her lithe form sent shockwaves of pleasure coursing through him. He could feel her arms snaking around his neck again, pulling her closer.

"Will you do this thing for me?" she whispered, laying her head on his shoulder. Her hair felt like silk as it cascaded down his arm and across his bare chest.

"Anything..." he whispered.

She nibbled at his neck. "Good..." Slowly she pushed on his chest and pulled herself away. Still sitting in his lap, she bent over backwards, displaying a nimbleness and agility that caused his mind to spin with the possibilities. She arched her back and reached over the conference table, picking up the phone. Once more facing him, she handed him the phone.

"Now tell him," she said in a commanding voice.

"I..." he said and smiled. He felt drunk. This wasn't real. "Who?"

Her face remained neutral. The softness faded from her, evaporating before his eyes. "Tell that self-serving, little shit of a base commander to order his men to *execute* the traitors. All of them." Her eyes narrowed. She shoved the phone into his limp hand. "Now."

He pulled the phone to his ear, in a slow, dreamlike movement.

"Hello?" a deep voice said.

"This is Harold Barron. Who am I speaking with?" he said in a voice that

was strong and vigorous. He was amazed at how suddenly assertive and in-command he sounded.

“Mr. President! Yes, sir. This is Colonel Andrew Molton, acting base commander, sir.”

“Colonel Molton, you have identified the traitors...?”

“Yes, Mr. President, they’re trapped in an older part of the bunker system here.”

“Very good. I want them taken care of, immediately.”

“Mr. President?”

He sighed. “How is it you soldiers talk? ‘Terminate with extreme prejudice.’ How’s that? Kill them. Every last one. They represent a clear and present danger to the national security of the United States. Is that enough legalese for you? Colonel, this is coming straight from my lips. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes...yes, sir,” said the voice, uncertainty clouding his words.

“Colonel Molton...”

“Sir?”

“Do this for me, and you’ll be *General* Molton by sundown. I’m looking for a new man to coordinate the Air Force counterattack...”

“Consider it done, Mr. President!” The line went dead.

The President exhaled and let the phone drop from his hand to clatter on the floor. His head lolled back against the chair and stared at the ceiling again. He was utterly exhausted. Every ounce of strength he had went into keeping his voice authoritative and strong. He began to quiver all over, as if he were going into shock.

Then she was there, slithering all over his body, embracing him, surrounding him, securing him, feeding him. She *was* him. He was her. He felt like he was floating, and his mind drifted on wave after wave of pleasure. Colors bursting overhead like fireworks clouded his vision.

Is this real?

“You did well,” she murmured in his ear, her voice soft, yet exploding in his mind like a bomb. Her fingertips brushed his skin, electricity crackling in her wake. He noticed his shirt was off, but he couldn’t remember when...

He sighed and gave in. Gave up? He smiled. It didn't matter. Only she mattered. And the sensations she gave him. He knew in that instant he would do anything, anything, to keep these feelings coming. If there was ever a Heaven on Earth, he was in it.

"Should I reward you now?" she whispered, her lips brushing the sensitive skin of his neck. A kiss here, a touch of fingertips there. Her smell was so thick he could almost see the clouds of heaven swirling around him.

Reward? What the hell is she talking about?

"Mmmmmmm...that's a yes," she chuckled. Her voice sounded as if it were coming from the next room. "But first..."

You mean it gets better?

"Wha—what?" he gasped. *Anything...just tell me.*

"I want you to disband Congress...send them home. For their own safety, of course."

Fine. Done.

"I...what?" A myriad of conflicting thoughts flitted across his mind, warnings, desires, the country, loyalty, lust...dammit all, it was so hard to concentrate.

"This is a time...of crisis. No place for...oh, what do you call them...legislators?" A finger trailed down his forehead, down the bridge of his nose and touched his lips together when he tried to mumble a weak protest.

"Don't talk. Just *do*. Listen to me, my love...just do what I say. Do what I say and this...will never end."

He cried out in pleasure. Everything went white. His toes began to tingle. It was the most delicious feeling he'd ever experienced. He wanted more. He had to have more.

God, please...

"Will you help me?" she said in a sweet voice.

"I'll do it!" he gasped. "Anything...just tell...tell me what to do." He tried to smile but was overcome with a sudden sensation of numbness. He began to worry that his smile looked more like a grimace—he couldn't feel his face. He didn't care.

“Tell me what to do...” he whined.

“Good!” she said. The slinky temptress vanished into the guise of the nonsense administrative aide. He felt his eyes go wide in shock.

“We’ve got a lot to get done,” she said matter-of-factly. “I happen to have a stack of papers for you to sign...you need to grant permanent rights to the U.N. forces...and you’ll have to come up with a convincing speech to give to Congress about why they need to take a leave of absence...but don’t worry about the details for all that. I’ll be here to help you! Oh, and then, there’s the Koreans...”

He groaned in frustration.

“But,” she said, fingers to her lip. The administrative aide was gone, replaced once more with his seductress. She smiled, one finger caressing the corner of her full, ruby red, pouting lower lip. “All that boring stuff can wait...”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BRENDA

*El Segundo, California
Los Angeles Air Force Base*

“MR. PRESIDENT, if you could—*please*—lay back down and relax,” pleaded Dr. Honeycutt. The Chief of Emergency Medicine wrung his hands—it was clear he was not used to people disobeying his orders.

The pounding on the other side of the thick door intensified. Brief muffled shouts drifted into the communications room. The SEALs knelt on either side of the entrance, weapons ready, but with their eyes full of questions as they looked to their leader, standing near the President.

Brenda had a lot of questions, as well. *How the hell are we going to get out of this? Did they really mean we were all traitors? I’m just a doctor...I didn’t shoot anyone...*

“Miss,” said the President gently, drawing her attention back down to the gurney where the leader of the free world lay dying. He put an emaciated hand on Brenda’s and squeezed. She had to force herself to look at his face. The skin around his ears was a distinct blue color. His eyes were sunken into grayish folds of skin that on closer inspection, were just dark blue. Memories of the Blue Flu made her stagger backwards in fear.

No...no, it can't be back...

"Take this thing out of my arm so I can put my coat on. *Please*," the President gasped. "I'll be damned if the last image people have of me is...this."

"Sir," she said, feeling her throat constrict with emotion. Here he was, a septuagenarian, on death's doorstep from the weaponized flu, and he was worried about making sure he was wearing a proper coat to address the nation—a nation that had already given him up for dead. She tried hard to hold back the tears. She knew from The Pandemic that once an infected patient started showing signs of cyanosis, death was only a few short hours away—if they lasted that long

"Please, sir...this tube is helping to keep you alive until—"

Something heavy hit the door, causing everyone in the room to suddenly stop and look around with alarm. The *thud* echoed again through the door. Whatever they were doing, base security was determined as hell to smash the door down. She shot a glance at Cooper, the SEAL leader. He frowned. The expression didn't make him any less handsome. Brenda averted her eyes before he noticed her stare.

"Miss..." The hand squeezed hers again. She looked down, thankful for the distraction. The President's grip was no stronger than a two-month-old baby's. "I know I don't have much time." He wheezed and coughed, a gurgling, wet sound. "I can see it in the look on your face, dear. Please let me do this my way."

One of the nurses—Brenda thought her name was Pam—sneezed. Everyone froze again. Brenda shot Dr. Honeycutt a look. He nodded and moved to put an arm around the poor woman. She had her hands to her face, covering her mouth and a frantic look in her eyes.

Does she have it? Brenda watched as Dr. Honeycutt got the nurse to sit on a dusty chair while he pulled out his stethoscope and checked her breathing. Quickly, with the practiced skill of a country doctor, he ran his hand over her forehead. He turned to look at Brenda and frowned with a quick shake of his head.

Shit. She's got a fever. Her hand moved to the surgical mask over her face. *Don't think these are doing any good...we're probably all infected already.*

“Sir, we’re all set,” said the Air Force technician across the small room. “When we send out the signal, everyone on the continent who has an antenna hooked up to a TV will see you. It may not get to every house in the country, but you’ll get to a lot of people. I’m going to be bouncing this off three different birds. I bet everyone in Washington will see you, at the very least.”

“I’m sure they will, son,” said the President with a grandfatherly smile. He turned back to Brenda. “Help me sit up.”

She didn’t hear the President’s soft request. Brenda was pouring over possibilities, percentages, and risks in her head. *How long before others in this little group starting showing symptoms?* She looked around at the SEALs. *How many of them are infected but not presenting yet?* They had all been around the President, nearly as much as the medical staff...

“Right here, sir,” said Cooper as he gently slipped an arm around the elderly man and raised him up off the gurney. Brenda jumped into motion and propped a few pillows behind the President. The Air Force sergeant put a small desktop podium across the President’s lap.

“It doesn’t have the Presidential Seal, sir...but we’ll zoom in so it won’t matter.”

“Very good. Thank you, Sergeant Lopez.”

“Sir.” The airman hesitated. “I just want you to know...it’s an honor to meet you, Mr. President.”

The old man smiled thinly.

Another man wearing a blue jumpsuit raised his hand and said, “Sir, two minutes until we get the signal back.” One of the panels behind him chirped and went red. He smacked it with the palm of his hand, bringing the light back to green. “Ah...that’s if it holds together.”

Brenda looked at the impressive array of equipment in the shadows on the far side of the room. To her, it looked like Mission Control at NASA, not a communications center. She marveled at the progress of technology. Forty years ago, that equipment was considered state of the art. Now, she could easily do the same thing with a cellphone—if the entire world hadn’t gone completely to hell.

“Okay, Mr. President,” said Lopez with a hand on the President’s shoulder.

“When I give you the hi-sign, start talking. You’ll have about...” He looked over his shoulder at the other airmen, manning the control stations. One looked up and held up a hand, all fingers splayed out.

“You’ll have about five minutes of clear airtime to broadcast,” continued Lopez. “After that, the satellites will be out of range and the feed will drop.”

“How did you figure all of that out so fast?” asked Dr. Honeycutt.

The airman with his hand up stepped off-camera and said over his shoulder, “We got word from NORAD yesterday on how to backdoor some old communication and weather satellites from the ‘60s. It allowed us to reestablish contact with Washington and...well, this isn’t going to be 3D-HD or anything, but people will know the President’s still with us, that’s for sure. It wasn’t easy to get these old pieces of...” An embarrassed look came over the young man’s face. He glanced at Brenda and looked away.

“Uh...these old *computers*, to work...they’re really ancient, now. But...the process is basically the same as with new equipment. Think of it like a webcam. On steroids. Just got to massage these old ones a little more.”

“One minute!” someone called out from the bank of control panels. “I got us hooked into the base feed. Everyone here will see you now as well, sir.”

“Okay, everybody, back out of the light,” said Lopez. “We need quiet!” He frowned in Dr. Honeycutt’s direction. The Chief of Medicine placed a comforting hand on the shoulder of the sobbing nurse next to him in order to keep her quiet.

“Our microphone isn’t exactly Hollywood quality.” He checked his watch. “Okay...you’re sure about this, sir?” he asked.

The pounding on the door continued unabated.

“Yes,” said President Denton, his pale, sweaty skin making him look like a living skeleton.

“I’ve always wanted to do this,” said Lopez with a grin. “And five... four...*three...two...*” the sergeant held up one finger then closed his fist and pointed at the President.

“Good evening, my fellow Americans,” said the President weakly. He cleared his throat and spoke more forcefully, “As the saying goes, the reports of

my demise have been greatly exaggerated.” He smiled thinly, clearly in pain. The smile faded as he stared into the camera.

“I’m speaking to you today...” He coughed wetly and only with great effort regained his sitting position. Brenda felt a strong urge to run to him and help. That was when she noticed the pounding at the door had stopped. She looked at Cooper. He winked and nodded at the door. Brenda felt a flutter in her belly. She suddenly wanted very much to feel the texture of his stubbly beard under her fingertips.

“I am sorry. To all Americans, I wish to say...” He coughed again. “I’m sorry, so terribly sorry. It was through...” He wheezed for breath. “Through my actions, my policies, and those of my party that brought this great nation...” Another coughing fit. This latest one seemed to sap his strength. “It has brought us to this unfortunate moment. I see that now. I cannot express to you how very much I regret the decisions I’ve made during the course of my political career. But that is behind us. History will judge me, and me alone for that.”

Brenda could see the outline of one of the airmen wheeling his hand to signal the President to hurry it up. She silently prayed that he would have the strength to say whatever it was he wanted to say. Behind her, the nurse sneezed again. She winced.

“I don’t have much time with you...so I want say this: it is clear that Vice President Harold Barron has been a wolf in sheep's clothing. He has had himself sworn in as president and has taken power in Washington, D.C...in an unprecedented, *illegal* act. He has usurped the Constitution itself and is in the process of bending it to his will...” He slumped a little, struggling to breathe through fluid-filled lungs. Brenda’s heart nearly broke at the sight of the old man fighting so hard.

When the President at last raised his head, a trickle of blood was tracing a line out of his nose. “You people in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and the other occupied cites of the east...you know this all too well,” he said in a wheeze. He swallowed and coughed again.

“I want you all—all Americans loyal to the Constitution, to the foundation, the history, the very essence of our society—I want you to know, I hereby

appoint the Speaker of the House, Orren Harris, as my legitimate successor, until such time as a special election can be held. I have heard of the actions Vice President Barron has taken and ordered to be taken...I..." He shook his head and coughed.

"It is beyond me why this man has acted in this unlawful and unpatriotic manner. But what really breaks my heart, is that so many people are...allowing it, or condoning it with outright apathy, if not direct support. The doling out of American soil to foreign powers is...anathema to our very way of life!"

"One minute, Mr. President!" warned one of the Air Force men off-camera.

The President shook his head. "Not enough damn *time*." He looked up at the camera and what strength was lacking from his sallow face and fever-kissed skin, was made up with the burning resolution in his eyes. Visibly summoning every ounce of strength, the President said in a strong voice, "I ask you to do one thing, America. *Rise*." He paused in a vain attempt to clear his flooded lungs. Weakly, he continued, leaning heavily on the podium across his lap.

*Jesus, he's got blood coming from his ear now...*Brenda put a hand to her mouth and bumped her mask. She stood helpless as tears spilled down her face.

"*Rise*, America, rise against this bald grab for power. *Rise* in defense of your rights, your homes, your country, and your fellow citizens. *Rise*, as one nation, one people, and fight off the tyrants, oppressors, and invaders of this sacred land." He coughed violently and couldn't seem to catch his breath. Brenda moved to help him but he looked up and raised a gaunt hand to keep her away. There was a pink-tinged froth dribbling from his mouth. The flu was destroying his lungs right before her eyes.

"*Rise*, America—and fight—every man, woman, and child...every minute of every day...in any way you can...with every fiber of your being...to the very last breath in your body.

"You have my blessing and authority to take whatever actions necessary to defeat the illegal occupations, defeat the Koreans and defeat those who support Vice President Barron." He slumped forward on the podium, breathing raggedly yet trying to lift his head up. After a few excruciating seconds, he pushed himself up again and squared his shoulders, panting with the effort.

“*Rise*, America. Rise, and wake the sleeping giant!” A cadaverous arm went up, the gaunt, blue-tinted fist pointed at the sky.

“*RISE!*”

“Annnnnnd, we’ve lost signal,” called out someone in the shadows. The red light above the camera winked out.

“Did he just start a civil war?” asked Lopez quietly. No one answered him.

The President gasped, his eyes rolled up and he fell back with a thud onto the gurney. Brenda and Dr. Honeycutt were immediately at his side, stethoscopes out and checking vitals.

The pounding on the door resumed, with vigor. There was a loud *boom*, and a dent appeared in the center of the steel door. *Boom, boom, boom* and the metal began to stretch. Brenda stared in horror. The tip of an ax had forced its way through the middle of the door.

“We’re gonna have company real soon, Chief,” said one of the SEALs.

“Sweet *Jesus*,” said Dr. Honeycutt, head cocked, listening to his stethoscope. “His pulse is through the roof.”

Brenda was shining a penlight in the President’s eye. “Pupils non-responsive, I’ve got blood from the nose and ears—we’re losing him,” she said.

“Sub-conjunctival bleeding,” muttered Dr. Honeycutt, using a flashlight to examine the President’s suddenly blood-red eyes.

Another crash from the door and a small piece broke away when the ax was pulled free. “Open this goddamn door!” a voice snarled. Threats of courts martial and firing squads were shouted in at them through the half-inch wide hole in the door.

“Leave...leave me in peace,” the exhausted President exhaled in a gurgle of air and bloody froth.

“But—” said Brenda.

“No,” he said, limply raising his right hand. “Too late...you did good...” He tried to find her hand. She gripped his paper-thin, weak hand in both of hers. “Sweet girl.”

The President slowly rolled his head to the left and his unfocused eyes sought the SEAL commander. “Will...it...will it work?” he whispered, blood,

mucus, and lung fluid leaking from the President's mouth onto his suit jacket. Despite everything, Brenda's breath caught at the desperate hope in the man's eyes.

Master Chief Braaten, bristling with weapons, approached and knelt at the side of his Commander in Chief without a mask, apparently unafraid of the microbial killer so close at hand. There was an MP-5 in a combat sling harness on his side, a sidearm in the holster on his leg, a grenade launcher on his back, and a big knife on his tactical vest. He stared at his clenched hands for a moment. When he looked up, his eyes were distant and empty. She caught herself once more thinking that he had a very handsome face...

"Open this door!" echoed behind them. Brenda flinched, her mind ripped back to the crisis at hand.

I need sleep...hard to focus.

"It—I'd say...yes, sir. I think it worked, sir." Master Chief Braaten wiped his nose on the back of a thick forearm. He sniffed. "If I was a civilian, I'd be loading up my shotgun right now."

The President sighed and looked at the ceiling. "So this is how it ends..." he said quietly, and then coughed, a wet, sucking sound.

That cough made Brenda cringe. She knew this was the end. Of what, though? His life? America? She wondered idly if the North Koreans could track the location of their signal and hone in on where they were hiding, deep under the Los Angeles Air Force Base.

"Never wanted..." the President said quietly, "this..." A tear rolled down his wrinkled cheek and mixed with the blood from his nose. He closed his red eyes and sobbed in silence.

"We'll get out of this, sir, don't worry," promised the SEAL commander. "America will survive this and we'll return, stronger than ever. It's what we *do*."

"I hope..." the old man said, face streaked with tears. His eyes were still closed tight in pain. He was very still for a long time. Brenda moved to check his wrist for a pulse. Suddenly, the President's eyes bulged and his body stiffened.

"Oh my—what are *you* doing here?" he said in a voice that sounded eerily normal. Then his body relaxed. His blood-red eyes were still staring straight

ahead. The breath slowly escaped his body in a bubbling gurgle. His chest fell one last time and did not rise again.

Brenda felt for a pulse, glanced at Dr. Honeycutt and shook her head, tears running down her face. “He’s gone,” she said, her voice cracking.

A thud behind her announced the infected nurse had passed out. She glanced over her shoulder to see Dr. Fletcher kneel beside the stricken woman. “She’s burning up,” he reported calmly.

The SEAL placed a hand on the President’s shallow chest and lowered his head. “Hail to the Chief,” he mumbled. Brenda had to wipe the tears from her eyes to see. Or was it sweat? In a panic, she felt her own forehead. It was warm, but that could’ve been caused by all the people stuffed into the room.

Dr. Honeycutt gently passed his hands over the President’s eyes. “Time of death...” He glanced at his watch. Brenda could see the face of the expensive-looking watch was a spiderweb of cracks. “It’s broken,” he said with a sad smile, stifling a laugh. He looked up. “Anyone have a watch?”

“Eighteen twenty-one,” said a voice choked with emotion in the darkened part of the room. The room was absent of sound except for the continual banging on the entrance door. Everyone had their heads bowed.

Dr. Honeycutt nodded. “Time of death, 6:21pm.”

“If you don’t open this door, so help me—”

The SEAL commander stood up and with an expression of pure rage on his face, pulled the MP-5 free from his side. He ripped the cocking handle on the small carbine back with a vicious pull and brought it to his shoulder. That one movement was so practiced, so smooth, it looked as if he could have done it in his sleep.

Brenda knew what was going to happen next, and pitied the men on the other side of the door. She had seen that look in other Americans’ eyes before, back in the Sandbox.

“Yo, Coop! What we doin’, man?” asked the tall, black SEAL by the door, as he glanced over his shoulder.

“Jax,” replied Master Chief Braaten, switching on his laser sight, “we’re going to follow orders.”

“*Hooyah*, Master Chief,” barked the blond-haired giant on the other side the disintegrating door. He high-fived his dark-skinned comrade.

A face appeared in the ragged hole, contorted with anger. “Open this *fuckin’* door! That’s an order!” shrieked the acting base CO from the other side of the ax hole. “If you don’t, I’ll have you all *shot* as traitors! The President himself told me—”

The other SEALs switched on their laser sights. The handful of red beams lanced out across the empty space in the room and came to rest on the man’s nose. The look of surprise and sudden horror on the man’s face nearly caused Brenda to burst out laughing, despite all the sadness that swirled around her.

Master Chief Braaten glanced at the body of his Commander in Chief and nodded. “I did not come all the way out here, lose half my team, and rescue the President, only to let *these* fuckers desecrate his body.” He stood there a moment, perfectly still, aiming at the door.

Brenda imagined he was trying to sort out what exactly to do next. If the SEALs went charging out there, they were likely to die, and take a lot of the airmen out there with them. If they let the base security in...what then? Would they all be arrested and tried for treason? Or just the SEALs? Brenda hoped it would be hard for a court martial to convict a doctor for trying to save a man’s life...

“Jax, open the door.”

Brenda held her breath. She gripped the edge of the President’s gurney and prepared to duck when the shooting started. Her training kicked in as warning bells screamed in her mind. *Take cover! Incoming!*

“Say what?” asked the tall SEAL.

Master Chief Braaten grinned. Brenda heard the soft *click* of the safety on his rifle being disengaged.

“Let’s *rise*.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CHAD

Salmon Falls, Idaho
U.P. Lake Ranger Station

THE DOOR OPENED and Tuck entered, followed by Zuka, who limped on his left leg. “Recon’s done. They got that place locked down pretty good, but it ain’t watertight.”

Zuka grimaced as he collapsed onto a crate and sighed. “Ivan’s got lots of toys, sir.”

“Well, we’ve got some toys too, but we’re running low on ammo,” grumbled Deuce as he looked up from his hastily made weapons cleaning station. He was sitting on a crate of candles, with what looked to Chad like the parts for a dozen weapons spread out on the floor in front of him. He meticulously rubbed down each part with a cloth and some oil.

“Ivan’s got a lot of that down in town, too,” said Tuck. His face betrayed no emotion. “Spotted at least three ammo-supply dumps.”

“Show me, sergeant,” Captain Alston said. He joined Tuck and Zuka at a table with a map of Salmon Falls.

“Okay, here we are,” said the sniper as he pointed toward the mountain just west of town.

Chad's view was blocked as the Rangers crowded around the map. He turned away and saw the Indian sitting alone in the shadows on the far wall. He took a step around the Rangers and walked over to his fellow civilian.

"Ivan's got checkpoints here, here and *here*," Tuck was saying.

"Here's the ammo dump—right next to City Hall," added Zuka.

"Or what's *left* of it. They got their BTRs here, and here to block the main access points..."

"Howdy," said Chad as he approached the man who'd killed the four Russians. "In all the excitement, we weren't introduced. I'm Chad Huntley." He offered his right hand.

The Indian looked up. His high-cheeked face was covered in a grisly camo pattern of brown and green. The effect gave him a leering smile or a skeletal look, depending on the angle. His coal-dark eyes bored into Chad's. The man didn't say anything, but looked back down at his tomahawk and continued to rub it across a whetstone. The tomahawk made a softly grinding *shriiiiick, shriiiiick* noise that sounded eerily menacing.

"Okaaaay..." Chad said, dropping his hand. "I just figured, you know, since we were the only two civilians at this party..."

"I'm not taking a long walk with you on the beach, if that's what you're going to ask," the man muttered. "So go ask one of *them*." He nodded toward the Rangers, still discussing the Russian positions.

Chad frowned. *So that's how it is, eh?*

"Well, you got a name, or do I just call you Chief?"

"Lot of guts to say that, Paleface," the Indian said. He looked up, anger flashing in his narrowed eyes. Abruptly, he smiled and displayed the white of his teeth in stark contrast to the dark colors on his face. The Indian stuck out his hand, yet that smile still sent a shiver down Chad's spine.

Chad took the proffered hand and said, "Glad to see you got a sense of humor...?"

"Denoyan. Denoyan Tecumseh. You can call me Denny." He dropped Chad's hand and went back to sharpening his tomahawk. *Shriiiiick, shriiiiick, shriiiiick.*

Chad looked at the tomahawk and admired the impressive-looking weapon.

“That what you used to...ah...?”

He looked up again. “Yes.” *Shriiiiick, shriiiiick, shriiiiick.*

“Hey, you two wanna get a room?” asked Zuka. His face split into a grin.

Captain Alston walked over to the civilians, but not before flicking the back side of Zuka’s head as he passed. The tall Ranger knelt beside Denny and admired the man’s sharpening skills for a moment. Neither man acknowledged the other or said anything. Chad stood there and watched.

“What are your intentions, Mr. Tecumseh?”

“Denny.” *Shriiiiick, shriiiiick, shriiiiick.*

“Pardon?”

“Call me Denny.” *Shriiiiick, shriiiiick, shriiiiick.*

“What are your intentions, Denny?” inquired Captain Alston again.

Denny paused his sharpening and looked up. “You heard the President’s speech—the real President, Denton—that was broadcast last night.” Denny held the tomahawk up and admired his work. “I didn’t vote for him, but I’m going to do what he asked me to do. I’m going to fight the invaders.”

“I’d say you’ve already started,” said Captain Alston.

Denny shrugged. “I guess so. It’s funny,” he said, his voice emotionless. “I’ve never killed anyone before. Just deer and turkey...” His voice trailed off.

Chad could sympathize with the man. He’d shot his first man a few days back during his flight from the North Koreans. Then at the emergency landing zone he had shot a man trying to kill Captain Alston...Since then, he’d felt that something inside him had changed. Tempered. Grown stronger.

“Tonight, I’m going to go down into town and kill as many Russians as I can find,” Denny said, looking absently at the tomahawk. “I’m going to protect my neighbors. I’m going to honor my ancestors. I’m going to defend this land.”

Shhhriiiiick, shhhriiiiick, shhhriiiiick.

Captain Alston nodded. He looked up at Chad. “Mr. Huntley here is my top priority. I’m supposed to get him to a tier-one medical facility so the mad scientists can make his blood into a vaccine to fight the super flu...”

Denny paused in his sharpening and regarded Chad. “Was your blood used ten years ago during the Blue Flu?”

“Yeah,” said Chad. He thought back to his first days during The Great Pandemic, spent in the medical checkpoint in Fort Worth. He’d just left his home and some doctor on the bus had hassled him about why he hadn’t been sick and why he hadn’t told anyone. Then the needles started coming at him and they didn’t stop for what seemed like weeks. He shuddered inwardly at the thought of going through that blood-letting ceremony again. But it had to be done.

Now it was Denny’s turn to nod. “Well, that’s good.”

“Only problem,” Captain Alston said, frowning, “is that we’re almost out of fuel for our helicopters. And now, there’s at least a battalion of Russians downslope in Salmon Falls, between us and safety.”

“Why don’t you just go around Salmon Falls?”

Captain Alston looked at Denny with something along the lines of indignation on his face. “Because we’re Rangers. We go *through* the enemy, not *around* them. We’re not in the damned Navy. Besides, we don’t have the fuel. They’ll pick us off as we try to get past them.”

Chad snorted, then coughed to cover himself when Captain Alston and Denny both looked at him. He cleared his throat. “So, what are you going to do about me?”

“Cap, we got a signal here!” called out Deuce. He pointed with a soiled cleaning cloth at the radio sitting on the map table.

Captain Alston held up a finger to Chad: *hold on*. He raced over and grabbed the radio, listening to the sound of broken static before he keyed the mic. “Come in, any unit this net, this is Hammer 2, Actual, over.”

More static. He tried again. Still more static. Chad’s hopes fell along with the faces of everyone in the little sanctuary.

Then, “—again, please. Hammer—” More static. “—come in!”

Captain Alston regarded his troops with a grin. “I say again, this is Hammer 2, Actual, over!”

The static cleared and a strong voice powered through across countless miles of airspace. “Damn glad to hear your voice, son. This is Watchtower, Actual. How copy?”

Captain Alston’s eyebrows went up. “Five-by, Watchtower.” He asked for

authentication codes and was rewarded with a request for his own.

“Who’s Watchtower?” whispered Denny as Captain Alston and the mysterious voice on the radio shared their authentication codes and confirmed identifications.

“Oh, just the commanding General of the Army. Nobody important...” replied Zuka with a casual wave of his hand.

“Give me a sit-rep, son, while we still have a secure comm-link.”

“Yessir,” said Captain Alston. The pilots all stood around the map table, grinning like kids on Christmas morning.

“Sir, we have what appears to be at least three companies of Russian foot mobiles occupying the town below us...” He glanced at the map on the table before continuing. “Grid Charlie-Niner, One-Kilo-Bravo-two-four. They have at least two BTRs and possibly some mobile SAM sites. We are bingo fuel—repeat bingo fuel—and at present time, have only enough for one vehicle to get about three hundred miles. We’re at the end of our rope, sir, as far as food and ammo. I’ve been in worse places before, but not many.”

“You’re not going anywhere.” The gruff voice sighed.

Captain Alston looked at the assembled helicopter pilots. The Black Hawk pilot looked at the others and then nodded at the Ranger. Captain Alston spoke, “That about sums it up, sir. We fuel the ‘Hawk and two Apaches, or all the Apaches and not the Black Hawk. Or any combination you can think of, but we’re not fueling all the birds. And it doesn’t really matter, because from what we can tell, we can’t reach more than a few small airstrips from here, anyway. Odds of finding enough fuel to keep going are getting slim.”

A long silence. Then, “Is the package secure?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Listen, son, I may get in hot water over this—the kind that puts you before a military tribunal or firing squad...but the President...he doesn't seem to have it all there anymore. Something is definitely going on but I'll be damned if I know what.”

Captain Alston looked at his men with a confused look on his face.

“At any rate, I pulled every favor I had trying to get you a Skyhook. You’ll

need to assign one man to accompany the package, if I can retask it. I hear these things can be kind of hairy.”

Captain Alston frowned and looked at Chad. “No SPIE rig, sir?”

“Negative. There's no long-range helicopters available, and you don't want to even try and set up a midair refuel right now, if you catch my drift. No, the only thing we can grab on short notice to get you out is going to be fixed wing. But I did find a Horny-Herc. It's a Coast Guard trainer, but it's the only thing I can do to extract the package on short notice. We should know within the hour. We've got to coordinate with the Air Force to get fighter coverage and with comms the way they are, it's taking longer than I'd like.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Understand, this will be a one-shot deal. If this fails, we may not have time for another option. Your little stunt with the Russians yesterday has them all riled up. They want to storm that mountain you're on and wipe the whole thing off the map.”

Captain Alston looked at Denny. “Sir, that wasn't us; it was a civilian action. We arrived after...”

“So, it's true then? There's a resistance? Good. At least there's some red-blooded Americans left out there.” Another pause.

Chad wondered if the signal had been lost. Then the general came back. “The President assures me that he put enough pressure on Moscow to keep you out of hot water, but local authority—meaning some Russian general—is in control and who the hell knows if Ivan will listen to the Kremlin.”

“Sir, I thought the Russians were only allowed on the coastal cities back east? At least, that's what they're saying on all the EAS broadcasts.”

There was a slight pause before the voice returned. “You're right. They shouldn't be here at all, son. It's a crying affront against God himself, is what it is. But, that's out of our hands and the Russians are denying there's any forces west South Carolina, anyway.” The general sighed. “It's a complete Charlie-Foxtrot.” Static crackled again over the radio.

“What's a Charlie-Foxtrot?” whispered Denny.

Chad shook his head. “No idea, but it sounds bad.” Zuka chuckled next to

them.

“Roger that, sir. What are my orders?”

“Son, get that package delivered at all costs, then handle the situation as you see fit until we can resupply, reinforce, or exfil you and your men.”

“Roger that, sir.”

“You hear me CFB, Ranger: I will *not* tolerate losses to your team over this situation. Do what it takes to stay alive until we can sort things out and get your unit out of there. If everything goes as planned, the Skyhook rig will be delivered to your location at 1530 Zulu tomorrow. The Horny-Herc will make the drop, circle once, and return for pickup when the balloon goes up. How copy?”

Captain Alston grinned. “Hammer 2, Actual, copies all.”

“Godspeed, Hammer 2. Watchtower, Actual, out.”

Chad watched as Captain Alston put his hands on his hips and rolled his head on his shoulders. A few cracks later, the Ranger sighed. “Well, how about *that*,” he muttered, staring the radio. After a moment, he turned to look at his men, his gaze lingering on Chad the longest.

“You all heard the general.”

“Hooah,” was uttered from the Rangers in unison. The pilots looked on with grim faces. Chad was beginning to feel like someone who didn’t know the inside joke.

“Any questions?”

Chad raised his hand. “What, uh, what exactly did he mean by that Skyhook thing?”

“And what’s a Horny-Herc?” asked Denny.

Deuce laughed. “You’re going on the rollercoaster ride of a lifetime, pal.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Huntley, one of us will be going with you,” said Captain Alston. “Skyhook is a...unique...method the CIA developed for getting spooks out of bad situations in a hurry. Back in the ‘50s.” He turned to the squad sniper. “Tuck, you’re the only one who’s actually *done* this before in the field. Want to fill Mr. Huntley in?”

“Sure, sir. Basically, a C-130 Hercules cargo plane—your Horny-Herc,” he

said to Denny, “will swoop over this mountain at a hundred feet or so and drop off a box. In the box will be a harness and a long rope attached to a...well...it’s like a weather balloon, see? There’s a helium bottle, too. You put on the harness, connect the rope to the balloon *and* you—then inflate the balloon with the helium.” He raised one hand.

“The balloon goes up as the plane circles around.” The other hand made a circle around the first. “When it’s up a hundred feet or so, the plane flies in low. There’s this set of horns, like a giant ‘V’ sticking off the front of the plane.”

“Ah, Horny-Herc,” said Denny. “I get it.” His face was deadpan and Chad had to fight the urge to laugh.

“The plane targets the balloon,” continued Tuck. He held up his hands demonstrating the maneuver. “They’re aiming for the rope to slide right up in between the horns. The rope slaps the belly of the aircraft, gets snagged by the crew in the back, and as the plane flies off, you fly up.”

Chad’s mouth opened. “Wait, like, up into the sky you go? On a rope? Dragged by an airplane?” He looked around at the grim-faced Rangers. “Are you *kidding* me? Isn’t that thing going hundreds of miles an hour?”

Captain Alston laughed. “This is the Army, not the Air Force, sir. We move a *lot* slower than them. Don’t worry, it’s relatively safe. You may be sore for a while—”

“Like whiplash, or something?”

“Or *something*, yeah,” chuckled Tuck. “It’s a real rush, man.”

“It’s apparently the only way the brass can think of to get you off this mountain as fast as possible and headed toward a hospital,” said Captain Alston.

Chad paled at the thought of being jerked up into the air by a passing plane. If these men around him were elite soldiers and only one of them had done it before...what did that say? He swallowed. His mind raced for an answer that didn’t involve him flying through the air.

“Wait—” he said, hands up in front of him. “Wait, wait, *wait*...What happens after this?”

“I don’t know yet,” muttered the tall Ranger. He rubbed the days-old growth of red-tinted beard on his chin. It sounded like he was rubbing sandpaper. “Once

we see you off safely, our next task will be taking on Ivan down there in town. If we're going to get out of here, we'll need fuel for the helicopters. The Russians likely have plenty of fuel down there...for those BTRs, if nothing else." He shrugged. "Guess we'll go and take it."

"BTR?" asked Denny.

"The Russian version of an armored personnel carrier. It's got a decent gun on top, armored sides, eight big wheels and a bad attitude," Captain Alston replied. "In order for us to borrow some wheels in town, we're going to have to cut through a lot of Russians down there." He nodded toward town.

"I want to help."

Captain Alston and the Indian looked at Chad. "You heard me," Chad said. "I'm in this fight now. Ten years ago, all I could do was sit on a table and be bled dry. This time, I have a chance to do more than just that, and I aim to take it."

"Sir..."

Chad held up his hand and shook his head. "Captain Alston, you said it yourself, it's not going to be easy to get us out of here, let alone into town and steal a car—armored or otherwise. You can use every man you can get. Am I right?"

"Well..." More chin scratching.

"Sir," said Zuka, limping up to the group. "We have the supplies—between our med kits and what's here..." He gestured at the Park Ranger Station. "We could draw enough blood from Mr. Huntley and ship it out to supply a whole hospital—hell, more than one hospital, actually. And he could still fight with us. *After* he recovers. Sir."

Chad clapped his hands. "That's a great idea! And then you wouldn't have all your eggs in one basket. The doctors can make a vaccine at a bunch of different hospitals and get it out into the public that much faster."

"But how would we get the samples delivered? Split our forces even more? Send men out alone?" Captain Alston shook his head. "No, I don't think so. And what happens if Mr. Huntley here takes a fatal round?"

"If he dies, then we're no worse off than we are right now. He's *here* and not at a hospital, and there's still no vaccine," replied Tuck thoughtfully, arms

folded.

“It’s risky,” muttered Denny. He looked at Chad and nodded. “You’re the last hope we have of stopping this flu, aren’t you? That makes you priceless to the government. But also priceless to our enemies. If they get you or take you out, we lose and they win.”

Chad nodded. “War is risky business,” he said, watching Captain Alston. “But I’ll take the risk of getting shot over being pulled off the side of a mountain by a damn airplane.”

Captain Alston looked Chad up and down. “You *sure* you never served? ‘Cause that sounded like a soldier’s answer.” He folded his arms. He looked at the other Rangers and got nods all around. He shrugged. “All right, we’ll run it by Watchtower.” He picked up the radio.

“Watchtower, Hammer 2, Actual, over.”

Chad watched the Rangers break up their little group and move off to other tasks: Deuce went back to cleaning weapons and Zuka began digging through their medical supplies as Tuck picked up his rifle and headed out the door to go on another patrol. Chad felt completely *useless*. Even Denny went back to sharpening that damn tomahawk.

Shrriiiiick. Shrriiiiick. Shrriiiiick.

After a few heartbeats of static, the radio broke squelch. “Hammer 2, this is Watchtower, wait one for Actual, over.”

Another interminable pause. Chad imagined the General saying *no*. He felt his pulse quicken at the thought of being yanked up into the air by a passing C-130, with its big engines roaring overhead.

“Hey...*hey!*” called Tuck’s voice from the door. Everyone in the cave turned to look. “Ivan’s on the move.”

“Go!” said Captain Alston, ear to the radio. Garza nodded and lead the way out the door.

Chad followed Garza and the others to the edge of the tree line where they all raised their binoculars and scanned the town below. He tried not to think about the precipice just a few feet from where he stood. One slip-up or stumble and it would be a long flight to oblivion at the base of the mountain.

“Ivan’s rounding up the civvies...” muttered Zuka.

“Something more than that. Notice any women or children?” asked Tuck.

“Malcontents, dissenters...” said Garza.

“Patriots,” said Chad quietly.

“Anyone showing any hint that they are ready to fight back,” agreed Denny.

“I see a lot of kids down there, from the high school. See the letter jackets? Look,” he said, pointing. “There’s even a few standing around watching the parade. That one’s Jeb Townsen.” He frowned.

“I don’t know Jeb Townsen, but I don’t like where this is heading,” muttered Garza.

Chad watched as the gaggle of thirty or so men and boys were poked and prodded by a ring of Russian soldiers down Mulbray Street toward the school’s football field.

Once on the field, it happened quickly. When the first bodies started to fall and the echoes of the automatic weapons fire began to reach them, he felt sick. He wanted nothing more than to close his eyes and throw up, but a harder, sterner part of himself forced his eyes to stay open and watch. To witness. To remember.

The Rangers watched the massacre in a tense silence. Chad could almost feel the anger boiling off them in waves. The only sound other than the distant popping of guns was Denny. He had dropped to his knees, spread his arms, right on the edge of the cliff, and was chanting a low, mournful litany. He rocked back and forth a little as he spoke, eyes screwed shut, face taut in pain or anger. Or both. Chad watched in silence, captivated by the display. Denny was speaking some sort of Indian language because it sure wasn’t English.

He didn’t stop until the last echo of gunfire drifted away on the wind. He slumped forward so far that Chad reached out to grab his shoulder, fearing that he would simply tumble over the edge and vanish into the void below.

“They were just *kids*...” Denny muttered through choked sobs.

“Cowards...” Chad said through gritted teeth. His vision was starting to blur with tears of his own.

“I have watched my town burn, my house burn, my neighbors buried. I have

seen the children I used to teach turn into monsters and people drop dead from the mystery illness.” Denny sighed, a body-shaking, empty-your-soul kind of sound.

“Now, I have seen the face of the invader, I have met his steel, and I have tasted his blood.” Denny slowly pulled his tomahawk from his belt and held it up in front of him, as if making an offering to God.

Or some Indian version of it.

“*Mishe Moneto*, bless this weapon of my ancestors.” He sucked in a breath through clenched teeth. “Give me the strength to use it well and the skill to kill as many of our enemies as there are stars in heaven. For the sake of my town, my *people*, grant me vengeance.”

“Amen,” said Chad. Denny turned and looked at him, then smiled. Chad suppressed a shiver. Denny, in his tear-streaked warpaint, looked like a gruesome, grinning devil. Chad almost pitied the Russians.

Almost.

They watched in silence as the Russians left the bodies of the men and boys where they fell on the football field and marched away. It was one of the most awful things Chad had ever seen.

“That settles it. I’m fighting with you.” Chad looked at Sgt. Garza and dared him to say no.

Captain Alston spoke from behind them. “Mind if we tag along?”

Chad turned and looked expectantly at the captain. “Well?”

“Watchtower agreed to the plan. We’ll send up your blood on the Skyhook, nothing more.”

AFTER SUNSET, and when guards had been posted in the trees, the mood inside the Park Ranger Station became even more grim. No one had much of an appetite—which was fine with Chad, as what little food they had left was in the form of MREs. Chad decided he’d rather go hungry.

At last, Captain Alston broke the silence. “We’re low on ammo, fuel, and

food.” A few of the close-shaved heads nodded. The pilots looked at each other. More than a few of them glared over at Chad. When they had found out that the HD-GPS tracker in his shoulder had been guiding the North Koreans to their position all along, they had been even more upset that he was still breathing.

Chad stared right back. He was done worrying about what anyone else thought. He was ready to fight. Something had stirred inside him when he saw the Russians murder those people in town, something angry.

“Well,” sighed one of the Apache pilots, “we got enough fuel to give you one or two sorties, at least. Then we fly back up here and scuttle the birds.”

Captain Alston nodded. “That could work. We need a distraction to get our assault team into town.”

“Our last three Apaches unloading on their asses would be a pretty damn good distraction,” said the female pilot. She high-fived the man next to her.

Captain Alston looked at Garza and Tuck. They nodded. He turned back to the pilots. “Good. You come in from the north and west; we’ll make our way to the southern end of town.” He scratched a crude map of the town on the dirt floor of the cave. “Once you start tearing into them, we’ll make our move, here,” he said, pointing at the map. “Chalmers Avenue. The main north-south road through town.”

“Tuck,” he said, pointing his stick at the sniper, “you provide overwatch. Find a suitable hill outside town to the west and bring the pain.”

The sniper grinned. Chad felt cold. The man didn’t say much. That smile, though. It wasn’t natural. Chad watched as he picked up his huge sniper rifle and patted it affectionately. The menacing black gun looked more like a shoulder-fired cannon than a rifle.

“I got plenty of ammo for Clarice here, sir. We’ll make ‘em squeal.”

Captain Alston nodded. “Good. Get your BFG barking and provide cover for us as we work through town. I’m betting their HQ is in City Hall. That’s where the majority of their foot mobiles seem concentrated.”

Denny raised a hand. “BFG?”

“Big Fucking Gun,” replied Zuka with a knowing wink. The others chuckled. He said in a poor imitation of Chad’s Texas drawl, “Tuck’s got him a real

popgun.”

“Fifty-cal EXACTO sniper rifle. Self-guided rounds,” said Tuck. He pulled the biggest bullet Chad had ever seen from a pouch on his combat vest and held it up. It was nearly five-and-a-half inches long. “There’s a little camera in there, and some tiny little fins. I fire it, then move to the next target. This little baby acts like a smart-bomb, cutting through wind and staying on target. If someone ducks, it sees that and moves to intercept. *And* she can shave a flea’s ass from a mile and a half away.”

“He ain’t lying,” added Garza. “These Russian *puntos* have no idea what’s about to drop on their heads.”

“There’s only a handful of us...” Denny said, shaking his head, “and so many of them...”

“Seems like fair odds to me,” said Captain Alston. He racked the slide of his pistol, checked the chamber, then reholstered with authority.

“*Hooah!*” bellowed the Rangers.

Chad grinned at a confused-looking Denny. “I know, I know. Crazy, right?” Chad laughed with the Rangers. “Trust me,” he said, slapping his fellow civilian on the shoulder, “be glad they’re on *our* side!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

COOPER

El Segundo, California
Los Angeles Air Force Base

“NO ONE FIRES until I do. Am I CFB?”

“Hooyah, Master Chief,” said a chorus of rough voices.

“I want leg shots if you got ‘em, otherwise, take ‘em down any way possible. On three...” Cooper said, his right fist held up in the air. “One...” He scanned the area in front of him and saw that his team was indeed watching him count, grim-faced and ready.

“Two...” He spoke louder now, sure that the airmen on the other side of the battered door knew what was coming. He wanted them to think about what was about to happen.

“Three!” His fist came down and gripped his rifle. He saw Jax nod and swing open the big door to their little sanctuary. As the door continued past him, he dropped to a knee and swung his rifle up.

Cooper took a step forward and his laser sight lit up a man standing in the middle of the doorway with a confused look on his face, a service pistol in his hand. He was short and plump—something Cooper never agreed with in a military man—and had a pinched face that immediately led Cooper to think he

was a rat.

“You men, drop your weapons and surrender!” the rat barked.

Cooper took another step forward without hesitation and moved the laser dot from the man’s chest up his body to rest on the center of his head. He saw three other dots appear and light up the bulbous nose that roosted on the pompous man’s face. Cooper shot a glance at the man’s uniform and quickly noticed the rat was wearing an officer’s uniform—a *colonel*, no less.

“Colonel, I don’t know who the hell you are but if you don’t drop *your* weapon, I’m going to drop you.”

The man smiled, despite the perspiration on his dome-like forehead, more of a leer than anything. He spoke over his shoulder down the hallway, “Captain, bring your men up and take these traitors into custody. If any of them resist, shoot them.”

“Sir,” answered an uncertain voice from the hallway, “I don’t think—”

“That’s right, you *don’t* think! Now carry out my orders or I’ll have you arrested for aiding and abetting known terrorists and traitors!”

“This is ridiculous, sir! The UCMJ doesn’t give you blanket authority...”

Good. Someone out there has half a brain...

Cooper saw his moment to avoid bloodshed. “The last thing in the world I want to do is shoot Americans. We got more than enough NKors to shoot topside.” He spoke louder now. “But I swear to you by all things good and holy, any man who raises a rifle at me *or* my team or anyone in the room behind me is a dead man. Colonel, before you open your mouth to argue, save yourself the breath—I don’t care what you have to say if it’s not ‘affirmative.’”

The colonel put on his constipation-smile again. He half turned his head and spoke over his shoulder, eyes never leaving Cooper’s. “Ignore his threat, men; he’s a coward and he’s bluffing. Captain, do your duty!”

“Sir...” said the man behind the colonel, with a pained expression on his face. Cooper noted his hands were nowhere near his service pistol.

More hesitation. That’s good. Come on, man, see through this guy.

“Dammit! This is insubordination! Arol, you are relieved of your command! Thompson!” the colonel said, now looking more like a sweating pig than a rat.

“Sir!” barked a much more confident-sounding voice from down the hallway.

“Get your ass up here. You’re in charge of the detachment now. Assign someone to escort Captain Arol to the brig.”

“Yes, *sir!* You and you, get him out of here. You three, with me.”

Cooper could hear footsteps in the hallway and a scuffle as Captain Arol struggled with his escort. “Get your hands off—” A choked-off grunt signaled the end of gentle persuasion tactics. “Son of a—”

A loud smack followed by a grunt signaled the good captain was not going quietly. Cooper grinned, never taking his eyes off the face of the colonel.

Some solid grunts, a few more punches or kicks from the airmen and the captain gave up with a whooshing sound when his body hit the floor. There were some more muttered curses, a few last thumps, and then the sound of people dragging something heavy across the linoleum floor down the corridor. Finally, he heard the echo of laughter.

“The rest of you men, watch closely. I’ll show you how to handle traitors—”

“Don’t do it,” Cooper warned. “You will lose. Sir.”

“Fuck you,” spat the colonel. “You’re a disgrace to this country. The President himself told me. *All* of you are.” He started to raise his pistol. It got six inches up before his head distorted into a mass of red-and-gray mist. Cooper had already swiveled to target the next-closest man before the thunder of his first shot left the hallway.

Jax calmly entered the hallway and sighted-in on the next airman before the body of Colonel Molton hit the ground in a spray of blood. Cooper ignored the twitching porcine-like corpse and stepped right into the dark puddle at his feet.

The big airman sporting an M-4, who was built like an All-Pro Linebacker, had to be Sergeant Thompson. He had the mean, dimwitted face of a natural-born bully and lickspittle. Lucky for him, he was also stunned by seeing the head of his CO explode right in front of his own eyes. Cooper waited for the man to regain his senses and focus on the SEAL in front of him with a rifle pointed at his face.

His peripheral vision showed the other men crowding around Thompson in

the hallway were frozen in fear or surprise. That suited Cooper just fine—he let the laser come to rest on Thompson’s chest, sure the bigger man could see the red light was now blazing directly at center mass.

“You in charge?” Cooper demanded in the coolest, most unemotional voice he could muster.

“Y-yeah.”

“Don’t be stupid. Tell your men to drop their weapons, and no one else has to die.” Cooper could hear the rest of his team moving into position behind him. More red dots were appearing on the chests and faces of the airmen nearest Thompson. To his satisfaction, Cooper could hear weapons already clattering to the floor behind the burly enforcer. The big airman frowned and glanced over his shoulder.

“Now it’s just you and me, bub. What’s it gonna be? Hands up or face down?”

Sergeant Thompson lowered his weapon but held it tight. “You got the drop on me, s’all.” He shrugged. “Put *your* gun down and I’ll break you in half.”

Cooper looked at Jax in complete surprise.

“Oh, hell no,” said Jax, incredulous. He took a step forward and lowered his rifle. “C’mon Coop, let me take his ass out.”

Cooper smiled and waved Jax off. He started to lower his own rifle. Thompson dropped his rifle and bum-rushed him with an angry shout. Cooper easily sidestepped the large fist that made a breeze against his cheek as it went past.

The big airman turned faster than Cooper thought possible and swung with his other fist. Cooper got his free arm up to block fast enough, but the strength behind the punch was unexpected. His arm shuddered under the impact as if Thompson had swung a baseball bat. Cooper was pushed backwards and spun sideways to regain his balance. He had to drop his rifle and duck to avoid taking one in the temple.

“Take his ass out, Coop!” Charlie yelled.

He heard Mike laugh. “C’mon, man, we got shit to do. I could’ve dropped him by now with one arm tied behind my back...”

Cooper grunted and backpedaled, blocking the flurry of punches thrown at his face. It was all he could do to stay on his feet. The enraged man before him was like a machine.

The airman checked his last punch and Cooper moved to block, letting the other fist connect with his torso. Cooper ignored the pain in his ribs and focused on the odd sensation of his heels lifting off the ground.

Enough of this shit, Cooper said to himself, feeling his anger catch fire.

The airman took a breath, leaned forward and threw another mighty punch, straight for Cooper's face. Cooper moved just a fraction of an inch inside the punch, grabbed the man's wrist as it approached, then twisted and pulled with all his strength. Thompson gasped in surprise as he found himself flung through the air onto his back.

Quick as a snake, the bigger man was back on his feet and charging with a scream of rage. This time, Cooper held his ground. In a smooth motion, almost nonchalantly, he stepped forward, spread his thumb from his fingers, and jabbed his left arm, straight out into the throat of his attacker. Cooper pulled the hit back at the last possible second—he had no desire to kill the hulking thug, just teach him a lesson.

The lesson was learned fast. Like a matador side-stepping a charging bull, Cooper swung his arm free and stepped farther into the hallway as Thompson crashed to his knees, clutching at his throat and gasping for air. Without looking, Cooper swung his left elbow back and connected with the back of Thompson's head, sending the big man sprawling face first onto the floor, still choking in a blind rage.

Jax laughed, the sound echoed down the corridor loudly. He fist-bumped Cooper. "Hardcore, baby."

Cooper squatted to pick up his rifle and raised it again, watching the wide-eyed MPs in the hallway. He rolled his neck, to the accompaniment of several loud cracks as he stood. He sighed, then looked at the men lining the hallway.

"So, who's reaching for the sky? Or does anyone *else* want to choose 'face down'? 'Cause I don't have time for any more bullshit." He chambered a round in his rifle.

All the hands in the hallway went up.

He turned around and saw Thompson struggle to get to his knees, his face purple but regaining its natural color. He shakily raised both hands with a meek expression on his face. He did not meet Cooper's eyes. Still, Cooper allowed himself to relax only after the MPs were secured with their own handcuffs and plastic ties.

"Charlie," Cooper said, turning his back so the prisoners couldn't hear.

"Yeah?" said his XO, moving to join him.

"Take a few of the ones who look ready to cry into the comms room. We're gonna let them go—"

"What?" Charlie hissed. He shot a look at the prisoners. "Man, they just just tried to kill us!"

"Wrong—the base CO did, and that big guy Thompson was his enforcer. I'm pretty sure most of them didn't want to go along with—"

"Coop...remember Tehran?" he whispered.

Cooper did indeed remember that hellish day during the aftermath of The Pandemic. In the blink of an eye, he could smell the dusty streets, the street vendors and their spices, the exotic *heat* of the place.

He remembered the back alley where they'd found their man and were about to hightail it out of the area when some kids playing soccer of all things stumbled on them. Swede had wanted to kill them all to ensure mission success. Charlie had been inclined to go along with Swede but Cooper could not—*would* not kill innocent children. Rather than lose valuable time arguing, Cooper made a snap decision and they moved on, only to be confronted by the beginnings of an angry mob around the corner. The kids had ratted them out.

It had been a slaughter. A full-strength SEAL team fully loaded for war packs an awesome punch. Later, when push came to shove, they shoved the hardest and mowed over anyone who stood in their way. If Cooper had decided to end the life of those handful of kids, it would've saved dozens of lives in the long run. Reliving that awful choice still gave Cooper nightmares when he had too much to drink, but he didn't have the luxury to regret his decision for one second. After all, he was still around to have nightmares.

Cooper took a deep breath and pulled himself back into the present. He looked around and saw frightened nurses treating wounded and exhausted Secret Service agents. Some of his rough-around-the-edges SEALs were even lending a hand and seeing to some very nervous airmen. He shook his head.

“Man, this is not Tehran. Those are *Americans*—our brothers in arms. We’re up to our neck in North Koreans topside and we need every man we can get. Now cut ‘em loose.”

“I’m not saying we kill ‘em,” replied Charlie in a defensive tone. “Tehran was before I met Allie...before...” He swallowed. “Before my kid. It’s hard not to think of getting back to my family in all this shit, you know? If I wasn’t who I am...man, I’d be tearing my way through every NKor up there to get to Allie and Charlie.” He sniffed and looked away for a moment. Then, “Could I do what I suggested back in Tehran, now? No way. But...cutting them loose? We need—”

Cooper spun and dropped to a knee, rifle raised. He heard footsteps. “Striker, we got incoming,” he whispered into his mic.

Charlie crouched next to Cooper, the argument forgotten. Muffled voices drifted down the hallway. Cooper could hear faint words, and a voice that sounded like it carried authority, but the only word he could really hear was “traitors.” He tensed as the sounds grew closer. It was definitely more than just one or two people approaching. *Here we go again...*

“Stay frosty,” Cooper warned. “No one opens up until I give the signal.”

“Hooyah,” someone replied in a whisper.

One of the prisoners started to pray, his body shaking in fear. Cooper did a quick scan of them, all lined up along the corridor behind him, and saw mostly round eyes and sweaty foreheads. His SEALs were spread out along the corridor and guarding the entrance to the comms room. The airmen would be sitting ducks and caught in the crossfire if a firefight erupted. And they knew it.

The sound of the approaching footsteps slowed and stopped just around the closest corner. Cooper held a fist up in the air: *hold your fire*. He heard some more whispers that sounded almost like commands, then a single set of footsteps grew louder.

A man in Air-Force-gray BDUs walked calmly around the corner, pistol in hand, as if he were on a parade ground. The way he carried himself screamed officer. As the sound of the officer's boots echoed off the linoleum floor down the hallway, Cooper counted to five in his head. Then he switched on the laser sight of his gun and aimed for center mass.

"That's far enough, bub."

It had the desired effect. The man froze and spread his arms out wide.

"I don't know who you are, but I'm on your side," the man said. The voice was not uncertain, shaky, or quiet. Whoever he was, the airman standing there in the corridor with a laser sight on his chest was calm and confident.

"Who are you?" barked Cooper. Another laser tagged the man and the red dot climbed up his torso and stopped on his forehead.

"Captain William Arol."

Cooper exchanged a look with Charlie, then nodded and stood up, lowering his rifle. He noticed two more lasers appear on Arol's chest and tried to suppress a grin. His boys were making double sure the good captain didn't try any funny business. Cooper took a few quick steps, anticipating an ambush and stopped an arm's length from Arol. The man was looking over the bound airmen sitting on the ground. He nodded reassurance to them before turning his face to Cooper. He had the makings of a terrific shiner on his left eye and a serrated cut on his right cheek. His lower lip was swollen and bleeding, but there was a fire in his eyes that Cooper recognized and liked.

"Thank you for not killing my men."

Cooper looked over his shoulder at the prisoners. He turned back to Arol and raised an eyebrow. "Your men?"

"They're part of my detachment. I'm the XO of base security. Well, I guess I'm in charge now, thanks to the Koreans." He swallowed. "Who the hell are you guys?" Arol reversed his grip on his pistol and offered it to Cooper.

"Master Chief Cooper Braaten, US Navy." He took the offered pistol and pulled the slide back, checking the chamber. Brass gleamed back at him in the glow of the florescent tube lights that hung overhead. He worked the release and caught the magazine that popped out. He slapped the magazine home again and

rested his hands on the chest pockets of his combat vest, rifle dangling by the sling on his shoulder.

The man before him watched all this with calm eyes, not nervous or impatient. Cooper decided this man was truthful in his convictions—he knew he was right and wasn't about to back down. Cooper had learned to read people like a book in stressful situations over the course of his SEAL career. None of Cooper's warning bells went off—his gut told him the man he faced was no threat.

“My men and I were tasked with extracting Slipknot from L.A.—”

“He's really here?” gasped Arol. “That speech was *live*?”

“He is,” said Cooper, nodding. “Or, *was*.” He sniffed. “Doesn't matter now. We were supposed to get him out of danger and we did—or we *thought* we did, until we brought him here. Didn't expect the welcome we received, that's for damn sure.”

Arol frowned. “Where's Colonel Molton?” he asked, looking over the prisoners again.

“Back down the hallway in a pool of his own blood. He tried to draw on me.”

“Good riddance,” said Arol. “He was an ass; no one got along with him. He kept going on about some damn personal phone call he'd received from the President—Barron. About how we were under orders to hunt you guys down and kill you all. He said the President would give us all raises and promotions for staying loyal to him.” He wiped sweat off his forehead with a disgusted look. “As if we were mercenaries.”

“So you're in charge of this goat-fuck, now,” said Cooper. “The question is, what are you gonna do?”

“I'm going to take back this base and try not to get shot.”

Cooper felt a smile spread across his face. He returned the pistol. “Stand down,” he said into his throat mic. The laser's winked out and Arol visibly relaxed.

“Where's the base CO? Is he alive?”

Arol holstered his weapon. “Yeah, a bunch of the less-intelligent and more-

gullible personnel on base sided with Molton and took control of the chokepoints. The hotheads, kids, some raw recruits. Basically, the worst we got here. The rest of us stood with General Nadina. He got wounded in the chaos when the North Koreans showed up and he's been under lock and key in sick bay ever since."

Cooper sighed. "Let me guess, the guards are part of Molton's crew, right?"

Arol grimaced. "Yeah. I didn't think anything of it, until he announced that there were traitors in the base and he was assuming command. He didn't have a clue about the MPs, so he asked me to join him."

"Why did you?" Cooper already knew the answer.

"I wanted to get close to him and keep an eye on him." He shrugged. "I hoped that maybe if he was locked up, his followers would just give up."

"You trust any of the men you see here?" asked Cooper quietly.

"Most of them, yes. But not Thompson and a few others like him. They were just looking for an excuse to shoot someone, I think. We've had our suspicions that a few of the men are actually in local gangs and are trying to smuggle weapons off-base. I was running an op to bust the ring when the Koreans screwed everything up."

Cooper nodded. "Fine. You point out the ones you trust; we'll cut 'em loose. My men will secure the rest here. You need to rally the troops and take back your base. Get your CO out of confinement. Can you do that?"

"You bet your ass I can. There's a lot more of us than there are of them," he said, nodding toward the sulking form of Thompson. "My question is, what are *you* gonna do?"

"That's a comms room, right?" asked Cooper, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "I'm going back in there and linking up with Coronado or NORAD or *someone* that knows what the hell is going on and can give me some intel."

"On it," said Sparky. He shouldered his rifle and disappeared into the comms room.

"Also, I've got nurses, doctors, Secret Service agents, and President Denton's body in there. We'll need to get all these people out and seen to; most of them haven't slept in 24 hours and they're half-starved. Got some walking

wounded, too.”

Arol scratched his close-shaven head. “You dragged all these people here?”

Cooper nodded. “Straight from downtown. The President was at All Saint’s Memorial, getting treated for the flu.”

The MP whistled, hands on his hips. “Well, let me gather up a posse and we’ll see what’s what.”

“You’ll want to prepare for infections, Captain. I’m afraid we brought the super flu in with us.” He leaned in and whispered, “I think one of the nurses has it...”

“Damn. Well, there’s no sense worrying about that now. We’ve got work to do.”

Cooper turned to see Agent Sheffield emerge from the comms room and approach him, straightening a dusty, ratty tie. “I need a moment.”

“All right.” Cooper turned back and nodded to Arol to start selecting his men.

“My men and I—we have duties to perform,” Sheffield replied in a pained voice.

“Pardon my ignorance, but isn’t the President dead?” Cooper asked, keeping an eye on Arol as he began to move down the line of prisoners, releasing a few. They stood, rubbing wrists and stretching, but gave no indication they held a grudge against the SEALs. For that at least, Cooper was thankful.

“President Denton named a successor.”

“The Speaker, right,” Cooper said, as he turned back to face the Secret Service agent in front of him. “Orren Harris. Isn’t he a Republican?”

“Yeah,” chuckled the agent-in-charge. “That ought to play hell with the politics back in D.C.—but it’s not my problem. *My* problem,” he said, hooking thumbs under his belt as he put his hands on his hips, “is that I was in charge of the Presidential Detail. Without counter-orders from the Director, my job is to protect the President, *whoever* that is, at all costs. I need to get to President Harris.”

Cooper grinned. The man was persistent, if nothing else. “Well, where is the new president? D.C.?”

The older man shook his head. “No, Apache Dawn has been put into play. That means COG is too. They’ll split up the upper-tier officials. I’m pretty sure that Speaker—I mean, President—Harris is assigned to NORAD.”

Cooper nodded in agreement. It made sense to have the backup president in one of the most secured locations on the planet. “Any idea which way they’ll go?” Cooper saw the confused look on the agent’s face. “Which president will NORAD back? Which way will the Joint Chiefs go? You guys work in the White House—you have to know more than us grunts in the mud.”

Sheffield chuckled. “You’d be surprised at the stuff we don’t know. I’m not sure who’s in charge of NORAD, but I can tell you the Joint Chiefs don’t care for Barron. They never liked him as a Vice President. I can only guess they *despise* him now.”

“Well, regardless of what happens in D.C., we need to worry about up there,” he said pointing to the ceiling, “before you can go anywhere.”

Cooper turned back to Arol. “Got a sit-rep topside?”

“Last I saw before Molton dragged me down here was that there was a North Korean force—we *think*—approaching from the northeast. All our equipment has been damaged, so all we could really tell was that a fairly large group of something was coming.” He shrugged, wincing in pain. “We assumed it was the Koreans.”

Cooper keyed his throat mic. “Sparky, keep on it until you get something. Let me know when you get a signal.”

“Aye, aye.”

Cooper pulled out his spare radio, a handheld unit. He tossed it to Arol. “Channel 6, if you need anything. I’m counting on you to take back this base, flyboy. We’re going up top to recon. Is there any other way out of this bunker? We may need to beat feet in a hurry if the Koreans show up in force.”

Arol nodded. “There’s two emergency exits, at the north and south ends of the facility. If we need to, I can get us out of here. But going topside may be a death sentence.”

“Well, I hate being trapped. All right,” he said to Sheffield. “If the coast is clear, feel free to head wherever you want.”

“You’re not coming with us?”

“No.” Cooper frowned. “The North Koreans took out half my team, including my CO. Men I’ve spilled blood with for the past decade. You Secret Service guys are trained to protect the President. I get that.” Cooper exhaled and looked down. “There’s gonna be a reckoning, and until I get orders to the contrary, my mission now is to destroy the enemy. It’s what they trained us for.”

Cooper turned away. “Swede!” he called down the hall.

“Yo,” replied the big SEAL as he came around a corner.

“On me. Let’s go do a look-see topside.”

IT TOOK A SUPRISINGLY long amount of time for Cooper and Swede to make their way through the warren of corridors and hatches up to the surface. There was some damage to the entrance to which they were directed by Arol, but the main hatch was still at least somewhat serviceable. Cooper put his ear to the big metal door. He could hear a humming sound, more of a vibration than an actual sound.

“*Something’s* going on out there. Let’s see what we can see. Ready?”

Swede nodded. He adjusted his grip on the hatch handle.

“All right,” Cooper said, taking a knee and bringing his rifle up. “Do it.”

Swede grunted with effort and after a moment of painful-sounding steel on steel, the door relented and a shaft of sunlight pierced the dust-clogged air. The door also let in the overpowering sound of engines. Lots of them. Big ones. Cooper held up his hand to stop the door from opening any farther. He crept forward to get a look.

Through the rubble, he could see a sliver of blue sky. Something gray flashed by, accompanied by the roar of turbines. At first he thought it was a helicopter, but something about the shape of the flash he saw suggested a plane. It was moving too slow for a plane, though. As the noise receded, he heard some indistinct shouts and the rumble and unmistakable squeak of tank treads.

Swede let go of the door to take up a covering position. The bulky metal

door swung inward and squealed louder than when he'd initially opened it. Cooper dropped to the deck and glared at Swede, who shrugged as he pulled his own rifle forward.

Cooper heard a shout, followed by another. "Shit," he hissed. "We're made. Get ready to fall back."

A shadow crossed over the gap in the rubble on the other side of the door and the blue sky disappeared. "Sarge! Over here! I got a door!"

Cooper and Swede exchanged looks. That voice sounded like it came from Kentucky, not Pyongyang.

"Hey! You three—yeah *you*, knucklehead—get your asses over there and help Bonner. Clear that debris away," barked a voice that could *only* belong to a drill instructor from Parris Island.

Cooper held up a fist for Swede, then gripped his rifle and waited. Rocks shifted and dust trickled into the open hatch as many sets of hands attacked the pile of rubble from the other side. The sliver of blue sky began to grow as rocks and bits of the ruined base were removed. He could hear bits of radio chatter and chirps. None of it was in Korean.

When the last big rock moved to the sounds of three sets of curses, sunlight flooded the little chamber Cooper and Swede occupied. He squinted and tried to make out the silhouette that filled the sky.

"That's far enough!" he called out.

"Holy shit! Friendly! *Friendly!* Don't shoot!" said the kid from Kentucky, falling backwards into the rock heap in surprise.

"Identify yourself!" barked the drill instructor's voice. Cooper heard weapons brought up and chambered. They were *definitely* outgunned.

"You first!" he hollered back. Someone chuckled nervously.

"Gunnery Sergeant Benjamin Morrin, United States Marine Corps. And you are?"

Cooper held a tight grip on his rifle. His mind raced—what were the chances that these Marines would want him and his refugees dead, like Colonel Molton? Had President Barron gotten to them as well? An idea occurred to him.

"Who's the President?" he yelled.

“Chesterfield Denton,” hollered the D.I.’s voice, without hesitation.

Cooper sighed and lowered his rifle. He stood, shaking the dust from his clothes. He took a step forward and met the Marine coming through the hatch with an open hand. “Damn glad to see you.” They shook hands, warrior to warrior. “Master Chief Cooper Braaten.”

The stocky fireplug of a Marine looked Cooper up and down. “You sure as hell don’t look like any jet jockey I’ve ever seen.” When Swede appeared out of the shadows and startled the other Marines, the Gunnery Sergeant grinned. “You boys must be them SEALs we’ve been lookin’ for.”

“Want me to call it in, Gunny?”

The D.I. in front of Cooper made a display of rolling his eyes then turned around to face the young Marine who spoke. “What the fuck do *you* think, Chavez? Get on the horn and let the Ell-Tee know we found our boys. Go on, *git!*” He looked back at Cooper and sighed.

“Round up everyone you can, they told me. Take the greenhorns, they said. It’ll be fine, Morrin. Invasion or not, they’re gonna get me killed, Chief.”

Cooper grinned. He liked the Marine already. He introduced Swede as a commotion outside grew louder. Over the constant drone of the engines, he could hear a group of men approaching.

“The hell is going on out there?” Swede asked, shielding his eyes from the bright light outside.

“The Reconquista, brother,” said the Marine, grinning. “The Old Man himself—the Commandant. He arrived on base yesterday like a pissed-off honey badger and stirred up every asset we had. We got the training air-wing out there with half a brigade of infantry and armor. All rolled out of Twentynine Palms about sunset yesterday on a one-way ticket here. The Commandant said he was on a personal mission from God to rescue the President and the SEALs that were protecting him. You’re famous, Chief.”

“Who the hell said we needed rescuing?” said Cooper, frowning. “We’re SEALs, Gunny.”

The Marine laughed. “Well, President Denton’s speech sure fired up the Old Man. Hell, it fired up the whole damn country.” The D.I. smiled. “It’s like the

NKors hit a damn brick wall. Lots of people took that ‘rise’ speech to heart. And now we’re starting to hold the line. We’re the tip of the spear, brother.” He put a hand to his helmet and listened. “Commandant’s comin’ in to see Denton.”

“That won’t be easy...” muttered Cooper.

“Why’s that?”

“He died right after the speech,” Cooper replied. “The flu.”

“Well, fuck me sideways.”

“Where are they?” growled an older man as he pushed his way through the growing throng of Marines gawking at the door into the bunker. “Make way!” Marines snapped to attention and fell over themselves to clear a path.

Cooper waited for the Commandant to clamber down through the rubble and step into the dusty chamber. He wasn’t sure what to do—after all, these were Marines. In the end, he saluted. “Master Chief Cooper Braaten, sir. Awful happy to see you, sir.”

The Commandant’s face split into a camera-cracking smile and returned the salute. The older man’s weatherbeaten face, his disregard for personal safety—he wore no helmet—his impressive physique...the man was a Marine, through and through. He had a strong handshake and clapped Cooper on the shoulder, sending a cloud of dust into the air. “Outstanding job extracting the President, Chief—out-*fucking*-standing.”

“Sir, pardon my asking, but aren’t you supposed to be in Washington?”

The Commandant laughed. “Son, there comes a time in every man’s life when he’s got to make up his damn mind and choose a side.” The voice was hoarse from decades of bellowing orders.

“Sir?”

“Barron—that little shit—is doing his best to destroy this country. I swore an oath to protect and defend the Constitution, and I intend to keep that oath. And, as long as I’m the Commandant, then by God, the United States Marine Corps will keep it, as well. I’m done containing the North Koreans. We’re going on the *offensive*—orders or not.” He glared around, as if daring someone to object. “We’re gonna roll these little rice-eating, slant-eyed, backstabbing fucks right back into the Pacific.”

“Oorah!” barked Morrin, standing at attention next to the Commandant. The call was taken up by the recruits clustered around their Commandant.

“What about President Barron?” asked Cooper after the cheering died.

“What about him?” snuffed the Commandant. “I heard President *Denton* last night. As long as he breathes, he’s the President. Barron just grabbed the reins.” He waved the idea off. “Besides, I think he’s fixin’ to shitcan my ass anyway. Everything is completely FUBAR in D.C. Now—where’s President Denton...?”

Cooper shook his head sadly. “I’m sorry, sir. The President is dead.”

The old man put a gnarled, yet strong hand on Cooper’s shoulder and sighed. “I’m sorry, son, I really am.” He sighed deeply. “Well, I figured it was a long-shot. He didn’t look so hot during that speech. I just hoped...I had hoped he would have survived long enough for us to reach you all.” He rolled a shoulder and shook off the melancholy. “You did well, Chief—better than anyone else could’ve done. *Almost* as well as a Marine.”

Cooper wanted to smile but couldn’t. “So who’s the real president, then?”

“Well, son, I guess my Commander in Chief is now Orren Harris.” The Commandant looked around the rubble at their feet, the dust in the air, and the debris left over from the Korean attack. “I’ll wager he’s got better digs at NORAD than you got here, Master Chief.”

Cooper’s radio broke squelch. “Chief Braaten,” said Arol’s voice.

Cooper held up a finger for the Commandant to pause. “Go ahead,” he replied.

“The base is ours. The CO is weak as a kitten—but spitting mad.” Cooper could hear the smile in Arol’s voice. “I think he’s gonna be all right.”

“That’s great. I got someone here who’ll want to speak with him.”

“What did he mean, ‘the base is ours’? What’s the sit-rep?” asked the Commandant, motioning for Cooper to lead them into the bunker.

Cooper started walking, the Commandant at his side. “The base XO took a personal phone call from President Barron and gathered up the hotheads here,” said Cooper. “He locked up General Nadina—the base commander—and tried to take over. They had a heads-up that we were coming and attempted to take us prisoner. Said he had orders—direct from Barron, to execute us.”

“Mutiny,” growled the Commandant. He pointed at Cooper. “I’m willing to bet those desk jockeys back at the Pentagon are behind this mess. We haven’t seen much in the Corps, but from what I understand, the Army is dealing with a pretty significant amount of desertion. Probably going to get worse now that Denton is gone.” He sighed, as if to say *ah well, nothing I can do about that.*

“So, where is this son-of-a-whore base XO?”

“He tried to pull a gun on me, sir, so I personally authorized his dishonorable discharge,” Cooper said matter-of-factly.

The Commandant laughed again as he ducked under a florescent light hanging by a single wire. “You ever change your mind about bein’ in the Navy, you come see me, son. You’d make a damn fine Marine.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BARRON

Washington, D.C.

The White House

Presidential Emergency Operations Center

“WHAT THE HELL do you mean, ‘you can’t get a hold of the Commandant of the Marine Corps’? *Find* him, you idiot!” hissed the Vice President. She slammed the phone down on the conference table and composed herself.

President Barron smiled dreamily. She was more than capable of taking over for him for a while. He could go spend some more time with Jayne...

A side door opened and Jayne entered, carrying a stack of papers and folders. The President lost all thought for his VP and incompetent staffers. All he could smell was her. All he could see was her. He felt his pulse quicken and his groin stir. Jayne winked at him and ignored the VP.

“They’re ready for you, Mr. President,” Jayne purred. She held the papers across her chest and nodded to Vice President Hillsen.

“Ms. Renolds.”

“Madam Vice President.”

It was easy for anyone to see there was a distinct animosity between the two women in the room, but the President couldn’t care less what Senator—Vice

President—Hillsen thought or wanted. He patted his lap and smiled. Jayne peered at him over the rims of her fake glasses—she wore them just for him. The seductive twinkle in her eye made his toes curl. She walked over, hips swaying in her graceful, catlike walk of hers, and lowered herself demurely onto his lap with a sigh.

The President closed his eyes as the weight of her settled onto his lap. He leaned back in bliss and wrapped his hands around her lithe waist. He rolled his head to the side, as if drunk, and smiled at VP Hillsen. The look of indignation on her face was priceless.

“Mr. President!” Hillsen hissed. “We—we are about to have a cabinet meeting. You...you can’t have this...*woman*...sitting—I mean—it’s just not done...” She was getting more and more flustered by the minute.

President Barron barked a laugh and tucked one of his hands under Jayne’s blouse, his fingers tingling at the contact with her soft, warm skin. “Let ‘em look,” he murmured. “Might get a *rise* out of ‘em, eh?”

Jayne giggled. The Vice President frowned.

“*Uh*,” said someone’s voice from across the room. The President looked around Jayne’s back and saw the bank of monitors were lit up with the faces of the Joint Chiefs and the rest of the cabinet. One screen—for the Commandant of the Marine Corps—was conspicuously dark.

Jayne waved coyly to the heads on the screens. More than one flushed pink. The Secretary of State actually grinned before he caught himself and cleared his throat, his face souring.

“Sir, is this really appropriate—” began the Chief of the Navy.

“Am I the President of the United States?”

“Well...of course, sir.”

“Then I shall do as I please, or I may start looking for a new man to run the Navy. Am I clear?”

“As a bell, sir.” The Admiral’s neck and jowls turned red.

“Now,” said the President, as he tickled Jayne’s taut belly. She tittered behind a hand and playfully slapped at his roaming fingers. “I thought it high-time to bring our new Vice President up to speed.” He turned to the Chief of the Air

Force. "Let's start things off with China. I believe you have some good news?"

"I do," said General Andrews in a stiffly formal voice. A screen in the middle changed from the Secretary of Homeland Security's face to what looked like a satellite image of an urban center somewhere.

"What is that?" asked Jayne, pointing at the screen. She sounded like a high school girl, her voice full of innocence and curiosity. The President could feel the old comfortable heat in his groin begin to spread through his body. He wanted her. Badly. But he had to suffer through this meeting, at least for appearances.

The General cleared his throat. "That, Miss...ah..." The loose flesh under his jaw began to turn red. He cleared his throat again. "That's downtown Pyongyang. This is footage from one of our stealth bombers. We sent in a flight of three out of Wright-Patterson as soon as you gave the green light."

"Looks like a video game," the President chuckled.

"General, is this live?" asked the new vice president.

"No, ma'am," the General said, his face showing signs of relief in talking to someone that was actually *supposed* to be attending the meeting. The President frowned. It was clear the General didn't approve of Jayne, either. *He's no different than the Admiral. That puts him on the shit-list, for sure. I think I'll just replace all of the cabinet...*

"This was taken about an hour ago." The face on the wall looked down. The image started to move, clouds winking in and out of the picture, the ground slowly, ever so slowly, rolled by. The President whistled. *The plane taking this footage has to be way the hell up there...*

"Roger, Hightower, authentication received. We are go for deployment."

"Who said that?" asked the President. His mind was enveloped in a thick fog of Jayne's scent. She squirmed again in his lap, sending waves of pleasure rippling through his body.

"That's the pilot of the stealth bomber, sir," said the Air Force Chief.

"Time to target, thirty seconds. Opening the doors."

"Doors open," replied a second voice. A green light flickered to life in the upper corner of the display.

“That’s the co-pilot’s voice, sir,” said the General.

The President closed his eyes. “I gathered that, General.” He winked at his new vice president and chuckled at her embarrassed look.

“Target acquired. Twenty seconds.”

“Guidance spooling up. GPS locked on. Payload is locked and loaded,” announced the co-pilot.

“Ten seconds. Final arming. Lights are green, we’re good to release. On my mark...three...two...one...release.”

It was all so businesslike. So casual. The President stopped paying attention to the voices on the speakers as the pilots announced the bomb was away and they were hightailing out of North Korean airspace. After the release, the view switched to a 3D display from the nose of the bomb as it tipped down and was pulled by gravity toward a violent death.

The clouds began to grow larger, then everything went white as the massive ordinance sliced through a cirrus cloud and emerged on the other side. The view of the ground came back abruptly, rushing up to meet the screen. The President leaned forward in his chair, nearly dumping Jayne off his lap in an effort to fight the vertigo rising in his inner ears. He felt as if *he* were falling forward and down with the bomb.

Faster still, the bomb raced downward; the factories, the buildings, the roads growing ever larger by the second. A beeping started as the bomb counted down to its own demise, locked on target and guiding itself home. The President gripped the arms of his chair with white knuckles. He could feel the sweat on his forehead. Ever downward the bomb fell, spinning first one way, then the other as it sailed through the air and stabilized its trajectory. The numbers counting down in the upper-left corner of the screen indicated America’s response to the invasion was less than five-thousand feet away now.

A little radar dish symbol appeared in the upper-right corner. The President pointed at the symbol, his other arm wrapped tightly around Jayne’s waist. “What’s that mean?” he gasped.

“Okay, right now, the North Koreans are attempting to lock onto the bomb with their missile defense system. It won’t work, though—the bomb has already

attained terminal velocity. Besides, it's got jamming and counter measures onboard. Once it's released from the plane, the target is as good as gone," responded General Andrews from his monitor.

The President watched the numbers spin and disappear: 900 feet, 800 feet, 700 feet—they turned red, his pulse quickened. Five hundred, four, three—two—one—

The last image he saw was of a large, industrial building. It must've occupied four city blocks and the roof was littered with satellite dishes. The GPS-guided bomb honed in on a ventilation shaft in the center of the roof and punched right through before the image went to static.

On impact, the President's body jerked with tension, causing Jayne to squeal in surprise.

"Good kill," reported the pilot. "Good kill."

"Target destroyed," announced the co-pilot. "Large secondary explosions."

"What was it?" asked the President, loosening his tie to get some more air. *What a ride!* "Can I get a copy of this?"

"That was the North Korean...well, the closest equivalent is a Parliament building, sir—but it's largely symbolic. Kim Yon Sul is not in residence. He's in his bunker, but this will be just as effective. We need the party-elite to be scared for their lives. Kim Yon Sul is absolutely certifiable. He'll never back down. You said to send a strong message—I think the hardliners in Pyongyang will understand things a little clearer now, Mr. President."

"Maybe the Chinese will answer the phone now, too," mused the head of the NSA.

The video feed changed from green-static to an image of the same four city blocks—now reduced to charred, burning rubble with a sizable crater in the middle.

"Biggest bomb we have that doesn't glow in the dark," said the Air Force Chief of Staff with a smirk.

"That...was...*awesome*..." whispered the President. He almost laughed. "How many did we drop?"

"Just one, sir."

“One bomb did that? How many bombers went in?”

“In total, three, sir. But we only needed one.”

“Why only one? I thought I said I wanted to send a message?”

“Mr. President,” said the new Secretary of Defense, Haden Brooks, the former undersecretary. “The message was loud and clear: we only need one plane to deliver one bomb and destroy your parliament.” His image snapped fingers. “Just like that. Despite all the chaos you’ve caused on our West Coast, America is still the big dog in the fight. And there’s a lot more where that came from.”

The President looked at his new VP. “I like him.”

“Sir, if I may,” said the Army Chief of Staff. “We’ve got some more things to sort out. For starters, we need a follow up.”

“You mean, hit them again?” asked Jayne.

The President leaned around Jayne’s waist and raised an eyebrow at the General. He nodded and cleared his throat.

“Ah, yes...yes ma’am. Hit them again.” The man looked genuinely embarrassed to be talking to the President’s aide, especially one sitting on the President’s *lap*.

“Mr. President, I disagree,” said Vice President Hillsen. She turned to face him, her posture stiff—as if every fiber of her being was trying to ignore the woman sitting on the President’s lap. Her eyes flicked to the movement of his hand up Jayne’s blouse. Jayne giggled and squirmed and the VP blushed.

“Let me make contact with some members of the Chinese government that I...” She looked at the faces on the bank of screens that watched her. The Joint Chiefs were frowning. She cleared her throat. “I...I have some backchannel contacts. Let me use them. If I can get them to broker a ceasefire with the Koreans, we can stop the fighting and figure out a diplomatic solution that would benefit both our countries.”

“Oh, we’ll stop the fighting,” said the Air Force Chief. “As soon as we bomb North Korea back to the Stone Age.”

“And how long do you think it’ll be, General,” VP said icily, “before the Koreans try to *nuke* us, now? Then we nuke them...Tell me, General, who wins

in that scenario?” She turned back to the President. “If I can establish a truce so that the Koreans can at least save face...we stand a much better chance at *real* peace, sir.”

She smiled—if you could call it that—a facial gesture that made her look like a classic witch. *All she needs is a cauldron and a pointy hat*, the President said to himself with a silent laugh.

The President glanced up at Jayne. He was bored. He wanted her. She winked at him, then shrugged. He sighed and looked at the VP. “Okay, go for it. We’ll hold off on further strikes until you can see what you can do. But if your way doesn’t work...”

“Understood, sir. Thank you, Mr. President.”

“What about all those cities on the Eastern Seaboard that the U.N. has taken over?” asked Jayne. “What about the rioting in the treaty zones?”

“Sir,” said the Secretary of Homeland Security. President Barron didn’t like the fact that the handwringing bureaucrat made it a point to address him and not Jayne, when it was clearly she who cared enough to ask. “I think this is beyond riots. It’s more like open rebellion. Ever since President Denton’s speech, all hell has broken loose in several major cities.”

“Did that doctored tape really fool all these people?” sighed the President. “The man was clearly dead days ago. Now there’s this broadcast displaying some actor claiming to be Denton—and people are revolting in his name?”

“People are gullible,” mumbled Jayne.

“Is there anything we can do to—”

“Sir,” said the Secretary of Homeland Security, “it’s not a question of what we can do—we can’t *do* anything. There’s just too many riots. They’re everywhere: Boston, Philly, New York, Chicago, Phoenix, Houston, Dallas, Miami, Charleston, Louisville...if it’s a city bigger than about 10,000 people, there are riots going on. In the treaty zones, or Occupied Zones, as they’re being called, the people are attacking the Europeans more than before, and they’re starting to really get organized.”

“The Rising,” said the FBI Director.

“What?” asked the President wearily.

“That’s what they’re calling it on the streets. The Rising.”

“I call it insurrection and it will be crushed!” the President proclaimed, waving the absurdity aside. “*Riots* in America. Ridiculous. Use the military, use the National Guard, just crush them!”

He got a weak chorus of “*yessirs*” in response. Jayne wiggled in his lap, making him forget what he was mad about. She was so flexible...

“General...” Jayne leaned back into the President’s arms and whispered a question in his ear. She nibbled it before he answered in a shaky voice.

“That’s General Harrison...” he murmured, eyes closed in bliss.

Jayne leaned provocatively forward in the President’s lap and rested her forearms on the table. The President still had one of his roaming hands up her blouse, but she acted as if nothing were out of the ordinary. Then her blouse fell open, causing more than one of the faces on the screens to blush or look away. Only the three military men kept their eyes on her—and narrowed them.

“General Harrison, be a dear and explain to me,” she said, twirling some of the liquid gold that tumbled down from her head in her fingers. “Why do you look so uncomfortable at the President’s suggestion to use the military to put down the rebellion?”

The General adjusted his uniform and cleared his throat. “For starters, ma’am, there are certain rules and time-honored customs—”

“You’re talking about *posse committatus*,” Jayne said. “It’s irrelevant. The President has already suspended that outdated practice for the duration of the crisis.” She raised her eyebrows, waiting for the General to proceed.

He glared at her. “This is the United States of America. We do not use our own military to impose—”

“Impose *what*? The will of the people?” she asked coyly.

“The will of one man! President Barron has disbanded Congress—”

“*Temporarily*. There were credible threats on the lives of the Legislative Branch. He had no choice—”

“Bullshit! Singlehandedly dismissing Congress is precisely the type of activity that is causing our men and women in uniform to question what the hell they’re risking their necks for! It’s why General Rykker has dropped off the grid

and why Marine units around the globe are mobilizing. Oh,” he said with a grin. “You didn’t know *that*, did you?”

“It’s going to get worse, sir,” said Admiral Bennet. “When the fleet Marines find out about the Commandant’s actions...”

“Admiral,” said Jayne in a husky voice that made the President want to melt into a puddle on the floor. “This *cannot* be allowed to get out of hand.”

The old man laughed. “And what would you have me do about it, Miss... whoever the hell you are? Why are we even talking to this woman, Mr. President? This is ridiculous—”

“Because I’m ordering you to talk to her. I have appointed Ms. Renolds here Special Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counter-terrorism. Is there a problem with that?” asked the President in a drunken voice.

“You’re damn right there’s a problem. You look like you’re unfit for the office. Sir. You bring in this...this woman...”

“If that’s the way you feel—”

“You are a married man, for Christ’s sake!” bellowed the Admiral.

“I’ll have your resignation on my desk in the hour and I thank you for your service to our country.” The President leaned his head back and called out, “Kill his feed, please.”

The Admiral’s shocked face disappeared as his screen went blank. General Harrison and General Andrews looked like they had been slapped.

“Sir, this is preposterous! It’s unheard of—”

“Kill the good General’s feed, as well. You’re fired too, General Harrison.”

“What!?”

“Kill that one, too,” he said, pointing at the Air Force General. “Bye bye, birdie,” chuckled the President.

When all the Joint Chiefs were gone, the President leaned back in his chair. “There, it’s done, just like you asked. Can we leave, now?”

“Not yet, love.” Jayne slowly, ever so carefully so as to remain in contact with the President as long as possible, extricated herself from his grasping hands. She adjusted her blouse and skirt and tried to appear more businesslike.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I believe the President has something he’d like to

say to you.” She turned and smiled at him.

“Oh. Ah, Jayne is going to run these meetings for me from now on. She speaks with my authority. I’m making her my Chief of Staff. Got it?” His hands started to shake. His subconscious mind was screaming that this was wrong, that it was betraying everything he’d ever stood for...but his thirst for Jayne, her body, her scent, her laughter, her touch...it was too much. He’d give anything, do anything to appease her and he knew it. He sold his soul to the devil and was happy at the bargain.

The room grew uncomfortably quiet. None of the remaining cabinet officials said anything. Most just stared at the President with open mouths. The President felt anger—a strange sensation buried down under waves of pleasure—start to bubble to the surface of his mind. Or was it shame? He leaned forward and pointed at the screens.

“Let me be *clear*, ladies and gentlemen. I want her to run things.” He nodded towards Jayne. “If that is a problem, I will replace this...entire...fucking... cabinet...And, in this time of national crisis, I don’t think you want to be out there in the street without a job, without a source of income, without food, water, and protection. Do you?” The President sighed.

“Folks, the world as we once knew it has changed and we *must* adapt to meet the new challenges we face. In order to get through this period of turmoil, we’re going to have to grit our teeth and muddle through what comes next. Understood?” He sat back, exhausted by his brief discourse, wondering where the words had come from. He was already starting to forget what he had just said.

The chorus of “*yessirs*” was music to his ears.

Jayne looked slyly at the cabinet screens. She picked up four of the folders she had brought in and spread them out in front of the President, being sure to lean over far enough to grant him a long, lingering view down her shirt. He inhaled deeply, drinking her sweet, fragrant bouquet, and visualized her perfume in his mind’s eye. It was *beautiful*.

A thought occurred to him. *Doesn’t anyone else smell this?*

“I have here the top candidates to replace the Joint Chiefs, sir. All men

willing to swear loyalty to you and assist in any way possible to get us through this crisis.”

“Outstanding,” he murmured. “Do it.”

“Mr. President,” began the NSA head, “is this course of action...prudent? I mean, begging your pardon, sir, but these draconian measures are going to have the effect of driving military personnel away. Perhaps even forcing them to go AWOL. I don’t think I’m that far off base with this, sir...”

He held up a skeletal hand and stopped her. As she waited, he examined his hand. *How the hell did I get so thin? Haven’t I been eating?* The hand held up in front of him *couldn’t* be his own. He was in the prime of his life...Then Jayne’s concerned face filled his blurry vision.

“Are you okay, love?”

Her beauty pushed all thoughts and worries over his own health aside like a snowplow clearing a road. He refocused on the task at hand. *Cleaning house. Right.* Reginald and Jayne had promised he’d be rewarded if he cleared out the traitors and put men loyal to him in office. Jayne had already started rewarding him just before this meeting and promised to continue where they left off, immediately after the meeting. His mind started to drift away to more pleasant thoughts...The shock of the pleasure unleashed by Jayne’s sudden squeeze of his leg brought him crashing back into the present.

“Where...” he sighed. “Where are they going to go, these deserters of yours?”

“Well...”

“Nowhere, that’s where. There are no standing armies of opposition forces—just the North Koreans and the U.N...”

“But the Marines,” began the Secretary of State with an embarrassed smile at Jayne.

“The Marines are of little concern,” Jayne murmured. “They don’t have the resources or the capability to do any serious harm. When the Korean threat is neutralized,” she said with a nod toward the Vice President, “then we will focus on the U.N. situation and then we’ll deal with these traitors called Marines.”

“Mr. President, Speaker Harris has declared that Denver will be the new

capitol and is gathering forces there. It's likely—"

"The hell with Harris, what are we going to do about this flu?" asked the Secretary of State. "I'm getting some very disturbing reports from the U.N. out of Boston—"

The President was quickly losing patience. "I just fired the entire military leadership. Are you two going to be next?"

The NSA head looked embarrassed, but held her chin up proudly. "No, sir, of course not. I will be the first to swear loyalty to you. For the good of the nation," she added quickly.

"For the good of the nation," mumbled a handful of the others.

The head of the CIA frowned. "I can't be a party to this horseshit. You're establishing a dictatorship, sir, whether intentional or not, and whatever this woman is doing to you while the flu is begging to get out of control—"

"Oh my, you *do* have an imagination," giggled Jayne.

"Don't you snicker at me, you little snake. I know who you are and what you're up to—you'll be dealt with in time," the elder CIA head hissed. The President felt Jayne stiffen, in surprise or anger, he couldn't tell. But his addled mind was alert enough to know she did not like what the CIA Director was saying.

The somber-looking chief spook turned his stony eyes on the President. "Sir, I have served this country my entire adult life, from the Army, to the NSA, to the CIA. I love this nation and have done my best to protect it from day one. I was running spies and renditions when you were still in diapers and I won't stand here and let you—"

The President frowned and wagged a hand in the air. The CIA feed from Langley went dark. Jane thumbed through her files and slid another folder in front of the President. She tapped the folder with one well-manicured finger. "There's your new CIA director."

"Thank you, Jayne." Suddenly the President could no longer contain his urges. He stood and declared, "This meeting is over. Get to work, people." He sliced his hand through the air and all the screens went dark.

Then Jayne was in his arms and he was fumbling at her blouse, clawing and

tearing at the expensive fabric. He had to have her, now. She tried to be modest and cover herself with her arms. But he was pulling on her clothes with an urgency that surprised even him.

The Vice President cleared her throat primly and frowned at the wanton display of lust in the War Room. The President leered at her and pulled down Jayne's bra. "Stay if you want, Sandra. I don't care who knows anymore." He planted his lips on the tender skin of Jayne's neck. Her gasp sent a thrill down his spine.

He heard the Vice President hastily remove herself from the room as he buried his face in Jayne's golden mane and devoured her fragrance in deep, desperate gulps. His arms encircled her writhing, athletic body and he felt like screaming in utter joy.

"We must move faster, love," she whispered in his ear. "You need to surround yourself with loyal servants, not traitors."

"Mmmmm...yes...fire them all...pick the ones you like," he said, sighing with pleasure. "Just come here..."

Jayne laughed, a deep, throaty, chest-gripping sound that stole the President's breath. "Oh, thank you, Mr. President," she murmured, undressing him slowly. "And now, I believe there's the matter of a *reward* we were discussing..."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

CHAD

Salmon Falls, Idaho

East Face of Morning Glory Peak

CHAD DOUBLED over and gasped for breath. He gripped a tree branch he had converted to a walking stick. “How much...farther?” He and Tuck had worked their way down the side of the mountain for what had seemed like hours in an attempt to reach a suitable spot for the Ranger sniper to set up shop.

“All that blood Garza took is really slowin’ you down, huh?” asked the lean Ranger, grinning through his face paint. The whites of his teeth and eyes were in stark contrast to the green-and-brown patterns smeared on his face. His ghillie suit had been modified with bits of greenery and dried grass as they walked, so that now Chad was afraid if Tuck stopped moving, he’d lose sight of the man.

Chad leaned against a pine tree to catch his breath. He started to see spots. “He took...he took a lot...” he wheezed. The bloodletting had been worth it, though, to avoid being snatched into the air by the passing cargo plane. Chad had witnessed the pick-up an hour earlier—the thought that *he* had originally been the intended victim for that little adventure made his stomach turn.

They had prepared for the Skyhook near the Park Ranger Station, so as Chad ate a few desserts from MREs to get his blood sugar back up, he was able to lean

against a snow-blasted tree and watch the action, trying not to shiver. Captain Alston was particularly excited, he'd explained, because he had never seen a Skyhook procedure in action. It was like watching the past come alive, he had told Chad with a smile. Chad still wondered if the good captain would've been that excited had it been *him* going up in the air instead of a duct-taped cooler of blood.

Chad thought it was interesting to watch and believed it would've been change-your-pants terrifying had he taken part. They stood around waiting for the hum of the big airplane for about a half hour before one of the helicopter pilots, the woman that always scowled at Chad, said she heard it in the distance.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, a bird-like shape appeared around the side of a nearby mountain to the southwest. It grew larger and louder until it passed right overhead with the ear-splitting roar of four huge turbo-prop engines. It'd been bigger than Chad had expected, and slower. A large rectangular box popped out the rear of the cargo plane and dropped a few hundred feet tethered to a bright orange parachute. Three of the Rangers had scrambled over and dragged it back to camp.

"The clock is ticking, people!" Captain Alston had said as he checked his watch. Chad remembered how he'd called out each minute as the time slipped away before the plane would circle back for the pickup, staying on the opposite side of the mountain from Salmon Falls to avoid any Russian SAM missile launchers.

As he had rested against a sun-warmed boulder on the north shore of U.P. Lake, Chad had watched the Rangers assemble and inflate the pick-up rig and giant dirigible-shaped balloon. At the same time, the vials containing his precious, freshly drawn blood were packed and attached to the rig as securely as possible. Everything was ready by the time the helium tank had been exhausted. By then, the Rangers strained against the ropes to hold the balloon under cover.

"On final approach," called out the plane's pilot. It was the only contact they had during the entire operation.

"Let it go!" the captain had said. The Rangers and Apache pilots released the guide lines holding the balloon and it shot into the sky, sailing up and over the

surrounding trees in seconds. Someone had looped the thick main line loosely around a large rock to keep the balloon from disappearing into the sky. The little pack of blood vials was nowhere near heavy enough to stabilize everything. It had been designed, Chad pondered nervously, to carry a man or two.

The roar of the plane returned, lower and slower now, just above the trees. The Rangers hooted and hollered as it grew near. Chad gritted his teeth as he felt his ribcage rattle in time with the rumble of those big engines. It was a most unnerving feeling. Like someone was shaking him from the inside. How the Rangers *enjoyed* it was beyond his understanding.

Then the big plane appeared over the trees, blotting out the sun. The rope looped around the rock suddenly went taut and began kicking up dust as it shot into the sky. The little package of vials lifted smoothly up and vanished above the trees in less than two seconds. Chad felt his stomach drop in a wave of vertigo, just imagining that he had been standing there as the plane flew over and picked him up.

And then it was over. The plane rumbled on downslope, turned the corner of the mountain and was gone from sight. In another minute, the echo of its massive engines died out there was nothing but the loud protests of one very pissed-off magpie, screeching at the humans who'd wrecked its daily routine.

“Stay with me, sir...” The sniper’s voice pulled Chad out of his dreamlike trance.

He blinked back the spots that threatened to choke off his vision. “I’m okay...how much...” He took a deep breath and the spots vanished. “How much farther?”

“Just there by that little rise. We’ll set up next to the boulder there by that tree. See it?”

Chad squinted in the morning light. “Yeah...yeah, I think so.”

It took another ten minutes for Chad to make his way gingerly through the underbrush and make it to the position Tuck had indicated. He collapsed next to the sniper, panting and wheezing but proud that he’d made it and would be contributing to the effort to liberate the besieged town.

Tuck checked his watch. “Any minute now, they’ll be checking in with us.”

He glanced out over the town, about half a mile downslope. “Nice clean angles, good concealment. We got us a hide, sir.”

“Overwatch, Hammer 2 actual. We're in position. You ready?”

Tuck squeezed his throat mic twice.

The earbud in Chad's ear broke squelch again. “Valkyrie, Hammer 2, Actual. We are go.”

Tuck uncapped the scope on his long rifle and settled into the space between the boulder and the leaning pine tree. When he stopped adjusting his gear, the sniper was nearly invisible, even from only a few feet away.

“Set up your spotting scope and let's get some practice in while we wait for the fireworks.”

Chad gratefully removed his backpack and sat on the ground. He unpacked a small telescope and set up the tripod like he'd been shown. He settled to the side of the boulder and got comfortable. “Okay...I'm set,” he whispered.

“Good, now see that blue house on the edge of town down there?” Tuck said quietly.

“Uh...yeah, there it is...hey!”

“Ssssh!”

“Sorry...I can see Captain Alston and Sgt. Garza...” Chad whispered.

“Good. Just remember we may not be the only snipers out here. If Ivan is smart, he'll have patrols combing this area. So we need to stay low, quiet, and most importantly, as still as possible—at all times. Got it?”

“Got it,” Chad whispered. He thought he heard a sound echo off the mountains around them. “You hear that?” he whispered.

Tuck listened. “Yup. Apaches must've dusted off.” Tuck checked his watch. “Well, we ate up more time than I wanted getting here...”

“Sorry,” said Chad.

“No worries, sir. Gonna get interesting real quick.”

“Look!” said Chad, a bit too loud.

“I see them,” hissed Tuck. “Gotta stay quiet, man.”

Chad watched in excited silence as the smoke trails from more than a dozen missiles streaked around the side of the mountain and dropped down into the

town. The missiles themselves were too fast and too far away for Chad to see, but he did spot their impacts. Bright balls of orange erupted where the missiles found their targets, producing clouds of smoke and flying bits of debris. It took a second for the sound of the explosions to rumble over Chad and Tuck.

“I’m getting a negative reading on the SAM radar, Actual,” reported Tuck.

“Roger that. Valkyrie Lead, Hammer 2, Actual. Overwatch reports negative SAM signature, how copy?”

“Something’s not right,” muttered Tuck. “Check out the northwest corner of town.”

Chad swung the spotting scope to the left and focused where instructed. “I got a bunch of Russians running between houses...looks like there’s a tank or something sitting in that backyard...”

“I’m keeping track of our people...there’s no movement on the south end of town. That tank you see—does it have missiles?”

Chad adjusted the focus of his scope and tried to ignore the popping sounds coming from the town as more explosions ripped into the Russian lines. “No...I don’t see anything. It’s just sitting there. I see a few guys near it, but they’re looking for cover, I think.”

“Okay, Actual, SAMs are down. Repeat, Overwatch has no visual on SAM sites,” whispered Tuck.

“Roger that, Overwatch.”

Chad could feel his heartbeat quicken when he spotted the two sleek-looking Apaches swing around the far side of the mountain to the north. “There’s the Apaches!” he hissed. “They look so small...”

“Wait a minute...” muttered Tuck. “Where’s the *third* one?”

Chad scanned the skies to the north. “I don’t see anything. Just those two. Boy, they’re sure givin’ the Russians hell—look at *that*!” Chad said, pointing at multiple little puffs of smoke that appeared in town. The Apaches were raining small missiles on the Russians. Chad was transfixed, watching as the helicopters soared through the pillars of smoke drifting up from burning Russian positions. As they passed through, destroying everything in their paths, the Apaches curled tendrils of smoke which swirled about them in the downdraft of their rotors.

They looked like something out of a nightmare.

Tuck muttered a curse under his breath. “Hammer 2, Actual, Overwatch. Got negative visual on Valkyrie 3, over.”

“Copy that, Overwatch. Wait one.”

“This isn’t good. That third Apache was supposed to take out the SAM sites on the northwest part of town.”

“But I didn’t see anything over there. That tank was just sitting there without missiles. Does that mean—”

“Look!” said Tuck, pointing toward town in a sudden movement that caught Chad by surprise. It was like the brush grew an arm and came to life.

Chad peered through the scope and watched missiles drop from the stubby wings of the Apaches and streak toward targets on the ground trailing smoke and fire. Muffled explosions reached their position a mere second after they saw the Russian positions burst into a balls of fire and flying debris.

“Nice!” said Tuck. “Didn’t think we had those, did you?”

The sound from another enormous explosion near the center of town rolled over them like a clap of thunder. “Wow!” said Chad, adjusting the focus on his scope and squinting through the eyepiece. He was watching pieces of City Hall fly across streets and smash into adjacent buildings.

“I bet those pilots are having fun,” muttered Tuck, watching the action through his rifle scope.

The front of what looked like a drugstore crumpled when two cars and a truck were flung into it from the tremendous explosion at City Hall. He laughed when he saw Russian soldiers, like little ants, scurrying for cover and trying to find the source of the death raining down on them.

“Any sign of Valkyrie 3?” asked Captain Alston’s voice.

Tuck looked around and examined the sky while Chad kept watch on the battle in town. “Negative, Hammer 2, Actual. Clear skies.”

Chad glanced over his shoulder. He thought he heard a twig snap and turned around to look. There was nothing there. Another explosion rumbled in town and he turned back to watch the carnage continue. Movement on the west end of town caught his eye.

“Uh-oh,” he said, looking through the spotting scope. “Hey, remember that tank? I think they had it covered or something. I see some white things on it that look like—”

A puff of white smoke between their position and the town appeared in his eyepiece.

“SAM launch, SAM launch, SAM launch! West of town!” called out Tuck.

“Get your hands up, Huntley!” called out a female voice. Chad flinched in surprise and knocked his spotting scope over the edge of the boulder. It hit the ground on the other side and shattered against the rocks.

“You scared the shit out of me!” Chad turned and saw the female pilot that had always glared at him a few paces away. She had her service pistol drawn on him in a two-handed grip. He noticed with some alacrity that her knuckles were white.

“What the *hell*—” said Tuck as he turned.

Before the sniper could say anything else, the pistol barked twice and Chad ducked, ears ringing.

“*Jesus!*” she said. “I didn’t even see you!”

“That’s kinda the point,” Tuck groaned in pain. He fell to the ground from his perch by the tree. His rifle clattered down next to him, just out of reach.

“You *shot* him!” Chad screamed, still crouched over, hands up next to his ears. “Whose side are you on?”

“That’s—that was an accident!” she screamed back. The gun wavered between Tuck and Chad. “I’m sorry,” she said in a not-unkind voice toward Tuck. She wiped at her eyes. “I really am...I’ve never shot—shot anyone before! I just wanted to get *you*,” she said, swinging the pistol in an unsteady grip back toward Chad.

“Let me help him!” Chad pleaded.

She shook her head. “Get on your knees with your hands above your head. Hands together—do it *now!*” she said taking a step closer. Chad hesitated and looked at Tuck writhing on the ground, his face a mask of pain. Tuck suffered in near silence as he clawed at his stomach. He opened his mouth and closed it, looking for all the world like a fish out of water.

“Now!” she shrieked. The pistol went off and a chunk of the pine tree to the right of Chad’s head exploded into splinters. “Sorry!” she called out.

“Okay, okay,” said Chad. He scrambled too quickly getting to his knees and put his hands up. The pilot crashed through the underbrush the last few paces and quickly secured Chad’s wrists together with a cable-tie.

Chad remembered some of the rudimentary training drilled into his head when he had been a “guest” of the CDC ten years earlier. They had been concerned that because of the unique properties of his blood, someone or some organization would try and kidnap him. Of course, keeping him confined under lock and key was the same damn thing to Chad.

Regardless, he remembered what they’d told him, “First, don’t fight. You’re not trained. Just go meekly and make your captors overconfident. They’ll be less likely to pick up on your next trick. Keep your wrists parallel to the ground and clench your fists as they put restraints on you. When you are secured, relax, and you’ll have room enough to maneuver yourself into a position to escape.”

Chad did just that and held his breath as the female pilot hastily slapped the cable-tie around his wrists. She never noticed how he held his wrists and clenched his fists.

“On your feet, let’s go.”

“What about him?” Chad asked, ignoring the demand.

She looked down at Tuck, who glared back at her with a face of pure rage. Chad could almost imagine that Tuck would somehow manage get up and strangle the pilot. “I’m sorry,” she said again. “Where’s your radio? Hand over your sidearm, too.”

Tuck grunted and used a blood-slick hand to fumble in a pouch on the chest of his ghillie suit. He pulled out the radio and jerked the throat mic and earbud cords free before feebly tossing it on the ground. He flipped up the holster cover on his hip and pulled out a pistol that also went into the loose gravel at her feet. The pilot bent down, picked up the bloody radio with a look of disgust and flung it away. The gun she slipped into a pocket on her flight suit and secured with a zipper.

Despite two bullet wounds in the stomach and chest, the Ranger was actually

smiling at the pilot, like he was thinking of some inside joke.

“What’s so funny?” she asked, her eyes darting toward the continuing battle over Salmon Falls.

“You throw like a girl,” Tuck hissed through clenched teeth. “You better shoot me in the head,” said Tuck in low growl, completely at odds with the smile on his face. His blood-slick hands fumbled with what looked to Chad like a tampon. “When I get patched up, I’m gonna hunt your ass down.” He grimaced and shoved the feminine product right into the bullet wound in his gut, then lay back against the boulder and closed his eyes.

The pilot pointed the wavering pistol at Tuck’s head but didn’t pull the trigger. Her eyes were locked on the town. Chad followed her gaze and saw with horror that one of the Apaches had just become tumbling bits of flaming metal falling out of the sky onto the burning town below.

Chad found it hard not to grin at the look on her face. “Someone you knew?” he asked.

She shook her head and wiped at her eyes with the back of one hand but kept the pistol on Tuck. “Start walking.” The firearm swung around toward Chad. Up close, the muzzle of the pistol looked enormous. “Move.”

Chad reluctantly got up and stumbled through the underbrush after a brief glance at Tuck. The Ranger nodded at Chad and pointed to his ear. He started to tear open a second tampon.

“I’m gonna find you...” Tuck warned the pilot.

What the hell does that mean? Chad struggled on the sloping ground with his hands tied together. Then it came to him. *Oh! I still have my radio! She doesn’t know I have one...*

“You hear me?” called out Tuck in a hoarse voice. “I *will* find you, bitch!”

“Where are we going?” Chad said after she prodded him up the mountainside for the third time. “I don’t like feeling that gun in my back, you know.” As he talked, he let his hands go slack, just like he was shown. He rotated his wrists. *It worked! Now I just need to wait for the right moment...*

“I don’t like having to remind you to go faster, you know,” she spat back. “Keep moving, civilian.”

“Overwatch,” Captain Alston’s voice said in Chad’s earpiece. He flinched in surprise but covered himself by tripping over a rock. “Now’s our chance. We’re moving in. Cover us!”

Chad fretted over how to activate the radio in his chest pocket. With his hands tied in front of him, there was no way he could do it without drawing unwanted attention. Whatever he did, he had to keep the pilot away from the right side of his head or she’d see the tiny radio’s tiny wireless earpiece for sure.

Every step they took led him farther and farther from the wounded sniper. His mind was racing, but nothing came to him as he staggered along. The pilot’s sidearm was never far from his back. *I’m running out of time...*

When they crested one last brush-covered hill, he understood why she was making him walk back up the mountain. Up there, behind a copse of pines was the third Apache, waiting patiently.

“Overwatch, take out that patrol in front of us!” said Captain Alston’s voice. In the background, Chad could hear gunfire.

“Why are you doing this?” Chad asked again, trying to buy time. He slowed down. The pistol hit his spine again. “Ow!”

“You know how much you’re worth to the Koreans?”

“Overwatch! Come in!”

“Really?” asked Chad. “This is about money? You’re going to sell me to the Koreans? After all we went through to *escape* them—”

She shoved him up against the fuselage of the helicopter with a grunt. “To the Koreans, you’re—or I guess your blood is—worth exactly one-half what the Germans will pay and one-*quarter* what the Russians are offering. Patriotism be damned—I can’t turn my back on half a billion dollars. I got family and bills and...” Her voice faltered. “My kids...my daughter has been so sick...”

Chad stared at her, incredulous. “You can’t be serious.” He nodded toward the distant battle raging over Salmon Falls. The last remaining Apache was ducking and weaving yet still dropping missiles and bullets, but it was clearly a losing proposition. “You think the Russians, the Germans, or even the Koreans are actually going to pay you? They’ll take me and put a bullet in your head. You—think of your kids! You love them, right? Why would you risk never seeing

them again for money?”

She sniffed and roughly turned Chad around so he could see the built-in footrests to reach the lower part of the cockpit. “For \$500 million, I’ll take my chances. Get in there.”

“Everyone has their price, I guess,” he muttered.

“Overwatch! Come in! Dammit—” Chad could hear screaming and the captain was panting now. “Overwatch, I don’t know what the hell is going on, but you’ve got to start shooting! Get these guys off our backs! They’re trying to flank us—”

“Oh, like you wouldn’t do the same thing in my situation? Shut up and climb the ladder.” She reached into the upper cockpit and started flipping switches. Deep in the bowels of the helicopter, the engine started to whine as it came to life.

Chad saw his chance as he climbed into the cockpit and pretended to lose his grip. He crushed his chest against the hull of the helicopter and hoped it was enough to activate the radio in his chest pocket. He grunted in pain and then said, “I hope it was worth it for you to hide this helicopter on the mountain. I can’t believe you think you’re going to get paid by the Russians for kidnapping me. How can you be so heartless as to leave Tuck to bleed to death back there?”

“Russians? Mr. Huntley! *Can you hear me?* Can you respond?”

“Answer me this then,” Chad said, panting with the effort to keep the radio activated and still look the pilot in the face. “Where are you taking me?”

“East, to meet the middleman. The Russins will probably take you to one of their treaty cities on the coast. Boston, or one of the southern zones. I don’t know and frankly, I don’t *care*. I’ll get my money before that happens.”

She pulled him back upright and shoved him down into the seat. He felt the radio switch disengage, still hidden in his shirt pocket, and hoped the transmission had gotten through. He sat down in the front seat heavily and remained still while the pilot roughly strapped him in.

“Hammer 2...Overwatch.” Tuck’s voice was weak. At least he was still alive. Chad closed his eyes in thanks as the pilot got into her seat. He could hear buckles clicking as the canopy lowered over his head and sealed shut.

“The pilot...double-crossing bitch...she *shot* me...”

“Roger that, Overwatch. What’s your location?”

Chad could see the black rotors begin to move, slowly at first, then faster and faster as the Apache spooled-up to speed. The control panels in front of him flickered on and a myriad of buttons and switches glowed and blinked.

“Where’s your co-pilot?” he asked nonchalantly.

“Gunner,” said the pilot. “Not a co-pilot. And he didn’t make it. Another person that died because of *you*.”

“Position Bravo-2. By the leaning pine,” whispered Tuck. Chad could barely hear him. “Hurry...”

“Garza is Oscar-Mike! You stay with me, Ranger!”

“Bitch shot me...”

“Tuck!”

“Unh...” static crackled and the signal faded.

Chad turned his head instinctively, trying to hear the transmissions better. He knew he’d made a mistake when he heard the pilot gasp behind him.

“You sneaky bastard! You had a radio the whole time!” He heard the pilot muttering to herself as she unbuckled her harness. The rotors were spinning so fast now, Chad noticed, it was impossible to see each one individually. They were just a blur on the other side of the canopy glass.

He winced as the earbud was ripped from his ear. A hand reached into his chest pockets and groped around. After a moment, the radio came free. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the reflection of the pilot pull out the pistol again. He thought she was going to shoot him for a second, but she turned it sideways and swung. Hard.

Chad felt searing pain in the back of his head. It traveled to his eyes like twin lightning bolts.

“They said you had to be alive, but they never said you had to be awake,” he heard the pilot say. She laughed.

Everything went white, then black as he felt his head fall to the side and strike the cockpit canopy. He felt the weird sensation that he was simultaneously falling asleep and slowly falling down a dark hole in the ground and—

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

COOPER

Denver, Colorado.

Denver International Airport

Emergency National Reserve Operations Center

COOPER STRETCHED his back and felt the wonderful sensation of a good night's sleep ripple through his abused body. The sounds of a military base intruded into his mind and pulled him out of the warm fog of drowsiness. Helicopters, men, machines, *tanks*...a stirred-up hornet's nest of activity that he could hear through the concrete walls.

Cooper sat up suddenly. *Where the hell am I?*

"Have a nice nap, son?" asked a raspy voice.

Cooper turned his sore neck and focused on an old man in perfectly starched digital camo, leaning against a desk with his wiry arms across his chest. The Commandant of the Marine Corps grinned. "Who's Brenda?"

Cooper sighed and ran a hand through his damp hair in an effort to conceal his embarrassment. He wondered what the Commandant had heard. He swung his legs free of the cot and stood up, going easy on his injured knee. The knee brace squeaked as he stood, in time with the creaking in his back.

Maybe the Navy's right. Maybe I am getting too old for this shit.

“Mouse! Get it,” mumbled Charlie from his cot next to Cooper. He jerked awake with the same look of confusion on his face that Cooper figured must’ve been on his own. Charlie rolled off the cot and sprang to his feet. “Where’s our gear?”

The Commandant nodded to the dark corner at the back of the room. “Back there. Don’t worry, nothing’s missing. We just figured you boys deserved some sack time. You pretty much passed out on the way here.” He checked his watch. “Been sleeping for sixteen hours now.”

“Too long,” said Cooper, rubbing his back. He cleared his throat. He glanced around the dimly lit briefing room. He kicked Mike’s cot and the short SEAL stirred and coughed. The others began to rise.

“Where are we, sir?” he asked.

“This is the new...well, they’re calling it the Pentagon for now, but there’s only one Pentagon and everyone knows it. This place looks more like an *outhouse* to me.” He shrugged. “That’s for the desk jockeys to sort out. We’re in Denver, setting up shop in the new capital, or close enough. Technically, we’re at the damn airport, but nobody seems to care. I’m more interested in killing Koreans. How about you?”

“New capital?” asked Charlie.

“Denver?” asked Jax, sitting up in his cot. He examined the fresh bandages on his arms in amazement.

“Can’t you guys keep it down?” grumbled Mike, pillow over his head. He yelped when Sparky slapped him on the back of the head.

“Yes, Denver,” said the Commandant loudly. “The President—that would be Orren Harris now,” he said with a grin, “has declared Denver to be the new national capital. This place has been prepped for the move from D.C. since World War II, I guess.” He shrugged. “Again, above my pay grade. I’m a Marine, not a politician.”

“Long way from Chula Vista, man,” muttered Charlie.

“Sir,” said Cooper. “Any word on Coronado? My men have family—”

“Son,” said the Commandant in a softer tone. “I’m afraid no one has had contact with the base there for quite some time. That whole region of California

was overrun in the first wave.”

“Overrun?” gasped Charlie.

“First wave?” asked Mike.

The commandant nodded. “Damn Gooks were hellbent on reaching L.A. and went through Coronado and San Diego like shit through a goose. That’s the bad news.”

“Oh Jesus...Allie, Junior—” said Charlie, his voice cracking.

Cooper’s parents had been killed by the Blue Flu and he’d only ever had a few girlfriends in the past, so he couldn’t hope to understand the fear and worry that Charlie had been carrying around inside, but he could see it finally cracking through to the surface. Charlie, his cool, calm, never-flustered, Terminator-like XO raised a trembling hand to his face.

Cooper put a hand on his shoulder. He looked at the Commandant. “Sir—”

“Son, my own boy and his family lived in Long Beach. I understand what you’re feeling. And I’m sorry, I truly am. There’s a shit-pot full of us who’re in the same boat.” He stood up straighter. “There is good news, though.”

Charlie’s shoulders shuddered and he sucked in a deep breath and came to parade rest, hands behind his back. The Terminator was back. Cooper turned to Commandant.

“Because the NKors were moving so fast, we think their objective was to cause chaos and drive out the civilian population before them, adding to the confusion which would allow them to reach Los Angeles unopposed. It worked. We got sporadic reports of heavy casualties along the coast, and then everything went dark and within hours, L.A. was swarming with Koreans. You boys ran into their advance scouts and got out just before the first wave rolled into town.”

“Good Lord,” muttered Jax.

“There’s a second wave offshore. Or, there was a few days ago. Last I heard, the Navy was supposed to sink that fleet before they made landfall but...” He shrugged. “Comms being what they are, we haven’t had much luck finding out what the hell is going on beyond the valley, let alone in the Pacific.”

Cooper looked at his XO, his brother, his righthand man, and saw the pain in his eyes. “What’s the sit-rep, sir? Sooner we finish up, the faster I get my men

back to their families.”

The Commandant nodded. “Here’s the straight dope, SEALs, from God’s mouth to your ears: the call has gone out for the boys and girls overseas to come home, to report here. Our good friend President Barron,” he chuckled, “has declared anyone not swearing loyalty to *him* a traitor—that’s punishable by death, by the way,” the old man snickered, then turned serious again.

“The scary thing is, he’s getting a lot more support from the rank and file than we’d anticipated. Mostly just the troublemakers and slackjaws to begin with, but some of the officer corps are staying with him. This old leatherneck sees it as a simple payback for recently acquired promotions and big salary increases. To think they hold their honor so cheap.” He spat in disgust. “Bastards.”

“Shameful,” said Charlie.

“Ain’t *that* the truth,” the Commandant growled. “The latest estimate has roughly 60 percent of the armed forces on our side. I think it’s actually higher than that—we can’t reach a lot of the people and our fleets are completely off the grid. Damn near every Marine, I’m proud to say, is with us.”

“Great, surrounded by a bunch of jarheads. That makes me feel so much better,” muttered Cooper.

“You should feel better—my boys pulled your asses out of L.A. just in time.”

“We were doing just fine, thanks,” said Cooper.

“*Mmmhmmmm*. Listen up, here’s the rest: Barron has announced the deputation of *all* Federal Agency security forces. He’s using some sneaky-ass, limp-wristed lawyer tactic and dredging up old executive orders from when Obama was in office—”

“President Obama? That was...When was he in office? Right around the time I was born. Barron’s using 30-year-old orders...?”

“Yep. Some little-known provision that allows the President to take control of Federal Agency security forces in times of crisis.” The Commandant turned and pulled some papers off the desk. He tossed a stack to Cooper.

Cooper glanced at the top page of the briefing notes:

Directive No. 3025.18
Defense Support of Civil Authorities
Dec. 29, 2010

“THEY’VE BEEN STOCKPILING weapons and ammo for decades, and now it’ll be turned against anyone who doesn’t get into lockstep with his agenda. Barron just created his own private army. Add to that the traitors in the military—boys, we’re outnumbered and outgunned.”

“You’re talking another civil war!” said Charlie.

The Commandant folded his arms and grunted. “It appears that may be what Barron wants. He’s already buying most of his people—through jobs, food, access to what medical supplies there are, that sort of thing. If he could get President Harris to attack, it’ll drive a good chunk of the population into Barron’s arms.” The Commandant shook his head.

“You don’t think these agency security forces are anything to worry about, though, do you, sir?” asked Charlie. “I mean, come on—even raw recruits should be able to handle them easily. What kind of training could they possibly have that would be compared to war fighters? If this is real—and I do mean *if*—I think we’re looking at a bunch of guys playing soldier, not a real army.”

Cooper grunted as he skimmed the papers. “I remember my dad bitching about all the alphabet-soup agencies purchasing and stockpiling huge amounts of ammo and guns when I was growing up. He’d tell me how it could be excused if it were for Homeland Security, or the Coast Guard or something. But it was always for agencies that never actually needed armor-piercing rounds and 50-cal machine guns: the EPA, the IRS, DOE, FDA, NOAA; hell, even the damn Post Office was loading up.”

“That’s crazy...” muttered Charlie. “I don’t understand why they’d even try.”

Cooper sighed. “Dad always said he believed the liberals in government were preparing to turn the country into a dictatorship...Mom used to laugh at

him and say if it was really all *that* big a deal, the media would be going crazy. They hate guns, right?”

“I sure don’t remember them covering all this with any kind of journalistic integrity,” said the Commandant with a sour look on his face.

Cooper nodded. “I can still see my old man rolling his eyes and explaining that the media would *never* cross their liberal masters.” Cooper shook the report in his hand. “I don’t know, man, I was just a kid, but it made a big impression on me. I remember thinking the mailman would drive up in a tank one day...”

“Too bad we didn’t have more people like your dad paying attention,” muttered the Commandant. “I was fresh out of the Academy when that all went down thirty years ago...There was a lot of grumbling in the ranks about it, but I was just starting my career and didn’t believe I needed to worry about politics.” He shook his head sadly. “Too many of us figured it wasn’t anything to worry about—we’d deal with it later. Back then, we had bigger things to tackle, like Afghanistan and Iraq and all the budget cuts and force reductions. Shit, then the Blue Flu hit and all hell broke loose with Iran.”

Cooper nodded again and skimmed the first section of notes outlining the directive. He looked up. “If Barron gets people to actually go along with this...”

“Oh, he is,” said the Commandant. “Plenty of people are joining his side every day.”

“Why the hell would they do that?” asked Charlie, leaning over to read the report in Cooper’s hands.

“Seems all those shiploads of food the Europeans have delivered to the East Coast are starting to win hearts and minds...”

“Easiest way to win a man’s heart is through his stomach,” said Jax.

Cooper shook his head as he read. He couldn’t believe what was on the next page of the report. He read out-loud the first paragraph someone had typed up, summarizing the directive:

“In emergency situations, to be determined by the President, Federal military commanders shall have the authority—including extraordinary emergency circumstances where prior authorization by the President is impossible and duly constituted local authorities are unable or unwilling to control the situation—to

engage temporarily in activities that are necessary to quell large-scale, unexpected civil disturbances...” Cooper looked up. “That sounds like one big loophole to me.”

“This could be *real* bad,” muttered Jax.

Cooper looked up from the report. “Where the hell was the ACLU on this? I’m no lawyer, but damn, this sure sounds like it violates *something*.”

“Yeah, but the question is: who’s going to actually go along with this?” asked Jax, taking a copy of the report. “Surely people are going to see what this is...or was...? I mean, come *on*—”

“Oh, he’s got people waiting in line to sign up and be counted as loyal. Lots of ‘em are desperate enough for food that they already ‘volunteered.’ We have the training and discipline and a lot of big toys. They have the rabble. A hungry, motivated, and scared rabble. But thanks to shit like this,” the Commandant slapped the report in Cooper’s hands, “they’ve got a lot more guns and bullets than us, now.”

“And the average Joe gets caught in the middle,” said Cooper.

Jax shook his head. “What a fucking mess.”

“According to Barron’s latest radio address, use of this doctrine is necessary to keep the country together while he deals with the Koreans and the flu. All it’s going to do is give his supporters a reason to shoot first, take their neighbor’s food, and ask questions later,” said the Commandant.

“When do we get back in the fight?” asked Charlie, folding his arms across his chest.

“Yeah, I got me some unfinished business with the Koreans,” rumbled Jax.

“Well, don’t get your knickers in a twist, but the Chinese have offered a truce, of sorts—on behalf of what’s left of the command structure of North Korea.” He chuckled. “One thing old Barron did right was to hit Pyongyang. He sent in two more bombing raids—the Air Force turned that shithole into a pile of rubble. So, now we get the word about no aggression from either side while the diplomats work things out. One week. Washington and Denver want everyone to toe the line.”

“Are we?” asked Cooper, looking up from the papers in his hands.

“Officially? Yes. President Harris is in talks with Beijing at the moment. He’s trying to get recognized as the legitimate president. It shouldn’t be too hard now that NORAD and most of the Air Force is with us. But, until there’s a decisive winner in this presidential pissing contest, Beijing will probably play coy and try to get us and the Koreans to kill each other a little more. Or let Barron and Harris kill each other...”

Cooper glanced at the papers and dropped them on the desk in disgust. “What do you think about it all, sir?”

The Commandant grinned. “*I* think the Chinese are using the Koreans as patsies, plain and simple. The NKors do the dying—and soften us up a little—and get wiped out for their trouble. China is then free to reap the benefits over here and won’t have to deal with an unruly stepchild anymore. So, until all the dust settles, we’re officially supposed to sit back on our collective asses and let the diplomats hammer out a permanent solution.”

Charlie grunted. “I got a permanent solution—it’s called a .45 semi-auto.”

“Hooyah, baby,” said Jax with a high-five.

The Commandant chuckled. “*Unofficially*, I’ve been sending my recon boys behind the lines to stir shit up in the Occupied Zones.” He chuckled. “They’ve been having a great time.” The old man looked surprised and raised his hands. “I’m so sorry, Mr. President, I have no idea why Korean platoons keep showing up missing...Jeepers, sir, it sounds like they’re meeting stiff civilian resistance, doesn’t it? Oh yes, sir, I assure you, my boys never left United States territory.”

Cooper grunted and walked over to the far wall to examine a detailed map of the United States. It had been marked up by someone. His finger traced the angry, red demarcation line between the Occupied Zone along the West Coast and the Free States of the middle of the country. On the East Coast, he saw the besieged cities with little European flags pointing toward each one, denoting who was in control. The sight turned his stomach.

“It’s all happened so fast,” he said.

The Commandant joined him at the map and nodded. “Shit like this usually does, son. The Joint Chiefs are of the opinion this whole thing was orchestrated by Barron. Especially after he fired their asses.” He snorted. “I don’t think the

man's got his shit together enough, though. I think someone else was, or *is*, pulling the strings. I mean, he fired me by email, didn't even have the balls to do it to my face."

"The Joint Chiefs got fired?" asked Cooper. "You got fired, sir? Can he do that?"

The Commandant rolled a shoulder. "Hell, he disbanded Congress. What's left to stop him? Barron is, for all intents and purposes, the first American king." The Commandant sighed. "Yeah, he fired all of us. President Harris was all too happy to have us join *his* side. So, you could say we're getting the band back together."

Cooper chuckled. He pointed at Idaho and a glaring red dot with a Russian flag. "What's up with Russians this far west?"

The Commandant rubbed his chin and thought for a moment. "I learned from General Harrison—the Army Chief of Staff—that the Source is in Idaho. The Russians sent in a team of *Spetsnaz* to bag 'im before the Koreans could. Things went south for Ivan real quick when the good citizens of Salmon Falls butchered a few Russians." He put his hands on his hips and laughed.

"Last we heard—when I was still in D.C.—the Russians were killing civilians in retaliation. We had some Rangers on the ground and there was an attempt to get samples of his blood out on a Skyhook of all things." He shrugged. "Then we lost contact with the Rangers who were escorting the Source. I tried to get the President to let me send in some recon Marines, but Barron didn't listen." He shrugged. "Haven't heard squat since I transferred to Harris' side."

"Wait—the Source? Blood samples? What are you talking about, sir?" asked Charlie.

The Commandant checked his watch. "Skip it. There's a briefing for the command staff starting in a few minutes. I'll get you in—the docs can explain all this medical shit better than I ever could. Follow me."

The Commandant led them through a maze of plain, industrial corridors lit by sparse fluorescent lights. There were people everywhere, most of whom wore surgical masks. Every now and then, someone wearing a full bio-hazard suit

strolled past them, carrying equipment into a myriad of rooms.

“We’ve taken up residence in a pretty much unused portion of the underground complex,” the Commandant explained as they walked. “Less crowded on this side, but less finished as well,” he said, gesturing towards the areas that were dimly lit.

“And here I thought that Air Force bunker was claustrophobic,” muttered Charlie.

Before long, the Commandant stopped in front of a gaggle of mid-level officers clustered around a door, quietly talking and exchanging papers. They noticed him and snapped to attention. He dismissed them with a casual salute and led Cooper and his men into a well-lit, fully furnished briefing room.

The number of stars and oak leaves on collars in the room was dizzying. The Commandant stationed Cooper, Charlie, and Jax in the back of the room along a wall. “Stay here and listen. I’ve got to be up front. We’ll speak after the briefing.”

“Yes, sir.”

Several moments passed as the room cleared of nonessential personnel. As the staffers and aides left in an orderly manner, Cooper watched Brenda reviewing papers and leaning over to chat with an Army general. The light reflected off her glossy auburn hair and though her skin looked a peculiar shade of pale cream—thanks to the fluorescent lighting—he still thought she cleaned up rather nicely. The lights gave her hair burnished-copper highlights. She wore clean green scrubs now, instead of the grungy, blood-splattered baby-blues she’d been wearing during their escape from All Saints.

When the background noise diminished and the room was left half empty, someone in Navy dress-whites stood up from the banquet table, under several bright lights at the front of the room. The table was lined with high-ranking officers and a few doctors in scrubs and lab coats. And Dr. Alston—Brenda.

“*Somebody’s* in love,” crooned Jax.

Cooper felt his cheeks grow hot and tore his eyes from her—Brenda—Dr. Alston. He clenched his fists and turned to his heavy-weapons expert.

“Shut your pie-hole, Jax. I’m not in love—”

“Aaaaw, they say denial is the first stage,” whispered Charlie from Cooper’s other side.

“Sssh!” an army captain hissed from the row of folding chairs in front of them.

Cooper cleared his throat and smacked Charlie. The two grinning SEALs fell silent, after a silent high-five over Cooper’s head. Cooper rolled his eyes.

“—introduce Major Brenda Alston,” Admiral Bennet said. “She has seen this thing firsthand in Los Angeles and will be able to give you a better handle on it than *I* can. Major?”

“Major?” whispered Cooper. Charlie shrugged. The captain in front of them turned around and glared at Cooper.

“Thank you, Admiral Bennet,” Brenda said as she took her position behind the makeshift podium and organized her papers. She picked up a remote control and pointed it at the ceiling. The lights dimmed and a wall-size monitor flickered to life behind her. The screen briefly showed the symbol for the Joint Chiefs of Staff before flashing a warning that the following information was classified and listed dire consequences if the viewer didn’t take that warning seriously.

“I don’t need to tell you all that what we’re facing is incredibly dangerous, not just to us but to the *world*. Gentlemen, this is our real enemy,” she said and the screen changed to a microscopic image of what Cooper presumed to be the weaponized bug. To him, it looked like a hairy blob, floating in bubbles.

“Many of you will recognize this as the image that graced the cover of *Time Magazine* at the onset of The Great Pandemic. We are facing that same virus today, only I can confirm now it has been genetically modified to act as a weapon of mass destruction. Perhaps the greatest such weapon that has ever been devised and unleashed by mankind.”

Cooper and Charlie shared a look. *Holy shit*. Then Charlie blew him a mimed kiss. Cooper frowned and turned to the front.

“You’ve all seen the early casualty reports and I’m sure no one here needs a reminder of the chaos we all suffered through ten years ago. Well, gentlemen, we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg. The infected numbers have risen across the country for the past three days at a steady rate and if the pattern holds true to ten

years ago, we'll see a sharp uptick in morbidity in just a few more days. We're already seeing higher-than-average fatalities in hot zones."

The screen changed to a huge map of the United States. "Hot Zones—Epicenters of Contagion" read the title at the top of the screen. On the map, Los Angeles, Sacramento, Seattle, New York, Chicago, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. were represented by blinking red dots.

Numbers appeared next to each dot—the number of cases was staggering. In Los Angeles alone there were reported over 100,000 people sick with the flu in the past week. Cooper blinked—a warning at the bottom of the screen indicated that the data was not complete for all secondary infection epicenters. The map was only listing the primary targets of the bio-weapon.

"It makes me sick to my stomach to say this, but it appears that there has been an antigen drift," Brenda said.

There were a few whispered comments from audience.

Antigen drift.

The Pandemic years seemed like another lifetime away, but Cooper well remembered those two little words. During height of the crisis, the press had breathlessly exclaimed scientists had finally found a way to beat the dreaded virus—only to discover it had mutated slightly, allowing it to parry modern medicine's counterpunch. The virologists had called it an *antigen drift*.

He had learned antigen drift was nothing really unusual—viruses do it all the time, *especially* influenza—but before the world could catch its breath, the drift had turned into a shift. The H5N1 Pandemic's antigen shift had completely fooled the human immune system and threw the floodgates wide open. Infection rates skyrocketed, igniting a wildfire that roared to life around the entire planet. Wherever the Blue Flu went, death followed in its footsteps.

The antigen drift had been the tipping point—when the H5N1 crisis had surpassed the 1918 Spanish Flu as the single deadliest pandemic in all of recorded human history. After that, it would forever be known as The Pandemic.

And it had all started with those two little words: antigen drift.

"—reach the tipping point," Brenda was saying, her face grim. Cooper suppressed a shiver. *Tipping point*. Another pair of words that brought back a lot

of bad, bad memories.

“We can’t, of course, predict when that point will be, but I can assure you,” she continued, “it won’t be too long now. We’re seeing some major drifts in cultures taken from the Occupied Zone that aren’t being matched by what’s happening on the Eastern Seaboard.”

Movement at the head table caught her eye.

“We, ah...” she said, as Admiral Bennet stood and moved toward the podium.

“May I?” he asked.

“Of course, sir,” Brenda replied. She stepped aside.

The Admiral cleared his throat and appeared to be considering what to say. Cooper instinctively leaned forward a little. “I believe I may be able to shed a little more light on this situation. At his first cabinet meeting this afternoon, President Harris was briefed by the CIA concerning the North Korean invasion. I can’t tell you everything that was said, but I *can* tell you the North Koreans have managed to inoculate their marines with some sort of half-assed vaccine. At least that’s what the spooks told the President,” he said to a welcome round of chuckles from his audience.

“Seems the North Koreans have hit on the idea to whip-up some second-hand, cloned version of our old synthetic H5N1 vaccine—the stuff with a reduced shelf-life that we gave countries that weren’t exactly friendly to us. Well, they mixed it with methamphetamine. The combination seems to be giving their troops just enough of an edge to counteract the weaponized flu that’s saturated the West Coast. Our best guess is this mixture, unstable as it is, won’t be effective for very long—then the NKors are going to start getting sick and dropping whether we shoot them or not.”

“I vote we shoot them anyway, just to make sure,” grumbled the Commandant from the head table. A ragged cheer erupted from the assembled commanders that only stopped when Admiral Bennet raised both hands.

“Major,” Admiral Bennet said, stepping out of the way as Brenda once again took the podium.

“Well, either the weaponized strain of flu that was released in the U.S. is

changing its own genetic code, or the vaccine strain the Koreans carry may be combining with the weaponized strain they released. Either way, it's starting to mutate into something slightly different and we can't be sure which way it's going to jump."

The screen behind her changed from the microscopic monster to a graph with different colored lines. Cooper saw one for young children, one for healthy adults in their prime, and one for the elderly. The curves and spikes didn't mean much to Cooper, but there was an oddly familiar pattern. The line for kids was just a curve. So was that for the elderly. But the line for healthy adults made a distinct W pattern.

"This is the mortality graph from the Spanish Flu of 1918." A laser pointer flared to life and she moved the dot to trace along the "W" line. "It was the first time in history that we noticed this particular pattern. The Spanish Flu had normal death-tolls among the very young and old—the two most vulnerable age groups in the population for *any* given flu season."

The laser bobbed and weaved along the W. Cooper could tell she was nervous. Hell, he would be too, if he had to get up in front of this much brass and talk about something so frightening.

"This is the scary part. The W line you see here indicates the healthy adult population—ages 20-40 roughly—people who were naturally the most likely to either fight off the flu entirely, or to get sick and recover. That spike in the middle represents the large die-off that occurred in 1918 affecting the healthy adult population. It went against all medical knowledge at the time and was completely novel and utterly devastating." The slide changed to another chart with different dates and similar shapes.

"This is the same chart, with data taken from The Great Pandemic. Notice the similarity? They're very close, yet the mortality rates are much higher for the H5N1 virus as opposed to the 1918 flu, which was H1N1. The average curves are nearly identical, though. The Spanish Flu had a 2 to 4 percent mortality rate. Infected patients had a 97-percent chance—roughly—of surviving. The problem was, if you were in that 2 to 3 percent, you died and there was nothing anyone could do. And it happened *fast*. Death occurred in many cases less than 72 hours

after first presenting with symptoms.”

The slide changed to a calendar. “It has been a week now since the first fatality that we can confirm was caused by this weaponized form of the Blue Flu.” The slide changed again showing what looked like a steep, exponential curve. “We are on the cusp of the initial spike. Despite what the current fatality reports are currently indicating, I would add at least 15 percent to those numbers, and that’s a conservative estimate.”

She waited for the murmuring to die down. “The reason I’m telling you all of this is because this form of the H5N1 Pandemic virus has been, as I said, genetically modified by the North Koreans to be even more lethal than the original version. The mutations we’ve found recently indicate that the virus—at least in samples from Los Angeles and Seattle—is somehow slipping past the body’s natural defense mechanisms. The human body doesn’t even recognize this thing as a threat.”

“You’re talking a stealth virus,” someone called out. A ripple of chuckles spread through the crowd.

Cooper felt his own patience wearing thin. Dr. Alston’s cheeks flushed. “Sir, if you’d like to continue making jokes, go ahead. But this ‘stealth virus’ has what we’re estimating to be a 10-percent mortality rate. The Spanish Flu killed roughly 100 million people worldwide in the span of a year—it had a 3-percent average mortality rate.” She took a breath and gripped the sides of the podium with white knuckles. “The Great Pandemic killed almost half a billion people around the planet with a 6-percent fatality rate. At 10 percent, we could be looking at death rates that would almost double what we saw 10 years ago.”

The room became as silent as a crypt.

“Gentlemen, I’m telling you this because you have to take measures now to protect and insulate your soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines. We will not be able to fight the North Koreans—or any other threats—if a tenth of our war fighters are dead and the rest are recovering from a major illness.” She rubbed her temples and Cooper could see the frustration in her face.

The screen changed again, this time showing a picture of police officers wearing surgical masks during The Great Pandemic. They had gathered around a

pile of bodies in Times Square, stacked straight across the road like cordwood. It was their eyes that spoke most to Cooper. He'd seen plenty of dead bodies in his career as a SEAL. But when you saw that look in a man's eyes, you knew he'd seen things that would haunt his dreams for the rest of his life—a period of time he fully expected to not be long.

Brenda took a deep breath and continued, “Gentlemen, I can give you the following information to help you in your preparations. We have discovered that those individuals who were previously exposed to the Blue Flu have a much greater resistance to this weaponized version. That's most of us in this room. People who were severely ill during The Pandemic ten years ago, now have the highest immunity. The rest of us are more than likely just going to be really, really sick.” She shook her head. “Honestly, until we get more data in, we're in the dark as to how many fatalities we can expect.”

“The good news,” she said, with a wan smile, “the good news, gentlemen, is that the age group of 30-60 this time around will have the highest resistance. Why? Because ten years ago, they were the 20-50 age group that got hit hardest. The survivors of that group are now the best equipped to fight off the weaponized flu. Our bodies already have the antigens necessary to deal with the strain we're facing—it's not a perfect match, but our confidence is high it'll be close enough to give us the edge. For now. That's why outside these new hot zones,” she said, moving her laser to point at Los Angeles and Seattle, “the fatality rates haven't gone up too sharply yet.”

Cooper looked at Charlie. There was a nervous smile on his XO's face. “Whew,” he whispered, pantomiming wiping his forehead with his sleeve. “We both got nailed by the Blue Flu...and we're in the right age group...that's good.”

“Brigadier General Andrew Ward is in acting command of the Western Regional Medical Command and is the highest-ranking officer to survive the invasion—he's in transit here—and has drawn up directives and information packets for you to relay to your individual commands,” Brenda said, motioning for a few lieutenants to start passing out the material to the gathered command staff.

“I'll let you all read the details, but the main goal is isolation, isolation,

isolation. If individuals or—God forbid—entire units under your command show signs of infection, you *must* isolate them immediately. Use whatever protocol works, but separate them from the rest of your command or you risk an outbreak that could threaten your combat effectiveness in as little as 12 to 24 hours as your people become incapacitated. This bug hits hard and hits fast. The recommendation is to make sure your units have plenty of extra pain-meds and anti-inflammatory doses.”

She waited again for the murmuring to die down. “Gentlemen,” she said, changing the slide, “I cannot emphasize enough the precautions that must be undertaken by your war fighters when they encounter sick civilians or even the bodies of the dead.” A famous picture from *The Pandemic* appeared on the screen, depicting a pile of gray, bloated corpses outside a hospital in Milwaukee. A dozen people in bulky, blue plastic suits with small oxygen tanks on their waists—woefully outnumbered by the dead—loaded bodies into wheelbarrows.

“This virus will remain a threat—even in a corpse—for far longer than you would think. Trained personnel in Level-2 bio-hazard suits—at a *minimum*—should be the only ones handling or disposing of the dead you and your men will likely encounter. The surgical masks you see the press harping about are next to useless. The virus spreads at the cellular level—much too small a particle for simple fabric to stop.”

Dr. Alston paused for a moment, then blinked and looked down at her papers. She shuffled through them as the men in front of her began to whisper and discuss strategies. She glanced at Admiral Bennet and shook her head slightly. He moved to the podium again.

“Thank you, Major.” He patted her gently on the shoulder and motioned for her to take her seat at the head table. The Admiral turned back to the crowd and frowned.

“Gentlemen, what you’re about to see comes directly from the NSA, at the behest of President Harris. He wants you to see this video, in order to understand what we’re about to face as we mobilize and prepare to take back the Occupied Zone. If there’s any doubt that the public is going to be a major concern for us going forward, this should clear that up for you.”

The screen flickered and a video began, depicting an angry crowd outside a makeshift medical facility. “These events took place outside of Boston General Hospital yesterday, gentlemen. The Germans had set up their medical staff here as a command center.”

The crowd of people was chanting something. Cooper could just barely hear it over the shouts and sirens in the background.

“Let us in! Let us in! Let us in!”

Someone was burning a German flag. Handmade signs waved back and forth with pictures of relatives and messages of hope. The doors to the hospital opened and a ring of police officers with riot shields marched forward, pushing the crowd back—gently, but firmly. They were wearing black gas masks.

The intensity of the chanting crowd ratcheted up a few notches. The view shook and wobbled as the cameraman was jostled. His voice, high-pitched with excitement, cursed loudly.

“Back up, motherfucker! I got a right to be here, too! My wife’s in there!”

Another officer moved out behind the shield wall and climbed up on something to be able to see out over the crowd. He raised a bullhorn and began to speak over the terrible noise.

“I know you are all scared.”

The crowd noise dimmed somewhat. Those in the front began to silence the people behind them so they could all hear the officer speak.

“I know you want to see your loved ones. I regret to inform you, this is not the time to visit the sick! You will only take the virus home with you and infect the rest of your family and friends! This is not a general aid station—this hospital has been designated by the German medical consultants as an emergency W.H.O. medical depot. We have taken in a shipment of experimental vaccines, not food, not water, as the rumors have said—”

Something sailed past his head. Another German flag went up in flames. The bullhorn squealed in feedback. The crowd cheered. Another thrown object flew towards the officer. He ducked and shouted, “Yeah, you think that’s wicked funny, huh? Well, throwing things at me ain’t gonna change the fact that we got no food or water to give you!” He ducked again as a brick shattered against the

hospital's wall. "*Please!* Return to your homes! You're risking infection by coming here—this building houses some very sick people who—"

A glass bottle exploded against the helmet of one of the cops with a riot shield. His gun went off like a clap of thunder. People screamed. The camera shook and the image blurred—the next thing Cooper could see, the police fired into the crowd. The noise was deafening. Some people fled in a panic, shoving neighbors out of the way. Even more of them pushed forward.

"Oh, my God!" the cameraman shouted. "Oh, my God, they're killing them!"

Cooper couldn't tell if the shaky cameraman meant the cops were killing the rioters or the rioters were killing the cops, but knew what was coming next. He had seen it before, in Tehran, after the Blue Flu had slaughtered half the city.

There were only a dozen cops. The camera was lifted up over the sea of heads and panned around. The crowd filled the streets as far as he could see and he quickly guessed it numbered at least a thousand. They were scared, cut off from loved ones, angry, hungry, some were sick—it was a powder keg and it had just been lit.

The officer was screaming for people to remain calm, between ordering his men to hold their fire and ducking more flying objects. It appeared for a moment that cooler heads might actually prevail. Then the first cop went down under a baseball bat. The crowd roared its approval.

The line had been broken. In seconds, the riot police vanished under swinging arms and bats as the tide of humanity rolled forward and crashed against the hospital entrance.

The doors buckled, the officer screamed and the bullhorn went flying through the air. The mob smashed through the doors to the hospital and flooded inside, screaming, cheering, waving fists in triumph. Someone ripped down the huge German flag hanging next to the doors.

It took less than five minute for people to start reappearing out of the hospital, carrying boxes, pillows—someone looked like they were flying a flag, but it was a bloody sheet—anything they could grab. The looting was complete. Cooper spotted IV pumps on spindly stands, computers, tablets—some fool was

even trying to roll a gurney out through the manmade hole in the front of the building.

The video froze on a frame that showed a woman being dragged through the doors into the street by four men. She was wearing a patient's gown, stained brown with dried blood—and God knew what else. Her face was contorted in fear and pain. Fresh blood was smeared across her mouth. Her eyes, sunken into dark spots on her face, were blood red.

Admiral Bennet cleared his throat. The image of the patient remained on the screen behind him, her silent scream quite unsettling. “This woman was identified this morning as a patient who'd been admitted to the hospital the day before with the weaponized flu. This crowd pulled her out of the hospital, along with anything that wasn't nailed down—anything that looked like it was valuable. The hospital was absolutely ransacked; thousands of doses of an expensive experimental German drug were taken and hundreds of patients were killed.” He looked over his shoulder at the image on the screen.

“She vanished into the crowd along with dozens of others that were forcibly pulled from the hospital, presumably by relatives. These fools,” he said, hooking a thumb over his shoulder, “by willingly exposing themselves to her, are probably now infected—and may have signed their own death warrants. This, gentlemen, is what we are facing. The total breakdown of society. People in these cities have been cut off from fresh food and water now for a week. They have been watching their friends and relatives get so sick they can hardly move. A few have seen people die—they are one shove away from falling off a very, very high cliff. It is our job to restore order, bring safety, and pull our country back from the brink. We start by putting a stop to the damn Koreans, here and now!”

The Admiral launched into his final orders and wrapped up the briefing. Cooper found himself staring at the face of the woman, caught mid-scream on the screen as the officers around him filed out. The murmur of the crowd slowly dissipated and still, Cooper was transfixed. He saw not her face anymore, but the memories of his own experiences through the nightmare of The Great Pandemic.

An elbow lodged into his ribs painfully. Jax hissed, “Here she comes, dude.”

Brenda walked past the Admiral as he and the Commandant discussed something at the podium. She began to walk toward Cooper and his men. Despite the somber briefing, Cooper was smiling. She seemed to miss a step, blushed, and smiled back.

“Go on, Hoss, *say something*,” whispered Charlie.

“Seriously?” asked Cooper. “Are we back in high school or something?”

“Want me to find out if she likes you?” asked Jax, dead serious. His face split into a wide smile.

Charlie burst out laughing. The Commandant stopped his conversation with the Admiral and looked over, his face dark as a thundercloud. The Old Man walked over and said in his gruff voice, “Glad you three find the end of the friggin’ world so amusing.”

Cooper cleared his throat and regained his professional cool-as-ice composure—with a little more effort than he would’ve liked. “Sorry, sir.”

Dr. Alston had followed the Commandant over and stood behind him, peering over his shoulder at Cooper and his SEALs.

“Major,” Cooper said with a nod.

She smiled and her face lit up—in complete opposition to the Commandant’s fierce countenance. She appeared like a patch of sun burning through a ferocious thunderstorm on a humid day.

“Well, you two can get a room *after* we beat the Koreans, drive off the U.N., and stop the goddamn flu. Agreed?” said the Commandant. Cooper snapped to attention at the Marine’s tone—yet there was a twinkle of mischief in the Commandant’s eyes.

“Things make a lot more sense now, sir. Ivan wants to snag the Source and make a vaccine before the Korean flu can spread everywhere. So far, only the NKors are protected from it, right?” He looked at Brenda. “We don’t have anything like this meth-vaccine, right?”

She shook her head. “No. Once we get the Source, we should be able to work up some sort of serum, but...” She shrugged.

The Commandant motioned for Cooper to follow him to a large wall map of the United States. “And if the NKors are safe, you know China is, too. Most

likely, China has got a better version of that little meth cocktail the NKors are using. Looks like they dope up their men before sending them over so they can walk right through us as we drop from the flu. And it's playing hell with the rest of the country. The casualty numbers are getting jacked up because the reporting lines are unstable, but according to the last, best guess we have, we're looking at something on the order of 35,000 fatalities, so far."

"Remember, this is just the beginning," said Brenda softly. "If this modified virus we're dealing with is really trying to pull a shift like it did ten years ago..." She shook her head. "We would be looking at a Wildfire Event."

"Good God," muttered Cooper.

"The hell is a 'Wildfire Event'?" whispered Jax.

"It's what we call pandemics that get out of control, like H5N1 did..." said Brenda.

"Yeah," said Charlie, "Kevin told me about it, once..." He shook his head sadly. "I wish I had paid more attention to him at that Christmas party last year. He kept trying to talk to me about some crazy viral research in the Netherlands or something."

"Sir, any word about Coronado?" Cooper asked.

The Commandant frowned. "Don't know. But Coronado's gone. Taken out in the first wave of conventional ICBM strikes—just like most of Portland and San Fran."

Cooper looked at Charlie. "Allie's smart, bro, she'll be okay. Junior, too. They're fine."

"How do you know?" snapped Charlie in a sudden burst of emotion. He took a deep breath, set his jaw, and nodded. "Mission first, aye, Chief." He turned and stalked off.

"His family was in Chula Vista," explained Cooper, finding himself with nothing else to say.

"So you said," The Commandant replied. He watched Charlie a moment and nodded, as if coming to a conclusion. "It's a tough time to be in uniform. Lot of us lost family and there's not a damn thing we can do about it. If we don't keep our heads in the game, though, we're going to lose our entire country."

Cooper frowned. “We’ll bring the pain, sir, I swear it. It’s what we do.”

The Commandant clapped Cooper on the shoulder. “Spoken like a true Marine.”

“You didn’t bring us all the way to Denver to recruit me, though,” said Cooper.

Admiral Bennet walked over carrying an expensive-looking leather briefcase. He motioned for the two lieutenants at his side to wait in the hallway. The SEALs snapped to attention. The Admiral gave a half-hearted salute and shook hands with the Commandant.

“Good seeing you, again, Mason. I’m heading out to Pearl tonight.”

Cooper had never met Admiral Bennet before, but his name and picture had appeared on an awful lot of orders over the years. The difference between the two service chiefs was clear. The Marine Commandant was short and solid-looking. The Admiral was tall and lanky and did not look like he could survive outside an office very long.

“No one’s recruiting you, Master Chief, but me. Don’t let this dirty old bastard get his hands on you,” said the Admiral. The Commandant chuckled politely.

Cooper shook hands with the Admiral, looked straight into the man’s eyes and was relieved to feel a firm handshake. That was the way a commander should shake hands, despite his appearance as a desk jockey.

“We’ve had some trouble with the extraction mission concerning the Source,” said the Admiral.

The Commandant nodded again. “The mission to get him is up in the air. No word on what’s going on—comms are too sketchy. Last we heard, samples of the blood we needed for a vaccine were sent up via Skyhook and were en route to research facilities set up by Barron.”

The Admiral nodded. “President Harris is going to do the same thing. Only, *his* plan includes reaching the scientists who made the H5N1 vaccine and get them working on it before Barron can.”

“Tag and bag. Got it,” grunted Cooper. *Now* they were talking his language. “Where you sending us, sir?”

“Your orders,” the Admiral said as he handed over a few sheets of onionskin. He let Cooper skim through the message. “We’re putting your team on a flight to Boston.” He pointed at the German flag on the map that was near the embattled city.

“Why Boston?” asked Cooper, folding the orders.

“Dr. Maurice Boatner is a professor of immunology and virology at Harvard. He lives in Charlestown. He’s one of two scientists alive today who developed antibody manipulation techniques for the Source’s blood, allowing for the manufacture of the stable, safe vaccine that put an end to The Great Pandemic. That makes him very valuable not only to us, but to anyone who can get their hands on him.”

The Commandant added, “We’ve known for years that Al Qaeda and ISIS have been hunting for this guy. Barron knows this and will send assets to get him. Hell, rumor has it the Russians and Germans are looking for him, too.”

Admiral Bennet nodded. “You and your men need to get to him first. Bring him back and let him make a vaccine for us. This will be lean and mean—sneak in, grab this geek, and get the hell out.”

“My Marines are protecting Denver, but I’ve dispatched an air support wing to bring in the Source and those Rangers, if they’re still alive. So that means you’re all we’ve got. Think you can do it?” asked the Commandant.

Cooper looked at the Commandant. “Absolutely.” He glanced at the map and chuckled ruefully. “Never thought I’d be doing a HALO into Beantown.”

The Commandant clapped Cooper on the back and turned to leave. “The weapons locker is all yours, son. You’ve got a blank check on this—you boys take what you want.” He checked his watch. “Hit the showers, grab some chow, and get your shit wired. Make it snappy though—wheels up in three hours.”

“Yes, sir,” said Cooper. “Thank you.”

“Good hunting, gentlemen,” said the Commandant of the Marines. He looked at each of the SEALs in turn before he left the room.

“Hooyah,” muttered Cooper.

“Master Chief, there’s one more thing,” said the Admiral. He reached into his briefcase and pulled out a small box. He opened the lid and turned the silk-

lined display toward Cooper. Inside were a pair of gleaming silver bars.

“Sir?”

“In light of your actions during the opening days of this crisis, I am pleased to inform you of your battlefield commission to Lieutenant, junior grade. Upon your completion of this mission to Boston, you’ll be assigned to form a new team and promoted to Lieutenant. We’re going to put you in command of the surviving members of the Coronado teams.”

“Me?” Cooper held the little box in his hands. It was a huge double promotion, the open door to a whole new career.

“Son, we took a beating on the day it all went down. We’ve got members of the other teams spread all over the globe. For right now, you’re Top-Hat stateside, if you want the job.”

Cooper came to attention. “I’ll do it, till you find someone better—but I don’t need a promotion, Admiral.” He tried to hand the box back.

The Admiral smiled at him. “Son, that right there is *exactly* why you’re getting the promotion. If we’re going to have to refill the officer corps, I want it to be filled with men like you.” After a moment, he said, “I understand Charles Marshal was due to be promoted...”

“I was about to be drummed out, sir,” said Cooper. “Charlie was next in line—”

“Belay that. He’s now your Master Chief. I’ve got Silver Stars for the rest of your team, as well as a presidential citation.”

Cooper frowned. “Sir, just point me in the direction of the armory.”

The Admiral shook Cooper’s hand again and smiled. “I know you don’t want all the attention, Lieutenant. That proves I was right in my decision, though. Do us proud, son. Good hunting.”

The Admiral saluted, then left.

Jax all but tackled Cooper. “Lieutenant! What the hell is this world coming to? Next thing you know, they’ll be giving me a gun and telling me to go shoot people!”

Charlie offered a wan smile and shook hands with Cooper. “Congratulations, sir.”

“Congrats yourself, Chief,” said Cooper with a smile.

“*Master Chief! Hooyah!*” hooted Jax as he shook hands with Charlie.

“Well, now that this little love fest is over, can we go get some guns? I feel the need to blow some shit up,” quipped Mike, arms crossed.

The smile faded from Cooper’s face. “Beaver’s right. Let’s get our heads straight,” he said, looking at Charlie. “We’re fixin’ to jump into enemy territory, boys.”

Cooper glanced at the map as the remnants of his team filed out, heading for the armory. Frowning, he stared at Boston on the map with angry, red markers and the German flag. Suddenly, he realized that he and Brenda were alone in the room. His heart raced.

This is so screwed up.

Before he could open his mouth and make a witty comment about the awkwardness of the situation, she leaned into him and kissed him on the cheek. He could smell a faint bouquet that reminded him of honeydew melons.

“That was for getting us—me—out of Los Angeles.”

Cooper felt warmth creep up his neck. Then she put a hand on either side of his face and pulled his head down to plant a long, tender kiss on his lips.

“And *that’s* to make you come back.”

He grinned like a fool and she blushed, as if suddenly realizing what she’d just done. She smiled and hurried from the room, stumbling again as she found the door.

Cooper stood there, dumbfounded for a moment and looked down at his right hand, holding the display box with the lieutenant’s bars inside. Fear and self-doubt welled up inside him and shoved aside his newfound emotions revolving around Brenda as he pondered what it meant to be an officer in charge of a SEAL team—commander of all stateside SEALs. The awesome responsibility to his country, to the men he would command, to their families—it was almost overwhelming as it settled on his shoulders like a wet cloak.

He slipped the little box into a pouch on his vest and resigned himself to worry about the details later. He left the room and jogged to catch up with his men. He had a mission to execute, and he had to stop thinking about Brenda

until all this was over.

But that kiss! Holy hell—I'll cut through the whole North Korean army to come home to more of that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

DENNY

SALMON FALLS, IDAHO

DENNY LOOKED up into the chilly rain that poured out of the sky. It appeared to be sunset, but in reality, that wouldn't happen for two more hours according to his watch. The dark clouds continued to pummel Salmon Falls with their torrential payload. It was a cold, drenching rain. Denny pulled the poncho tighter around his neck. Mother Nature really knew how to cap off a day.

"Won't be long now," whispered Deuce, kneeling next to him. They were crouched at the corner of a house, scanning the deserted street out front. Denny could hear the cold rain drumming off the Ranger's helmet and body armor.

They were on the outskirts of town, behind one of the very last houses on Main Street. The Russians were checking each house in this end of town, searching for them. The storm had arrived after their disastrous initial assault and had given them the cover they needed to escape annihilation at the hands of the Russians.

Denny could still see the flaming wreckage of the two Apaches spiraling down to earth when he closed his eyes. His hopes, and those of the Rangers with him, had been dashed when only two of the three attack helicopters had arrived on station. They had no idea what had become of the third; they only knew how critical it had been to the success of their attack.

The Russian patrol they'd been stalking eventually spotted their position and opened fire. The Rangers had to request immediate sniper support—which never came. Then Captain Alston had received word that something had happened to Tuck, their sniper, off to the west of town. He wasn't sure what had happened, but the captain was awful upset about it and no one was talking—they were too busy shooting and trying to stay alive.

The attack had turned into a running retreat as the Russians continued to chase and pour fire on them from different directions. Denny managed to keep up with the Rangers as they moved house to house and cut through yards and briar patches with reckless abandon.

At one point, Garza had dropped his pack and gear and tore off into the surrounding brush with only his sidearm and a medical kit. That was a bad omen, Denny had figured. The remaining Rangers and Denny then went in the opposite direction and made a lot of noise doing so, hoping to draw the Russians away from Garza.

The plan had initially worked. A little *too* well for Denny's liking, but it had worked. They soon found themselves on the outskirts of town with a pack of trigger-happy Russians on their heels. They had been pushed back to a position where, if they had to run for cover, it would be a long and dangerous one. That end of town emptied into a broad plain that had been carved by the Salmon River eons ago. They were well east of the shelter of the mountains and well south of the foothills and forests that surrounded the rest of Salmon Falls.

"Okay, we either make a stand here, or we double back and look for cover farther north," Captain Alston had said. They were all crouched at the corner of George McDonnell's small ranch house.

The Rangers took up positions at the rear corners of the house—some knelt, others lay prone on the ground. They kept a sharp vigil for the Russians, still a ways down the block and systematically searching house by house for the Americans.

"Cap, we got maybe half an hour before they're on top of us," said Deuce.

"The rain is helping slow them down," mused Captain Alston. He looked up at the gray sky, squinting in the deluge. "Be full dark soon..." He shivered and

hunkered next to the wall of the house.

“Golf, what’s the sit-rep?” he asked with his hand on his radio.

After a moment of ear-numbing rain, Garza’s voice replied, “Got ‘im stabilized. This rain isn’t making things any easier.” He panted. “Ran into a couple hunters heading home. They’re assisting.”

“Keep trying to contact...anybody,” Captain Alston said. “See if you can make a shelter out there and ride out the storm. We’re going SERE. Actual, out.”

“Hooah,” was the response.

“See-er?” asked Denny in a whisper.

Zuka grinned, rain running down his face in rivulets. “Survive, Escape, Resist, Evade. We train for this stuff.”

“Zuka, you take Mr. Tecumseh here and make your way to the river,” said Captain Alston, motioning to the east, across the street. “Work your way north along the river and try and flank these guys.” He took another peek around the corner of the house into the gathering twilight.

“They got their flashlights out now—that should make it easier to avoid them.” Captain Alston looked up at the roofline of the house and nodded. After wiping the rain out of his eyes, he squatted in the little group and continued his plans. “Deuce, get inside—”

“Nice.”

“I’ll get up on the roof next door and get behind that chimney there,” he said, pointing up. “Should give me some decent cover. I’ll be able to paste them as they head down the street.”

Denny looked at the captain. “How you planning on getting in?”

Deuce grinned. “Door, meet foot.” He reared back and prepared to kick in the backdoor.

“Wait!” Denny said. “I know the old man who lives here. Give me a second.”

“Sir, we can’t risk someone—” began the captain.

“He’s a Desert Storm Vet. Good people. You’d like him.”

The captain looked above Denny at the dark porch light. He nodded at Deuce, who reached up and twisted the exposed light bulb a little but left it in the socket. Denny rapped on the window next to the porch door. He flinched

when the shade pulled back and George McDonnell appeared, his face illuminated by a flash of lightning.

The door cracked. “*Denny?* What the hell you doing out here in the storm?”

“George, I don’t have a lot of time. I’m with some Rangers—”

“Army Rangers?”

Captain Alston stepped out of the shadows. “Well, we’re not *Park* Rangers.”

The old man took his hand and shook it, a smile plastered on his face as the rain soaked his arm.

“What can I do for you, Captain? I’ll be glad to help—Russian bastards been ridin’ the town pretty rough.”

The captain nodded. “We saw. I need to station one of my men in your home, sir, if that’s okay by you. The Russians are heading this way and we’re going to try and ambush them.”

“Done,” said George. He stepped aside as Deuce filled the door. He turned back to face the remaining men standing in the rain. “You got time to come inside out of the rain and get some chow?”

“Thank you, but that’s a big negative. There’s a Russian patrol hunting for us, up the street—”

“Son of a *bitch!*” said George through clenched teeth. He grabbed a rifle from beside the door. “That was you guys earlier? I heard them Apaches. Haven’t heard that sweet sound since my time in the Sandbox. Sounded like they were really spankin’ ‘em. Then...I saw the smoke...” He looked down sadly. His face brightened quickly. “I was a pretty good shot back in the day. Let me help. Ain’t got nothing else to do.”

Captain Alston considered this a moment as he checked on the Russians. He relented. “All right, go see my corporal inside. He’ll tell you what to do.”

“Great. And thanks. Stay safe, Denny. I wish I was out there with you.” He tapped the prosthetic legs under his bathrobe with the muzzle of his hunting rifle.

“You’ve already done your part, sir. I appreciate the assistance,” replied Captain Alston. They shook hands again.

“Here,” said the captain, after the door shut. He tossed Garza’s M4 and ammo kit. Denny caught the rifle in midair, splattering himself with water. “Best

get going, sir.”

“Roger that,” said Zuka. He turned to Denny. “Follow me, sir, *if* you can keep up.” The short Ranger grinned and dashed off into the rain, running low and hunched over.

Denny nodded, slung the olive-drab messenger bag over his shoulder and ran across the street in his best imitation of Zuka’s hunched-over run. He found the small Ranger lurking behind a pine tree on the corner of the lot opposite the McDonnell place.

“Not bad, sir. Not bad.” Zuka pulled out a small LED flashlight and clicked it on and off twice, using his hand to shield it from the Russians up the street. Denny watched as a light blinked twice in the gloomy darkness.

“How far are we to the river?” asked Zuka, peering into the sodden darkness on the other side of the tree.

Denny thought for a second, catching his breath. The rifle was not too heavy just standing around, but running across the street with it had winded him. The adrenaline didn’t help either. He squinted through the rain.

“I think it’s about a hundred yards.”

“You *think*?” Zuka chuckled to himself. “Well, it’s all we got, I guess—”

“All units stand by,” Captain Alston’s voice announced.

Denny’s thoughts drifted to Chad Huntley, the civilian who’d started this whole mess. Where was he? Was he alive? Did he run off and leave Tuck to die? Was he kidnapped somehow? Denny shook his head in disbelief that so many people were risking their lives for Huntley. A traitor—if one was to believe the ever-changing public announcements on the radio.

“Enemy patrol sighted,” whispered Deuce. “Two-man element. East side of the street. They’re not checking door to door. Coming straight on. I think they know we’re here.”

“Uh-huh. Ivan’s sending out two guys to anchor the line and keep the rabbits from running off into the storm,” said Captain Alston. “Too bad for them, we ain’t rabbits.”

“Hooah!” whispered Zuka. He shot a grin at Denny.

“Deuce, you take the first shot as they pass your position. Everyone else,

that's your cue," said Captain Alston.

"Standby one," muttered Deuce's voice. Next to Denny, Zuka was peering through the small scope on his rifle. He clicked a small button and adjusted a dial, then started to calm his breathing.

Denny raised his own rifle and peered into the darkness. He couldn't see anything past fifty feet. Just a wall of rain.

A single rifle shot broke through the steady din of the storm. Denny was amazed the sound of the gun was so quiet. What gave away the Ranger assault was the muzzle flashes. He grinned. Even that, reflected as it was off the houses and cars in the street, looked like the lightning that had been pummeling the area for over an hour.

Zuka took off for the street at the start of the shooting, in order to take out the other Russian. Denny followed, crouching as he ran, but by the time he got to the front yard, it was all over.

He held up a hand to shield his eyes from the rain and could see Zuka's shadowy form dragging a dark object off the street toward another abandoned house. As he trotted over to the scene of the ambush, even the blood was being erased by the storm. Zuka slipped past him back into the shadows of the house and handed off an AK-47.

"Put it over your shoulder. Never know when you're going to need some more firepower."

Denny took the heavy rifle. He ducked under the strap and adjusted it before he too crouched and headed for the safety of the pine trees.

"Never knew what hit 'em," commented Deuce.

"Settle down, people. A two-man patrol ambushed in these conditions is nothing to cheer about. Any one of you should've been able to do that by yourselves. Stay on mission."

By the time he and Zuka reached the churning river that gave its name to the town, Denny was doubled over to catch a sodden breath as they paused to get their bearings. Zuka appeared to be none the worse for wear, despite carrying his rifle and battle load-out. Denny had his tomahawk and the borrowed M4, with the addition of the liberated AK-47.

“Whenever you're ready, sir...” Zuka said, smiling.

“Heads up,” warned Captain Alston over the radio. “Ivan’s stopped about four houses up. They’re gathering in the street. Hard to see through the rain but it looks like they’re arguing.”

“Movement! Get down!” hissed the Ranger.

Denny dropped into the mud next to Zuka and tried to calm his heart. He strained his ears to pick up any sound that would mean approaching Russians. Zuka planted a finger across his lips and shook his head. He pointed at his eyes, held up three fingers, then gestured to their right, along the shoreline toward the town park on the north end of the street. Denny nodded, then turned his head ever so slowly until he could see the dark outline of the jungle gym in the gloomy distance.

There. A tiny red light flashed. He looked back at Zuka who nodded and held up his fingers to his lips as if he were smoking a cigarette. Then he frowned and shook his head in a gesture of disbelief.

They were both laying along the side of a riverfront fishing shelter, completely exposed to the Russians. They had the storm for cover, but otherwise, only a stretch of too-tall sawgrass and deep mud sheltered them from direct sight of the enemy patrol. Zuka pulled his rifle ever so slowly through the mud until he had it at his shoulder. He settled his cheek against the stock and peered through the scope.

Denny started to move his own rifle when Zuka, without looking, waved him off in a tense gesture. He pointed roughly in Denny’s direction and held out his hand in the universal *stop* sign.

How did he know I was moving? Denny wondered, blinking through the rain.

“Heads up, Zuka...BTR in the street. They’re getting reinforced. Four houses up now,” Deuce warned over Denny’s headset.

Denny saw the headlights lance around the side of a house in the distance. Great white beams of light cut through the storm and swept around the playground as the vehicle pulled up alongside the Russians. His blood chilled. As the lights illuminated the patrol, he and Zuka saw that it wasn’t just three men, but ten, all clustered around the jungle gym.

When the big, armored personnel carrier stopped, rain-slick brakes squealing in protest, the Russians all eagerly moved inside through the big hatch that opened up on the back. The vehicle sat there for about three minutes, the engine growling at idle, exhaust smoking in the chilly rain. Then as Denny was about to tap Zuka on the boot to signal they should move, they saw one last figure leave the jungle gym. Very slowly, the Russian moved his rifle around, scanning the area.

He's spotted us. They left a sniper behind to catch us...Mishe Moneto, protect us. Let me die well...

The Russian suddenly lowered his rifle, turned and boarded the BTR at a trot. The hatch closed, the big engine roared, and the ugly machine rumbled off toward the center of town in a cloud of exhaust. After a few seconds, the only sound they heard was the incessant drumming of the rain. Denny let his breath out and lowered his face into the mud.

"That, my friend," said Zuka in a whisper, *"was close."*

"Ivan giving up?" asked Deuce.

"Negative. I see something glowing in the distance—I think it's a fire near City Hall. Maybe the good people of Salmon Falls are getting restless," said Captain Alston over the radio. "Everyone sit tight."

Denny smiled. He could well imagine more than a few of the more outspoken patriotic townies who would probably enjoy the cover of the storm to cause a little chaos for the invaders. He wanted to run down the street and join them.

After a few moments of waiting in the cold rain, Captain Alston finally broke squelch. "Hammer 2, listen up—Ivan's pulled out of this sector. Everyone regroup."

"Roger that, comin' back," said Zuka. He turned to Denny and wiped the mud off his cheek. "Let's get up and get moving, sir. There may still be Russians out there, waiting for us to move, so be careful and be *quiet*. Got it?"

Denny nodded.

"Don't say much, do you? Good. Follow my lead."

Denny picked his way through the mud and the grass as they crossed a

number of sodden backyards and worked their way closer to George McDonnell's house. It took them nearly half an hour to move one block, racing for cover around the corners of each of the abandoned houses and trees as they went. Denny marveled that there were so many empty houses in town. He supposed that after the Blue Flu had roared through the region, this side of town never fully recovered.

At last they raced, hunched over, back across the street and reached George McDonnell's house wet, tired, and hungry. Captain Alston opened the backdoor and let them in himself.

"Welcome back," he said, handing Zuka a steaming cup of coffee. He offered a second to Denny.

Denny was about to ask what their next move would be when a radio broke squelch and its tinny speaker cut through the quiet talk and the noise of the rain on the roof. "Hammer 2, Actual, Hammer 2 Golf," called out Garza's voice.

"Go ahead, Golf," said the captain.

"Just made contact with Watchtower! They got my sit-rep and are coordinating with available forces to send a combat Evac. But we've got to knock out the remaining SAM sites."

"Roger that, Golf." The captain grinned as Deuce and Zuka high-fived. Denny smiled and took a sip of the hot coffee. It was black and strong, but even better, it was hot, and he could feel the warmth spread through his body almost as soon as it went down his throat.

"Can confirm there are two remaining sites—repeat, there are two remaining SAM sites."

The captain nodded. "Actual copies all. You still got friendly company?"

"Roger that. One went back to town to rally support a couple hours ago. One stayed behind to help me with the shelter. We're out of the rain, but it's a near thing. Evac can't get here fast enough."

"Roger that. Stay dry and stay alert. Actual, out."

"Cap, got a light over here!" warned Deuce from the living room window. He was kneeling next to the wall next to the drawn curtains, peering out through a slit at the street in front of the house. "Headin' this way."

“Zuka,” said the captain, reaching for his helmet.

“On it.” The short Ranger handed his mug to Denny. “Hold that for me, will ya?”

The backdoor opened, letting in the cold air and dull roar of the rain. The door shut and Zuka was gone, a ghost in the shadows. Captain Alston picked up his rifle, pulled back the charging handle and nodded at Denny. “Just stay put, sir.”

“Okay,” said Denny, a mug of coffee in each hand.

“Comin’ back, Hammer 2,” said Zuka’s voice after a few tense minutes of silence. “Target acquired.”

Captain Alston opened the door and Deuce covered the opening with his rifle. A very wet civilian in a woodland-camo hunting jacket stumbled through the door with his hands up, dripping water on the floor. Zuka was right behind the taller man, his M4 leveled at his back. Over the Ranger’s shoulder was a bolt-action rifle with a large scope.

Once inside with the door shut, the Rangers made sure there was no one else outside before dealing with their prisoner. The man was obviously scared or cold or *both*, because his hands were shaking as he held them over his head. Denny squinted in the darkness but couldn’t really see the man’s face. Something about the way he carried himself seemed familiar, though.

“Mind telling me what the hell you were doing out there with this?” asked Captain Alston, holding up the hunting rifle.

“You guys are Americans, right?” said the deep voice of the stranger. Only, he wasn’t a stranger. Denny knew that voice.

“Anse?” he asked.

“How’d you know my name?” growled the big man. He craned his neck to peer in Denny’s direction. “Wait, Denny? Is that you?”

The two men shook hands. Denny turned, all smiles, to Captain Alston. “Captain, this is Anse Johnson. He’s the phys-ed teacher at the high school where we—where we used to teach.”

“Yeah, it burned down...” Anse said with a shake of his head.

“You can vouch for him?” asked the captain.

“Absolutely,” said Denny. “He’s on our side.”

“Did a stint in the Coast Guard when I was younger and lived back east,” said Anse, pride evident in his voice.

Captain Alston shook hands with the newcomer and the Rangers relaxed. “So, what were you doing out there?”

“Buddy of mine, Steve Petach—you know Steve, right Denny?”

“Sure, he’s gone hunting with us before,” said Denny. He handed a mug of coffee to Anse. Captain Alston nodded.

“Thanks, man.” The big man took a sip. “Aaah, that’s good. Well, Steve comes running up to my house an hour or so ago, soaking wet, with this wild look in his eyes. Wilder than normal, I mean,” he chuckled. “He says he was out with his brother, coming back from a hunt and found these two Army guys, west of town. One was shot up pretty bad.”

Captain Alston shot a glance at Denny. It was clear he wanted no interruptions. Denny nodded slightly.

“Anyway, turns out they were Army Rangers. Here to help us fight the Russians, man! So his brother stays to help get a makeshift shelter set up, and Steve ran all the way back to town—in this storm!—to spread the word. He got to three people. Each one of us agreed to go tell three more. I was on my way to George—oh, heya George.” The big man waved to their host.

“Anse,” the old man said with a grunt. “I got no idea who the hell you think I’d be running around to tell. Take me all week to track anyone down, slow as I go.”

“Well,” said Anse with a shrug, “we don’t have any organization or anything, we’re just spreading the word. You seen combat before, so I figured we should tell you.” In his hunting gear, it looked like a small tree shrugged. “Bunch of us still got our guns squirreled away—and we ain’t too scared to fight, neither,” Anse said, looking at Captain Alston.

“We’re meeting at dawn, at the school. Or, what’s left of it, I guess. The Russians burned it to the ground and no one’s gone there since. I don’t think they’ll bother to look for us in the rubble.”

Captain Alston nodded. “Not bad, but you need a plan of attack. Simply

meeting will accomplish nothing except maybe get you all killed. At least some of these Russians are *Spetsnaz*. They mean business. You guys start taking pot shots at them, they'll slaughter you—"

Anse's face darkened in the dim light. "We know that. But we got to do something. I saw what they did." He thumped his broad chest. "Now it's *our* turn."

"Fair enough," said Captain Alston, hands up. "But, I'm trying to tell you, if you and your friends have a plan, you'll do a lot more damage. And if we work together, we might just teach Ivan a lesson he won't soon forget."

"We surprised 'em good enough tonight. Couple of the boys set fire to one of their big piles of gear."

"The ammo dump by City Hall?" asked Zuka.

"Yeah, I guess. Bunch of stuff piled up next to the building, guards all over the place. But they didn't bother to guard the rooftops of the buildings across the street. Well, the ones still standing, I mean. We lobbed some Molotov cocktails in there, just thinking to stir some shit up."

"That's funny, right there," said Zuka, raising his coffee mug in salute.

The big man laughed out loud. "You should have seen 'em run when the first bottle hit home. *Whoosh!*" He laughed again. "Scared the *shit* out of 'em, man."

"Well, we got a few surprises for 'em, too. We'll destroy those SAM sites—" said Captain Alston.

"Sam who?"

"Surface-to-air missile. *SAM*. They got a couple of mobile launchers on the west side of town. There's more good guys coming, but we need to take those missiles out, so our reinforcements can land." Captain Alston shrugged. "But there's only a handful of us. If you and your buddies could cause a diversion... just get the Russians to focus their attention elsewhere for a few minutes, we'll blow the missiles straight to hell."

The camo-clad civilian scratched his beard. "Okay, say me and the boys pull that off..." said Anse. "Then what?"

"Then I call down the thunder and we teach Ivan that payback's a bitch."

CHAPTER THIRTY

BARRON

Washington, D.C.

The White House

Presidential Emergency Operations Center

“I AM TRULY DISAPPOINTED by your performance to date, Mr. President,” said Reginald in a clipped voice, rolling out of the cell phone like the wrath of God coming down on the President's head.

The President rolled his eyes and tried to calm his trembling hands. *Wait, why are my hands shaking?*

“I gave you a set of instructions to be carried out—”

“I’m the President of the United States, not some damned kid,” the President mumbled, staring at his hands.

“Then bloody *act* like it!”

The President was shocked into silence by the venom in Reginald’s outburst. It was completely outside the range of emotion normally displayed by the mysterious voice that controlled his destiny. The President frowned. *He’s keeping me from seeing Jayne, I know it.*

“Where is she?” the President asked in a voice that was close to a whisper. He winced. *God, I sound pathetic. But I need her...*

It took a moment for Reginald to respond. “You miss her, don’t you?”

“Of *course* I miss her,” the leader of the free world whimpered. “I...” He had to put out an arm and steady himself. *What’s wrong with me?*

“Mr. President, did you honestly expect—”

“What did you...unh...” His knees felt weak. It was getting harder to stand. “What did you *do* to me?” He leaned heavily on the conference table in the War Room. *This is not good!*

Reginald chuckled softly. “My good man, I have done nothing at all to you. You have done this to yourself.”

“Did what you asked...” the President gasped. He looked down in shock at his right hand. It was past trembling. *I’m shaking like a leaf...what the hell is happening?*

“Oh, you did *some* of what I asked. But you have started to go...how is it that you Americans put it? Ah yes...you’ve gone off the reservation. You are losing control of your government. There is an usurper out there, this Orren Harris. Your military is flocking to him. And you have done nothing. The Germans have been screaming for help, the Russians too, and you have done nothing. Where are the National Guard troops you promised to help quell the riots?”

“I *suspended* the Constitution and gave your military governors absolute, regional control—just like you asked. I declared *martial law* in the major cities—just like you asked...the troops are *there*...they’re just...refusing...orders...”

“That is true, you certainly—”

“I forced North Korea to the table with the airstrike on Pyongyang. Don’t forget that—because *you* did nothing.”

“Indeed, but that has only given their military leaders more incentive to use tactical nuclear weapons on American soil,” replied Reginald in a thoughtful tone. “Which, I assure you, is coming. More importantly, you have lost the Source.”

“But...the Rangers took blood samples—”

“Yes, against my orders, they were allowed to send blood samples, not the Source. And where is that plane? Do you have it? Because I hear this flu the

Koreans gave you is starting to mutate...”

“Well...no...we lost contact with the plane after it picked up the blood.”

“So? Was it shot down? Or did the pilots defect to Harris?” asked Reginald’s voice, tight with emotion. “Do you understand what you have allowed to happen? If Harris gets his hands on that blood—”

“He won’t.”

“How do you know that? You can barely stand up, let alone prevent a plane from flying to Denver.” Reginald laughed, a mocking, sinister sound. “And that situation would still be recoverable, *if* we had the Source. Which of course, your precious Rangers lost.”

“But—”

“Mr. President,” Reginald sighed. “You do understand the predicament you have so incompetently put me in, do you not? My employers were adamant that the Source—*him*, not his blood—be delivered to them as the price for your presidency. You have done moderately well for yourself up to this point. But, you have now lost the only bargaining chips in your hand.”

“The...what—?” The President could see the room start to spin.

“Precisely. You are overwhelmed. I don’t see how there is any other option going forward but to withdraw support for your administration. You aren’t the only person who can be president, you know—”

The President lost his grip on the cell phone when his head hit the side of the table. He felt an odd, floating-falling sensation, but could only see Jayne in his mind’s clouded eye. She was reaching out to him, covered in soapy suds, begging him to join her in the tub. He reached his arms out and felt nausea sweep over his body. Then a part of his addled mind recognized that he was on the floor.

His heart rate slowed; he could feel himself drifting off into deep relaxation. *Is this the end? Am I dying?*

The cell phone landed next to him. A barely audible sound emanated from the phone—a voice, rising in concern or anger...he couldn’t decide. He tried to say something but found his mouth wouldn’t listen to the commands his brain was sending. His hand twitched, but didn’t move when he ordered it to touch his

face. In a panic, he tried to shout for help and heard only a muffled, faint mumble.

What the hell is going on!? I... His eyes closed slowly, then opened even slower. His thoughts drifted by on a mere trickle of a stream of consciousness. *Jayne...Reginald...my wife...shaking hands...room spinning...panic...I can't speak...Jayne...the riots...Jayne...*

He closed his eyes and when they didn't open, he began to cry and waited for death. As he slipped into nothingness, an image of his wife's face flashed before him with a sad, mournful look.

"I SEE HIM, yes, he's alive."

The President's eyes fluttered open at her touch. *She came for me!* He struggled to focus his vision. Jayne stood up and turned away from him, one hand on her hip. She looked disappointed, to say the least.

Blurry as she was, she still looked wonderful. Like an angel sent to rescue him from his own personal hell. He tried to reach out for her but his arm still wouldn't move properly. He felt the muscles twitch, then rebel and collapse.

"I understand. But *you* must understand, he's taking too much," she said. Jayne listened for a moment, her head cocked to the side. "Yes, of *course* I know how much he's getting. You think I'm still a rook or something?" The anger in her voice was a side of her he had never seen. He was fascinated.

She shifted a little to the side and planted herself on the edge of his desk. He could see her short skirt slide up. Even in his incapacitated state, he could feel his heart rate start to go uphill. *Those thighs...*

"He has gotten single doses, no more. I'm telling you, he's built up a tolerance for it—I've never seen someone handle so much before." She raised her delicate right hand and admired the gleaming ring on her middle finger. The intricate Celtic knot-work had always attracted his eye.

"I've never seen it before either. All the others broke long before this point." She shrugged, such a simple, gesture, yet she looked so graceful—it made him

ache with longing. She sighed.

“I really thought he could handle it.” She glanced down at him and licked her lips, slowly. “I really hoped he could.”

Handle what? What’s she talking about?

The dreamy look vanished from her face. Her eyes narrowed, focused on infinity. “Yes, I’ve tested it myself. It’s fine. More than fine, it’s perfect. You’re overreacting.” He watched as she carefully removed the ring and held it up to the light, examining it. She turned it this way and that, her smooth hands gently holding the gleaming jewelry.

I miss her hands...

“No, the problem is not on my end. It’s him. He’s an addict, like I told you before. It was all there in his blood work. But you didn’t listen to me, did you?” She tossed her head, flipping her golden mane from one shoulder to the other so she could switch the phone to the other ear. “Yes, sir, I’m looking at it right now and I’m telling you, the ring is fine. The dosage is fine. Your president is the problem.”

She shook her head, the flowing, golden hair swirling about her shoulders. The President ached to run his hands through that silky goodness one more time. *I can’t even sit up, how would I run my hands through her hair? This is worse than death...*

“No, it’s worse than that.” She laughed, a deep throaty sound that made the blood ring in his ears. “He takes all I give and his body just wants more.” She slid her free hand down the smooth length of her bared thigh. In a soft, dreamlike voice, she said, “Don’t get me wrong, it’s been...mmmm...fun...”

She straightened up suddenly and smoothed out her skirt. “Yes, sir. Of course. I—well, you know...Yes. I’m telling you, he’s in the downward spiral.” She looked at the ceiling and sighed. “No, don’t do that. I have no traction with *her* at all. She hates me, thanks to him. That last display during the cabinet meeting pushed her over the edge. Yes. Yes. No, I’m telling you, if you do this, you’ll be on your own. That’s right, she’ll remove me from the bunker faster than you can blink. That dried-up cow has a stick up her ass, for sure.”

The President tried to chuckle; he knew she was talking about Vice President

Hillsen. She was the only person in the bunker that he figured could get such a rise out of his normally sweet, submissive, suggestive, Jayne.

She recoiled her head, causing her hair to rustle about her shoulders. It was as if she'd been slapped. "Don't you *dare*. That woman is ugly as sin. If you're going to make me do that, at least let me pick someone I can play with." She looked at the phone and chuckled. Fingers twirling her hair, she grinned and said, "God, Reginald, you are such a prude. You need to loosen up."

She laughed again, casting a glance over her shoulder at the form of the President of the United States, crumpled on the floor like a rag doll. He was looking at her through eyes that were just barely open and she didn't notice. She watched him, with a wistful look on her face.

"I'll give him one thing, he certainly knows how to show a girl a good time."

He tried to smile, but his face was slack and unresponsive, like the rest of his body. He tried to calm himself, to not think about being incapacitated like that—conscious but unable to move—for the rest of his life. He poured all his remaining willpower into moving his tongue, his toes, his fingers... *anything*. Nothing moved. Just his heart and lungs, on auto-pilot.

Jayne. And Reginald. His mind plowed through the fog of her perfume at a slow pace. *They drugged me. The damn ring.* His heart broke with the realization that Jayne had played him expertly to the very end. *I just can't believe it...*

Jayne continued to chat with Reginald, pacing the room and picking up random objects to examine while she talked. She was bored, listening to instructions, giving reports, offering suggestions.

She used me. Used me up completely and now he's telling her to throw me away like a piece of trash. Somewhere, deep down inside his tortured body, a tiny spark appeared in the darkness. Anger began to grow inside him, competing with the frustration he felt at being denied access Jayne's body.

He was angry for being used, angry for being propped-up as president before his time, angry that Reginald and his employers were tearing America apart piece-meal. The spark grew into an ember and his helplessness blew the ember into a furnace of rage.

They think I'm all used up, an empty husk. Useless. He seethed with raw,

white-hot anger.

His fingers twitched.

Yesssss. His eyes moved slowly to follow Jayne's progress around the room, like he was pushing his vision through jelly. But, at least his eyes were under his control again. He let his rage burn away the effects of whatever toxin Jayne had been using on him, and he kept still. Slowly, he could feel control over his extremities return. First a finger, then two, then four, then a wrist. Slowly, his feet twitched on command.

It's working...just stay still...

Jayne returned to the desk and stood right in front of him. If he dared to move his head, he could've looked straight up...

Stop that. Get a hold of yourself. She's been playing you like a fiddle. It's time to show this bitch what you're really made of. You are the goddamn President of the United States of America. Time to start acting like it.

He summoned all the remaining shreds of his battered willpower to fight off the lust that was building in his loins. She was so close. He could smell her shampoo, her perfume—that lovely, fragrant bouquet—the very *essence* of her. A whimsical, naughty thought flitted through his mind: *I wonder if she's wearing panties?*

It was the same old, intoxicating wave of euphoria that threatened to drown him again. He gritted his teeth and could feel the sweat bead on his forehead. *At least you're feeling something...*

"All—all right, if you say so," Jayne said, sounding unconvinced. She glanced down at the President. "I—I have to go. Now." The phone clicked off and then she was on her knees, cradling his head in her soft, gentle hands.

"Oh my *goodness*...what's happened to you? My love, my poor sweet, love...You're working yourself too hard..."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the deft movement of her right hand, as she adjusted the ring to face toward her palm. *Here it comes...*

Knowing what was coming, he reached out with all his senses to try and feel the pinprick of the ring. Her hand brushed his cheek and caressed his neck. He could feel the cold metal work its way under his jaw.

Still nothing...

Then, complete joy and relaxation washed over him from head to toe. He felt himself relax in her grip. He imagined her strong, gentle hands were cradling his head—holding it above a fragrant pool of swirling water. He wanted to giggle at the absurdity of that image as he lay on the carpet in the bunker under the White House.

“Sssssh,” Jayne whispered, brushing a lock of hair off his sweaty forehead. “Hush, my love. You need your rest...you have a lot of work to do...”

You bitch... The last vestige of who he was, of Harold James Barron, Esquire, defied her in a whisper from the dark recesses of his mind.

She moved her hand just so and another wave of joy crashed over him. He could resist no more. His last, feeble thought was one single word.

Revenge.

He vowed to himself he would attain that word, he would *become* that word, if it took a week, a month, a year, a decade. He would beat the odds, he would fight back, he would regain control over himself, and he would punish Reginald. He would punish her. The word danced in and out of his consciousness. He closed his eyes, a false smile on his lips. The last thing seared into his memory was the equally false concern for him, plastered on Jayne’s perfect face as he passed into oblivion.

I will have my revenge, Jayne...

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

DENNY

SALMON FALLS, IDAHO

DENNY PEEKED around the corner of what was left of the smoldering house. He glanced at his watch: 7:22 p.m. Any second now, men from the town were going to start shooting on the other side of the Russian encampment. He gripped the M4 in his cold hands and tried to wiggle his equally frozen toes to make sure they were still there.

Last night's cold rain had given way to even colder winds and clouds throughout the day. They'd spent the day resting and making plans with the group of citizens who were going to play a key role in the liberation of Salmon Falls. There had been a steady stream of men and women sneaking in and out of the McDonnell house throughout the day. They were under constant threat of discovery by the Russian patrols, but the citizens had understood all too well the danger and had disguised their activities well. The Russians, after all, had only locked down the town's center. The outlying streets and subdivisions had been looted for supplies, dissidents, and attractive women, then left by the invaders to rot.

He looked at the dark sky and frowned. Every bone in his cold, wet body told him that the clouds that were hanging low over the town were pregnant with snow.

Corporal Donovan peered around a charred beam and then looked back at Denny. He pointed at his eyes, then held up three fingers and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. Denny nodded. He'd been given a crash course in silent communication throughout the day while he and the Rangers had been holed up in George McDonnell's house.

I see three Russians over there.

Deuce pointed at Denny, pointed at his own eyes and made a shoo-ing gesture toward the other side of the rubble. *You go take a look on that side.* Denny gave him the thumbs-up and took three slow, cautious steps to the corner. He stole a glance over his shoulder at Deuce. The Ranger nodded and jutted his chin out. *Go on.*

Denny took a deep breath and closed his eyes, asking *Mishe Moneto* for a calm spirit and quick reflexes. He opened his eyes and slowly leaned around the corner, just exposing enough of the side of his head to see with one eye.

He could see four Russians milling around a missile launcher. *That's a lot bigger than I expected.* The portable missile platform looked to be the size of a tank and had a rotating radar dish on the front. The rumble of the big launcher's engine at idle was a constant noise in the background.

There were four, fog-gray missiles, each about ten feet long, cradled on a large arm that had been hoisted into the air. The big steel pillars that extended from the corners of the launch platform had been driven into the earth for stability and gave the impression that the thing had been grafted into place. Denny frowned.

No, it's more like a cancer that needs to be removed for the patient to survive. They desecrate this land with their presence.

Then he looked closer at the Russians. One was smoking a cigarette and watching his partner fiddle with a computer terminal built into the side of the mobile launcher. The other two were idly chatting with each other, but keeping a wary eye on their surroundings. One made a comment to the other and they chuckled softly. The second soldier gyrated his hips and made an hourglass motion with his hands. More soft laughter.

Denny pulled himself around the corner and felt his earlier fear quickly

dispel. He quickly discovered he was able to bury it under the anger burning within his soul. He turned his head and looked at Deuce. Denny held up four fingers and pointed at his own eyes.

The Ranger was grim faced, showing no emotion. But he locked eyes with Denny and nodded slowly. He pointed at the watch on his wrist and held up his hand. *Five minutes.*

Denny nodded and checked the chamber on his rifle. It was fully loaded and ready to go. He leaned back against the charred timber and looked up at the black sky, watching the snowflakes drift down out of the darkness into his field of view.

How did it ever come to this? A few weeks ago, I was just a teacher. Now... what am I? A freedom fighter? A terrorist? A rebel?

Little Spear...

Denny jerked his head down and looked around. He'd sworn he heard Red Eagle's voice. He closed his eyes tight. *Get a hold of yourself. It's just nerves.*

You are a liberator, Little Spear. You are freeing this land of the pestilence that plagues it...

Denny glanced at Deuce. The Ranger was squatting on the ground, back to the wall, staring impassively into the darkness with his rifle across his chest. *He's preparing himself. I should be, too.*

Gunfire in the distance jerked Denny out of his thoughts. He looked at Deuce, who checked his watch and with wild eyes, shook his head.

"They're early, they're early! All units, Hammer 2, hold your fire..." Captain Alston's voice announced over their radios.

Denny gripped his rifle and tensed. He peeked around the corner of the ruined home again and could see the Russians had dropped into crouches and were scanning in all directions, looking for a threat. One of them talked urgently into a radio, looking toward the east where sporadic gunfire was now popping.

Denny could hear the staccato *tat-tat-tat* of Russian AK-47s. Then there was a chorus of loud rifle shots. The hunters had joined the fight. It sounded for all the world like last year's 4th of July celebration.

"Get ready...they're moving."

Denny held his breath as one of the Russians said something to his comrades, then ran off toward the firefight on the other side of town. He could hear a lot more AK-47s now and a new sound. It was a strange, *whump-whump-whump*. Lights flared to the east. Explosions, he figured. Everything sounded muffled in the snow. Like a battle was raging miles away, instead of just a few city blocks.

“The BTR’s moving. That’s our cue. All units, Hammer 2, engage! Take ‘em down!”

Denny took a breath and raised his rifle, taking aim on the Russian closest to him. Before he could pull the trigger, the man next to his target screamed and crumpled in the snow. Only then did he hear the report of Deuce’s rifle. Denny pulled his trigger and saw his man twist around violently and slam into the side of the launcher. As the man slid down into the snow, a trail of blood smeared the camouflage paint pattern.

Deuce dispatched the remaining soldier and in seconds, the skirmish was over. “Nice work, sir,” the big Ranger said as he slipped around the corner of the house and patted Denny on the shoulder. “Come on.”

Denny followed his partner in a crouch to the side of the launcher and checked the Russians for signs of life. One of them was moaning and clutching his chest, blood, dark in the dim light, smeared over his mouth and chin. Without a thought, Denny knelt next to the man and ended his suffering with a single blow of his tomahawk. He wiped the blood off his blade on the Russian’s uniform and stood, peering into the darkness for more threats.

I’m changing...I don’t even know who I am anymore...

“Deuce, we’re secure. What’s your sit-rep?”

“Secure. Starting demo.”

“Roger, make it quick, I just got word we got reinforcements inbound.”

“No C-4,” Deuce muttered, examining the missiles in their cradles. He looked at Denny. “This thing is locked out *and* it’s in Russian.” He kicked the launcher. Deuce stepped back and sighed. “Here, take this,” he said and tossed Denny his rifle.

“What are you going to do?”

“The only thing I can,” he said as he climbed up the side of the launcher and

started to fiddle with the missiles. “I’m going to stuff some grenades up the ass-end of these missiles and hope when they cook off, they’ll put these things out of commission. See if you can find any on those guys down there,” he said, pointing at the Russian bodies.

Denny found five grenades on the Russians and tossed them up to Deuce. He gathered their sidearms and rifles, and then started to dig through their packs, looking for any food or medical supplies. In the distance, the gunfighting continued unabated.

The Ranger jumped down into the snow and ran for cover. “Let’s move! Find some cover!” They ran for the rubble pile of the nearest house and dove down behind a collapsed brick wall. “Keep your mouth open!” Deuce said, and covered his head and ears.

Denny did likewise, just as the grenades exploded. Even through tightly closed eyes, his world went white. His body was pounded by the grenade blasts—then there was an even *louder* explosion. He felt the breath ripped from his body and thought his lungs had been turned inside out. The bricks that shielded them rained down on top of the two men like hail.

When at last he could claw a breath into his lungs and cough the mortar and brick dust out, Denny opened his eyes and moved some debris from his head. There was a muffled ringing sound in his ears that was so intense, it threatened to steal his thoughts. He cleaned his face with the back of a hand and gradually his vision returned. He saw Deuce was rising through the rubble pile with a grin on his face, missing his helmet, blood trickling from his ears.

The Ranger turned to him, his face lit by the glow of a fire, and said something. Denny heard a mumbled gibberish and nothing else but a constant ringing sound. He blinked and started to rise up, feeling bricks and wood chips fall off his back as he emerged from the debris of the abused house.

Deuce picked up his helmet and put it back on, his mouth still moving. Denny could hear only a higher-pitched ringing now. He shook his head. Deuce grinned, grabbed him by both shoulders and turned him toward the source of the glowing light. What was left of the tank-like missile launcher was now on its side, blown completely in half. The launcher’s mechanical guts were spread out

in the shallow crater formed when the four missiles detonated on the rails.

Slowly, the ringing in his ears faded and he could just barely make out what Deuce was yelling and smiling about.

“We did it!” the Ranger was screaming. Denny could see the cords in his neck standing out as he yelled, but the sound that reached his tortured eardrums seemed like a loud whisper through a pair of earmuffs.

Denny fumbled with shaking hands for the headset that was hanging by a cord on his chest. His hands felt thick, but he managed to get the earbud in place. He cranked the volume and heard Captain Alston’s excited voice. “—hell you did, but you just lit up half the town! Regroup at the rendezvous point, we need to give the locals some cover!”

“Roger that, Actual! We’re on our way!” yelled Deuce with a whoop. “Goddamn that was *awesome*! I love my job!” He clapped Denny on the back.

Denny looked at the wreckage of the SAM launcher and blinked in amazement.

Who am I?

Denny struggled to catch up to Deuce, who was making a beeline for the old Citgo station a few blocks away. He barely had time to glance at the houses and what was left of the town he’d called home for more than a decade. The burned-out, half-deserted town looked more like a war zone. *Hell. It is a war zone and I’m fighting the war.* The sound of gunfire and that ever-present *whump-whump-whump* just added to the madness.

Up ahead, something exploded on the other side of town, showering the sky with glowing sparks. “What was that?” he called out.

“Hopefully that damn BTR!” answered Deuce, checking the street for movement. He ran full-speed for cover.

They ran past startled citizens emerging from houses to peer into the storm, looking for the cause of the fires and explosions. Others were cowering behind opened curtains. Most houses were empty or simply ripped-open husks of what they once were.

“Hammer 2, this is Dagger Lead—Marine strike-force closing in on your location—how copy?” Denny was momentarily startled by the sudden, dynamic

voice of the pilot in his ear as he ran. He nearly tripped over a section of busted sidewalk, buried in the snow. Finally, after the long sprint, he reached the rendezvous point, completely spent and out of breath.

Captain Alston, Zuka, and Deuce were already stacked up along the wall of the gas station by the time Denny crashed into the building in a huff. The Rangers looked at each other and grinned as Denny dropped to his knees and gasped for breath.

“Dagger Lead, Hammer 2, Actual. I read you five-by-five. Welcome to the party. We took down the remaining SAM sites; you’ve got clear skies.” Zuka held up a map in front of the captain. “Ivan’s holed up on grid Victor-Romeo, one-three-niner, alpha. Friendly forces are on east side of the town, backed up to the river. All other foot mobiles are hostile, *repeat*, all other foot mobiles are hostile. What’s your ETA?”

“Hammer 2, Actual, we are ten clicks out and comin’ in hot. Fuel for one pass. Whirlybirds are on our tails and will provide close-in support for the EVAC. Tell your boys to hunker down—target coordinates are locked.”

“Roger that, Dagger Lead, good hunting!”

Captain Alston leaned around the map Zuka was holding. “You heard the man—this is going to be danger close.”

Denny gasped for breath. “What was all that about?”

“There’s a flight of Marine Corps F-35 Lightning’s coming in to lay a strafing run on the Russians. NORAD got the word out and they were the only ones available to assist. I guess they’re coming long-distance, because they’re only going to make one pass before they fly home. Should be some helicopters along in a minute to get us the hell out of here.”

“Oh,” said Denny, staring at the snow. “Well, okay then.” His head was spinning with the events of the last few days as he tried to ignore the chuckling Rangers. His world had suddenly become a surreal environment: violent explosions everywhere he turned; dark-clad Russian invaders scrambling around, engaging his friends and neighbors in blistering firefights; the systematic slaughter of many good citizens at the hands of the Russians; an armored personnel carrier rumbling about, trying to kill his friends; and now American

jets making bombing runs across his town.

“Hey,” said Deuce. He put a reassuring hand on Denny’s shoulder. “Hang in there, sir. You’re doing great. It’ll all be over soon. Now that we’ve taken out the SAM sites, Ivan’s gonna get a surprise, even if it *is* just a bunch of Marines.”

Zuka laughed. “Hell, I’d welcome the Coast Guard at this point.”

“Oh, I’m not turning down the assist,” said Deuce, a half-smile on his lips. “I just think it’d be more dignified if it weren’t Marines doing the rescuing.”

Captain Alston let the Rangers laugh for a moment before he spoke. “All right, settle down. We need to get across the street into that house and get some cover. Let’s go. We don’t want to be next to this thing when the jet jockeys get here,” he said, patting the wall of the gas station.

Zuka peered around the south corner. “Clear.”

“Clear,” replied the captain, looking around the north corner. “Let’s move.”

They double timed to the sturdy-looking house across the snow-covered street and took up positions on either side of the front door. The house was mostly still intact—one of the few remaining the area. Denny glanced up the street. The house had a good view to the east.

One solid kick from the big Ranger and the door crashed in, allowing Zuka and Captain Alston to rush in with weapons up, lights on, followed quickly by Deuce. In seconds, the house was cleared and they called for Denny.

“I hope your friends are getting behind some cover,” said the captain as Denny entered the front room of the abandoned house. The Rangers were in the shadows, looking out the windows at the dome of glowing light in the distance. The brilliant orange, flickering light pinpointed where the fighting was taking place on the other side of town.

“Hammer 2, Actual, this is Dagger Lead. Commencing our attack run. Danger close, danger close, danger close.”

“Here it comes!” said Captain Alston. He made a show of covering his ears, closing his eyes, and opening his mouth as he crouched down low to the floor.

The Rangers grinned. Denny looked out the window as he heard the tremendous roar of the jets overhead, through the walls, through his chest, in the soles of his feet. The house shook as the jets split the night in their passing. Then

the town of Salmon Falls exploded.

Houses and businesses—buildings that he had walked past or driven by countless times—exploded into matchsticks and blossoms of fire and sparks. The ground shook as missile after missile streaked into the Russian lines and pummeled the town.

As the last explosion rocked the house, Denny could just make out glowing stars moving across the darkened sky in a diamond formation—ten of them. In seconds, the jets were screaming off to the northeast, leaving the town burning in their wake.

Then the second wave hit. More jets, more missiles riding fire and smoke through the air, more explosions. The ground trembled, the house shook, sparks and flaming debris flew through the air across the east end of town. The destruction was beautiful and horrible, yet mesmerizing to behold. Denny couldn't take his eyes off the devastation. And then it was over and the jets were gone. The only thing left was the sound of the raging fires and the clouds of debris raining down on the town. The deafening silence of the snow returned to drape an eerie blanket over Salmon Falls.

Captain Alston stood up and brushed glass off his uniform. "Well, *that* ought to even the odds a little."

Denny hadn't even noticed the big picture window had imploded not ten feet from him, showering the room with shards of glass. He watched, hypnotized, as the curtains danced in the breeze, while the town of Salmon Falls burned beyond the window frame. As the noise of the jets and explosions receded, he began to regain his senses and noticed his hands were trembling in time with his racing heart.

"Hammer 2, Actual, Dagger Lead—our run is complete, multiple good kills. That BTR shouldn't be giving you any more trouble."

"Roger that, Dagger Lead, thanks for the assist."

"Oorah, Ranger. Switchblade will be taking over close-air support in a few minutes, just hang tight. Dagger Lead, out."

"Let's move, Rangers. There's still a fight to win."

"Hooah!" replied Zuka. The little Ranger looked positively giddy.

Denny followed the soldiers out, his head still in a daze over the destruction he'd just witnessed. It was one thing to read about airstrikes in some foreign land; quite another to witness one in your own hometown.

As they approached the heart of the battle between the townspeople and the remaining Russian troops, Denny could hear something...a growing rumble of noise that began to rise above the gunfire, the roar of the fires...

Cheering.

All around them, people were rushing out of their homes, carrying baseball bats, garden tools, sticks, pipes, anything they thought would work as a weapon. The entire town—what was left of it—was joining the fight and swarming like a hive of angry hornets toward the surrounded Russians.

This is going to be a blood bath, he thought as he stared around in shock at the tide of humanity rapidly advancing toward the invaders, toward vengeance. *They'll rip the Russians limb from limb.*

On this cold, bloody night, the people he'd lived with for a decade appeared completely alien. They were consumed with rage. Most of the people he knew did not recognize him, dressed as he was in camo and face paint.

War paint, he told himself. *The Shawnee are going to war one more time.* Denny was swept up in the river of people and carried toward the firefight.

Cleanse the land, Little Spear, whispered Grandfather.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

COOPER

40 miles west of Boston, Massachusetts
22,000 feet over Worcester

COOPER WOKE when up he felt a firm grip shake his shoulder.

“It’s go-time, LT,” yelled Jax, a big grin plastered on the man’s face.

Cooper nodded and sat up, taking quick stock of his surroundings on the rumbling C-130. He and the remainder of his team were in the cavernous cargo area, bathed in red light. The cargo crew was securing themselves by the rear hatch. His own men were still in their seats, examining gear and parachute straps one last time. He put on his high-altitude jump helmet and watched as the others followed suit.

Cooper took a deep breath and nodded again. He watched as the cargo master hit a button and the flashing red light started blinking overhead. The rear hatch began to lower sedately, letting in the howling, cold wind as the opening grew wider and wider. Cooper watched the dark hole grow in size as the big cargo ramp dropped out of sight.

The red light turned green.

“Let’s go, ladies!” Cooper stood up and hobbled his way aft toward the opening. His gait was made awkward by the parachute, the gear, the weapons,

the High-Altitude/High-Opening jump gear, and oxygen tank, all strapped to his body. He prayed his knee didn't lock up before he made it to the ramp.

A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed his SEALs were lined up right behind him, moving like their namesakes in an odd wobble-shuffle toward their date with the open sky.

Cooper stood at the edge of the ramp and switched on the latest-generation heads-up display inside his helmet. In the upper-right corner of his field of view, he saw the rest of his team behind him through the rear-facing camera on his back. Altitude, windspeed, air temperature, O2 levels, and GPS coordinates were displayed on the left side. He moved his eyes to the far left of the helmet and the screen switched to night vision. *I love these things.*

"Radio check," he shouted over the muffled roar of the wind.

"Two," said Charlie.

"Three," said Jax.

"Four," replied Swede.

"Five," muttered Mike.

"Six," said Sparky.

The cargo master slapped Cooper on the shoulder and gave him the thumbs-up.

Cooper nodded. The little rearview screen showed Charlie's insect-like head nod to the cargo master as his XO stepped up in line.

One more step. Cooper closed his eyes and savored the moment. The start of a new mission. Everything was green. Everything was before him, the past was gone. His head was clear, his mission was clear, his world was focused. He was ready.

Please let my leg hold up on the landing...

He leaned forward and fell out the back of the plane, grinning like a schoolboy at the familiar feeling of free-fall. The roar of the plane vanished in a heartbeat, replaced by the roar of the wind as it screamed past his helmet, trying to freeze him as he approached terminal velocity. It was just one of the perks of his job he would miss the most when he retired: the complete freedom, the near weightlessness, the odd sensation in his stomach that told him he was in free-fall

—he loved all of it.

He watched the mission timer on the left side of his screen. When the little green clock ticked over to fifteen seconds, he pulled the D-ring on his chest and braced for the jolt of the main parachute unfurling above him. With a muffled *snap*, the ‘chute filled with frigid air and halted his uncontrolled descent.

The voice of the wind softened to a gentle whistle as he watched his airspeed slow and his rate of descent drop into the controlled stage. He flicked his eyes to the right and watched the rest of his team deploy right on cue, one after the other. He could just barely make out the dark shape of the C-130 as it turned against the star-field and disappeared from sight in the distance. When Mike’s ‘chute opened and Cooper was confident his entire team was secured and on target, he turned his attention back to the ground, still thousands of feet below.

Worcester was already falling under his feet and moving behind the SEALs. The darkened city was a large, black hole in the landscape below, marked by a few random points of light. The mission briefing had revealed that the locals would likely be burning fires in backyards. Power was sporadic across the region, due to workers falling ill with the rapidly spreading influenza.

As far as he could see at this considerable height through the light clouds below him, there were dark green fields and darker green forested areas—all interconnected by the black ribbons of roadways. Everything was calm, everything was quiet, everything was dark.

“One, Four. Check your two o’clock low.”

Cooper frowned at the break in radio silence but looked where Swede had directed. He flicked his eyes to the far right of his HUD and the rearview screen cycled to a map of their area of operation. The glowing green dots represented his team, the blue triangle was Cooper himself. They were passing over the intersection of Interstates 495 and 95. He noticed on the map that two o’clock low corresponded to the darkened city of Framingham.

Looking back down at the ground, he saw what had attracted Swede’s attention. A line of vehicles, tiny little specks down below on I-495, led by the lance-like beams of their headlights. There were twelve vehicles, all traveling on the interstate at perfectly maintained spacing. It was a military convoy, and they

had just left Framingham in flames. It looked like half the town was on fire.

The Germans are ranging out of Boston. Must be a retaliation raid or something...

“Copy that, Four.”

Cooper made a mental note to remember the convoy roaming around behind them when they landed. He squinted his eyes and looked forward at Boston, nearly straight ahead and at the far edge of his vision. He glanced at the distance-to-target number on his HUD: 25 miles. The number was dropping quickly. His altitude was down to 16,000 feet and falling.

He lost track of Boston in the distance as he dropped into some thin clouds and his vision went white. It was an eerie sensation, knowing that his body was falling out of the sky—hanging by just a few threads connected to a billowing sheet of silk thousands of feet above the ground, surrounded by clouds and the nocturnal darkness. Without the advanced tactical night vision built into his HAHO rig, Cooper would’ve been completely blind. He looked around and could barely see his hands and feet—then suddenly he was through the cloud deck and was bursting into the night once more.

The ground below sprung into sharp clarity; a much better view than when he’d been above the clouds. In the distance loomed Boston, a giant black hole on the edge of the starlit ocean. A ring of lights were visible—even at a distance of nearly 20 miles—fires and spotlights that ringed the besieged town. It appeared the largest concentration of lights were clustered due west of Boston and located, according to his map display, around Newtown. That had to be the German base.

Random flickering of lights down below gave away the position of people trying to survive the crisis. As he drifted through 10,000 feet, Cooper noticed whole neighborhoods had lit bonfires so entire blocks could share the light and heat. It was truly a desolate scene below—there were no visible indications of cars or trucks moving about, no houses with lights, nor a single strip mall. It was as if he had traveled back in time two hundred years, back to a time when the only light was provided by a candle or a torch.

As they passed through 5,000 feet and came within ten miles of their landing zone, Cooper continued to keep a wary eye on the sky for German aircraft and

drones. His night-vision enhanced HUD showed no aerial threats yet, but he was still cautious. The last thing they needed was to be spotted by a damn drone or some Luftwaffe pilot flying CAP over Boston.

The great northern city grew ever larger, filling his green-tinted HUD. He could make out skyscrapers and the downtown district now, out on the wide peninsula in the bay. There were lights in many of the windows of the bigger buildings. He could see fires burning in the streets and groups of vehicles prowling the outer fringes. It looked like a restless night.

They sailed, silent as a whisper, over the I-95 loop where it intersected U.S. 90, the Massachusetts Turnpike, heading into the heart of the city. The Germans were just below them now; he could easily spot their sprawling base. It was the large area full of heavy equipment, neatly parked rows of half-tracked vehicles and what looked like tanks and a few planes as well. There was a stream of lights heading overland from the port, where he could see dozens of large ships anchored offshore. Cooper frowned as he realized their resupply effort was in full swing.

At that instant, he saw a large cargo plane lift off from Logan International. The huge plane clawed its way into the sky, heading east over the bay toward Europe.

He scanned the approaching ground—now just a few thousand feet below—watching roads and neighborhoods roll by under his boots and bags of gear that were strapped to his body. He could see burning buildings, flattened homes, swaths of whole neighborhoods that were just ugly, charred black smears instead of homes and businesses. The rioting and unprecedented repression by the Germans in response had left battle scars all around the outskirts of Boston.

At last he was able to spot their primary landing zone, John F. Kennedy Park, just on the north side of the Charles River, about as close as possible to the Harvard campus, where the good professor was reportedly living. Instead of the darkened grass and trees he was expecting, Cooper spotted lights and movement. There was a group of people walking around with flashlights and a number of vehicles on the outskirts of the park. A German forward-operating base? Or a checkpoint? The park was conveniently located adjacent to the John F. Kennedy

Street Bridge that linked Cambridge to Allston.

Well, that's not going to work. Damn park is crawling with Germans.

He keyed his mic. "All units, abort primary LZ, repeat, abort primary LZ. Follow my lead to the alternate." He listened to a series of clicks as his men checked in by breaking squelch and acknowledging the change in plans.

Cooper pulled on his guide ropes and started a slow, gentle turn to the north and west, making a loop over the Charles River and getting the team lined up for landing on a large, flat, sports complex across the river from JFK Park. He pulled the team down through a thousand feet and followed the river, keeping an eye to the left, where Cumnock Fields Park was a nice, inviting patch of green. He couldn't see anything on the ground below—no sign of Germans anywhere close. Cooper swooped around to the north, then curved back to the east over the river at a steep incline, and dropped just over the tree line. Their boots skimmed the treetops and coasted just above the grass to the far side of the field.

He flared expertly at the very last second, just outside the tree line that sheltered the southern riverbank of the Charles River. As his momentum was fully arrested, his feet dropped to the ground without a sound and he sank to a crouch, already rolling up his parachute.

In a whisper, Charlie landed next to him, almost as perfectly as Cooper. Jax landed on his left and skidded a few feet before he stopped. The others, he noticed with a grin, landed safely and quietly along the length of the tree line. They were as silent as ghosts. In their black helmets and HAHO suits, to anyone who'd bothered to look, they were mere wraith-like shadows passing silently through the night.

Once free of their parachutes, oxygen tanks, and HAHO gear, the SEALs strapped on weapons and cut loose the empty leg-bags. They were now ready to continue the mission. Cooper checked the elapsed mission time on his HUD and nodded to himself. It'd taken less than a minute to go from flight to land operations.

By the book.

He saw the others take a knee and when each helmeted head had turned in his direction, he waved his hand in the execute signal and pointed at Charlie to

head for the river. Charlie nodded and moved off silently, Jax and Swede following him into the tree line. When they vanished into the trees and undergrowth that lined the river, Cooper motioned for his squad to follow as he moved along the tree line toward the JFK Street Bridge.

“Two in position,” said Charlie’s voice a few breathless moments later.

The kid’s fast, Cooper admitted to himself. Charlie was already in position by the river, at the foot of the bridge. Cooper reached his position, just inside the tree line, at the street level of the bridge. Craning his neck, he could make out the IR beacon on the back of Charlie’s helmet down below near the river.

“Sparky, you got eyes on?” he asked.

“Roger that.”

Cooper watched the team sniper move to the right and set up his long, black sniper rifle behind a tree. Sparky plugged a cord from the rifle’s scope into the side of his helmet and started scanning the bridge and the far bank.

“Bridge is clear. No enemy foot mobiles in sight. No vehicles in sight.”

“Two?” asked Cooper.

“Negative activity here. Skies are clear,” Charlie reported.

“Let’s go,” said Cooper. His team headed out of the tree line and crossed the street. They hopped a temporary concrete barrier set up by the Germans and made their way across the long bridge. He watched as Charlie’s squad took position on the opposite side of the road from his men and they all moved across the bridge together as a single unit.

“Still clear,” called out Sparky, still in his position back in the tree line.

“Copy,” grunted Cooper. They were almost at the other side. *This is turning out to be—*

“Movement, far side, your eleven o’clock!”

The front two SEALs, Cooper and Charlie, on either side of the road, dropped to the deck and had their rifles at the ready. The other SEALs took a knee and aimed over their leaders.

“Wait one...I don’t think they’re Germans...”

“Say again, Sparky, what the hell are we looking for?” hissed Charlie.

“Seven, repeat, seven foot mobiles, approaching the Germans in JFK Park.

Moving up from the riverbank. They've got their backs to you."

"Go, go, go," said Cooper, getting to his feet again. They would use the cover of the side-rails of the bridge to shield their movement as they reached the far side and crouched again. "Where are they at, Sparky?"

"Foot mobiles entering the tree line, your ten o'clock."

Before Cooper could say anything else, gunfire erupted in the trees across the street. The bright muzzle flashes lit up their night-vision enhanced HUDs. The computers in their helmets did a good job of dimming the display to prevent momentary blindness. Cooper grinned. He'd taken the Marine Commandant at his word when he told the SEALs to take what they wanted.

"I have *got* to get me some more of this gear," he muttered.

"Hooyah," replied Charlie.

"Whoever they are, they took Jerry by surprise. They're pretty good, but the Germans got reinforcements approaching from the north—your one o'clock. Across the road, looks like a six-man squad. On foot."

"Whoever the hell they are, they're fighting the Germans, and that's who's standing between us and our objective. I say we lend a hand," suggested Charlie.

"Agreed, let's do it. You take out the reinforcements, we'll engage from the tree line."

"Copy." Charlie moved off silently with Jax and Swede in tow, racing up the street directly at the unsuspecting German squad rushing to help their comrades.

"Sparky, you suppressed?" asked Cooper as he and Mike moved forward toward the fighting.

"Affirmative."

"Clear to engage."

"Roger that, engaging now."

Cooper reached the tree line ahead and saw shadowy shapes in front of him, moving into the German encampment. There were a few tents on fire and one of their vehicles was all shot up. He counted three bodies on the ground and could see the silhouettes of the mystery attackers moving forward in a disciplined approach, raking fire into the surprised German troops. To his right, he heard muffled gunfire erupt—Charlie was engaging his targets.

A German staggered from the tent in front of him and was suddenly jerked backwards into the tent's opening. Cooper ducked involuntarily.

"That's one," said Sparky.

"That was a little *close*, brother," muttered Cooper, searching for a new target.

Another German crumpled on the edge of Cooper's vision. "Two."

Muffled gunfire reached Cooper's ears inside his HAHO helmet. He turned again to the road and saw his SEALs moving forward, laying down controlled bursts through the trees. Germans were falling left and right.

He turned back to the main camp just in time to see a German emerge from the trees and take aim at the back of one of the unknown foot mobiles Sparky had spotted earlier. The man turned to face the German and Cooper could see by the firelight the look of abject fear and surprise on his face.

Cooper fired without further hesitation and the German fell to the side with a scream. Cooper was then left standing with his rifle aimed and ready, pointed at the stranger's chest.

The stranger quickly gathered his wits and started to raise his own rifle toward Cooper.

"Hold your fire! *Friendly!*" Cooper said, raising his left hand. His voice, broadcast by external speakers in his helmet, came back to him muffled. He winced, thinking he sounded like a Stormtrooper right out of *Star Wars*.

"Comin' up on your three o'clock, Coop," warned Charlie.

The man in front of Cooper was now joined by his surviving comrades, three more shadows that moved through the camp to the tree line. Cooper could see they were all dressed in civilian clothes, though one had some hunting camo. They all carried M4s or AR-15s. One had an SKS slung over his shoulder.

Mike stepped up next to Cooper and took aim at the men opposite them. Cooper laid a hand on Mike's rifle and pointed the barrel down.

"No need to get twitchy, boys. Let's all stay frosty. I think we're all on the same team here." As a show of good faith, Cooper lowered his own weapon. The men across from them kept their weapons aimed.

"I say we take 'em out right now," said one of the men in a thick Boston

accent.

“I’d advise against that, friend,” said Cooper. He motioned at the leader’s chest. Sparky’s laser had lit up the man. The red dot was square in the middle of the man’s chest and not moving at all. “My sniper is back across the river. You’ll never get the chance to pull the trigger.” He turned his head. “Come on out, boys.”

Like wraiths, Charlie, Jax, and Swede emerged from the flickering shadows of the burning German camp. The locals nearly jumped out of their skins and Cooper couldn’t help but grin. When the men calmed down a bit, Cooper let his rifle hang by its combat sling and raised both empty hands. He slowly broke the seal and removed his helmet. Sighing, he relished the first breath of fresh air that kissed his damp skin.

God, that feels good.

“Who the hell *are* you guys?” asked the man Cooper assumed to be their leader.

Cooper smiled. “We’re the good guys.” He peeled back the flap of cloth on his right shoulder and exposed the American flag sewn onto his jumpsuit.

“Where’d you come from?” asked one of the others. Cooper noticed their rifles weren’t pointed so straight anymore.

“Way up there,” he said, pointing up.

“No planes or helicopters flying around here but the Krauts and their damn drones,” muttered the leader. “Those are some wicked-fancy helmets you got there...you guys special forces or something?”

“Or something,” Cooper said, grinning. He stuck a gloved hand out, and almost said *Master Chief*. After a quick pause, he said instead, “Lieutenant Cooper Braaten.”

“Air Force?” asked the leader.

Charlie snorted in derision, an odd sound coming through his helmet. Mike shook his head.

“Navy,” replied Cooper, the grin spreading into a smile.

After a moment of silence, the leader said, “*Nice*.” He lowered his weapon and shook hands with Cooper. “I gotcha. Hey, it’s cool, you guys really helped

us out. Thanks.”

“So what, we’re just gonna trust ‘em ‘cause he says he’s from the Navy? These guys dropped outta the sky like ghosts...”

His partner slapped him on the shoulder. “Dude, they’re *SEALs*.”

“No shit?” asked the Doubting Thomas.

Cooper laughed. “No shit.” He stopped mid-laugh and grew serious. “But don’t tell anyone, or we’ll have to kill you.” When he heard the locals grow silent, he laughed again. “Just kidding, man. We’re not here to kill any Germans. They’re still technically just medical security staff for the W.H.O.” He turned to his team and touched the mic at his throat. “Okay, stand down, Striker. Sparky, come on over.” His bone phone clicked twice.

“So why are you here, if you’re not here to kill some Krauts? We been all alone in this too long, man. Sure be nice to get some backup.”

Cooper looked at the burning wreckage of the German outpost. “We’re here to find someone. Someone very important to the future of this nation.” He fished around in a side pocket and pulled out a laminated photo. Holding it up in the firelight, he asked, “Have any of you seen this man? His name is Dr. Maurice Boatner. He’s a virologist and a professor at Harvard...?”

The leader laughed bitterly. “Look, bro, this is Boston. There’s a lot a people here, right? Never seen him before. Sorry.”

Cooper nodded and put the photo away. “Well, it was worth a shot.”

“We need to get the hell outta here before the Krauts show up—” said Doubting Thomas.

“And they will!” chipped in one of his men.

“You guys wanna come with us? We get back to camp, we got hot chow... and you can check in with the colonel.”

Cooper put his hands on his hips and looked around. “Who are you guys, anyway? National Guard?”

“Nah, they’re still trying to figure out if they’re gonna work with the Krauts or us for some reason...” He shook his head. “Name’s Dillon Prebble. This here’s my brother Jimmy. That’s Donny, and the ugly one over there is Kaden.”

“Up yours, Prebble,” muttered Kaden in a deep voice.

An odd, European-sounding siren wailed in the distance. All of the men jerked rifles up and looked for new threats. Sparky padded up softly and stopped next to Cooper.

“More vehicles coming in from the north. I saw the headlights from the bridge. We need to make tracks, LT,” the speakers on his helmet reported.

“You comin’ with us? ‘Cause, the colonel’s gonna shit himself when he meets ya,” said Prebble in his thick accent. He turned to leave.

“May as well,” said Cooper with a shrug.

“Okay boys, back to base. Let’s go,” announced Prebble as he shouldered his weapon.

“Charlie, you take the north flank,” said Cooper.

“Roger.” Charlie removed his helmet with a hiss of escaping air. “So Prebble—if you’re not with the Guard, who are you with? What’s SOL?” Charlie said, pointing at the white letters crudely sewn on the sleeve of the man identified as Kaden.

Dillon Prebble slung his rifle over his shoulder and smiled. “We’re the Sons of Liberty. We don’t wanna be here when the Krauts find this mess. We don’t do the stand-up-and-fight routine. We hit, run, and hide. Minuteman style. Now come on and make sure you stick to the trees. You can hide your heat signature better by staying near the brush.” He pointed up. “Damn Kraut drones are everywhere.”

“Hooyah,” said Cooper as he jogged off into the night with his newfound allies.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

CHAD WOKE TO THE SOUND OF SOMEONE VOMITING. HE HATED TO THROW UP, always had. *Whoever* was yakking was doing a real good job. Great gulping heaves, and from the sounds of it, a lot of splatter.

Man, some poor bastard is having a rough—

Chad's thought was interrupted by a painful heave that emptied the nonexistent contents of his stomach. The throbbing in his head was nearly unbearable. His senses, one by one, returned to his control and assaulted his abused consciousness.

He felt cold steel all around him. He was in some enclosed space. The helicopter—the memory trickled back into his tortured mind. It took a while for him to fully remember what had happened when the last time he'd opened his eyes.

Another dry heave left him panting for air. Then the rush of memories hit.

The pilot! That bitch! She hit me... He opened his eyes slowly, enduring the lightning bolts of pain tunneling into his brain as soon as light broke past his eyelids. *Ugh. I'm still in the cockpit of that damn helicopter. And there's puke everywhere...*

"You done yet?" asked a malicious voice that echoed through his mind.

"Wha...what?" Chad stammered. The world began to spin. *What the hell is she talking about? What's happening to me?*

"Settle down. We're on the ground already. Just waiting for the Russians to walk over."

A loud clacking sound shook his eardrums. Then he felt a cool breeze on his neck. He squinted up. The cockpit canopy, accompanied by the whine of hydraulics, lifted sideways out of his field of vision.

Chad gingerly rubbed the back of his neck. “Owww...” he muttered. *God, it hurts!*

“Sorry about that...” the pilot said. “*Finally*. Here they come.”

In a blur of pain, Chad heard several sets of footsteps approach the helicopter. Then there were strong hands gripping his shoulders and he felt the dizzyingly queasy sensation of being pulled out of the helicopter. It felt like they were spinning him around like a top before dumping him unceremoniously on the hard ground. Every bone in his body felt broken. He fell back against the ground with a teeth-rattling impact. Chad kept his eyes closed tight—even *breathing* was painful.

Am I dying?

“This is the Source?” asked a gruff male voice.

“Y-yes,” replied the pilot. The sudden nervousness in her voice did nothing for Chad’s nerves.

There was some chattering in a language that Chad couldn’t understand, but it sure sounded excited. He tried to say something but only a low moan escaped his lips.

“We will test.” The hands grabbed him again. Chad whimpered. He was beyond crying out. He just wanted it all to end.

They’re carrying me off...to a lab...the needles...God no...please...

“Okay, so if you, like, you know, don’t have the money here, I have an account number I can—”

More guttural Russian-speak. Chad tried to tell the pilot to leave and save herself but he couldn’t get his mouth to work. Something was wedged in between his jaws. The cable-tie around his wrist was still loose, so that was something.

This is not good...

“Da, da. Gregor! Pay her,” said the male voice with a cruel chuckle.

“Wait, no, hey *look*, I’ve got a family—” the pilot started to say.

A single gunshot cut her off, mid-sentence. The sound of her body hitting the ground almost made Chad want to throw up again. He inhaled deeply through his nose several times in an attempt to conquer his storm-tossed stomach.

“Would you like *receipt*?” asked a second voice in a thick accent. Laughter exploded around him.

As he was dragged away, he heard excited babble coming from behind him and getting louder. There were several Russians talking with each other. He couldn’t understand any words but heard the names Yuri, Gregor, and something that ended in ‘*vich*. Then he heard someone sssssh the group.

A radio was adjusted. The static broke up a few times and then settled into a somber voice. “—the President of the United States.”

After a brief pause, he heard a new voice, tinny sound over the radio. “Good evening, my fellow Americans. My name is Orren Harris, and until a few days ago, I was the Speaker of the House of Representatives.”

One of the Russians laughed softly. Someone said something in their guttural language, followed by more laughs. Chad tried to focus on the radio.

“I should say, a few weeks ago, I was the Speaker. Since that fateful day when all of our lives were turned upside down, I have been nothing more than a citizen, like you, wondering what was happening, why, and how we as a nation would survive.” He cleared his throat politely.

“My fellow Americans, I have the unenviable task, set before me by the legitimately elected President, Chesterfield Carter Denton, of assuming the mantle of leadership and steering this stricken country back to its former glory.”

One of the Russians said something and was quickly silenced by the others. Chad turned his head to try and hear better.

“It is with a heavy heart that I relay the news that President Denton has left this earth to watch over this land that he loved from a better place. I ask all Americans to not only pray for his salvation, but for the salvation of this great land, indeed for the very survival of ourselves and our loved ones and—”

The radio snapped off. A new, louder voice dominated Chad’s sightless world. He barked out Russian gibberish and by the way feet were scattering in all directions, Chad assumed this new speaker was the man in charge.

Someone gripped Chad's face in their hand and pinched painfully in order to turn his head left, then right. *They're examining me like a horse.* Someone laughed. More Russian talking. In the distance, he heard the tell-tale whine of heavy machinery coming to life. The hand left his face with a grunt of approval.

Chad was hauled up to his unsteady feet and carried off to his destiny.

God, help me...

COOPER TOOK a long pull from his cup and nodded his thanks to the young man who held the water jug. He and Charlie stood with the Sons of Liberty leadership, staring down at the map of occupied Boston. They were in the local headquarters—an abandoned brownstone on the edge of Cambridge.

They'd been discussing the strategy the Sons were using to harass and disrupt the German supply line. Cooper was impressed by the colonel's boldness so far. The Sons of Liberty had been such a thorn in Jerry's side that they'd been forced to erect forward-operating bases—like the one taken out in JFK Park—all around the city. It was spreading the German presence thin.

“So, you can see,” said the colonel, pointing at the map, “we’ve got positions here, here, and here.”

“It’s not enough, sir,” said Cooper. He hated to say it, but there it was. “On our way in, we observed transport ships out in the bay—and they were using Logan to fly materiel and most likely troops in from Europe.”

The older man grunted. “Don’t I know it. I’ll give ‘em one thing, they’re wicked efficient. As soon as we take out an outpost or steal a load of supplies, they replace them with two more somewhere else.”

“How are you set for manpower?” said Charlie, looking around the room. “I didn’t see all that many shooters.”

The colonel grinned. “Most of my men are out on patrol—it’s nighttime, and that’s *our* time—and Jerry knows it. We’re getting new recruits every day. It’s just a trickle now, but the more they tighten their grip on the city, the more our ranks swell. Mark my words, Master Chief, we’re gonna take back this town,

with help from outside or not.”

“I believe you will, sir. But my priority is bigger than Boston.”

“Yes, the professor.” The colonel crossed his arms. “I don’t know the man.” He shrugged. “But hey, we’ll put the word out. We’ve lost a lot of good people to this damn flu. Must be half the town is in bed sick, now. From what we can tell it’s really taking a toll out west.” He shook his head. “Damn Koreans.”

“Hey! Everybody shaddup!” someone shouted. A radio was turned on in the background. “It’s the new president!”

“—likely know all too well, we are beset by a host of trials: the North Korean invasion of the West Coast, the starvation and suffering of our people across the land, and above all, the influenza which is gripping our nation and sickening so many of us.”

Cooper set his cup down and leaned over the map, willing the location of the professor to appear to him. He stared at the labyrinth of streets as he listened to his new commander in chief.

“Let me assure you, I will not rest until we as a people have utterly destroyed each of these threats. In order to do this, we must have a functioning government again, not the tyrannical boondoggle that has been created by Vice President Barron.”

“Preachin’ to the choir, brother,” muttered Charlie.

The President’s voice rose in strength. “He illegally seized power in a time of national emergency to advance his twisted political ambition—this runs counter to everything our founding fathers fought and bled for, and insults the sacrifice that every patriot in uniform has made for this country since the Revolution. “

Cooper looked up at the men gathered around the radio. Modern-day Minutemen. Scions of the Revolution. He grinned.

“I will not stand for this affront to our liberties and will stop at nothing to bring this criminal and his co-conspirators to justice!”

“Colonel, thank you for the refreshments. I think it’s time me and my boys get on with our mission. You’ve seen the radios and gear we brought...?”

“Yes, thank you, Lieutenant. We’ll put them to good use. I’ve already started to distribute the good stuff to the boys in the field. You be sure to spread the

word about us and what we're doing when you get back to...wherever you came from."

"Will do, sir." Cooper picked up his rifle. His team gathered gear and put their game faces on. "Let's go find us a professor, boys."

"YOU SON OF A BITCH!" hissed Harold James Barron, President of the United States, as he listened to Orren Harris, President of the United States. Harold was lying on a bed, draped in sheets and blankets that bore the Presidential Seal and were far too heavy to be comfortable. He lay there sweating through President Harris' speech. Harold was too weak—no thanks to *Jayne*—to lift an arm and shut off the damn radio.

Jayne left it on...bitch did that on purpose, he groused to himself.

"To that end," continued that *imposter's* voice, "I am hereby declaring that in Denver, a new seat of power shall be established during the current crisis. I urge any and all military units and commanders who are loyal to the Constitution and to the America of your birth—join us, as we formulate a strategy to take back our country. Patriot forces are growing daily in number as more and more of our brothers and sisters in arms throw off the shackles of Mr. Barron's illegal reign and join the fight."

"Stupid...*sanctimonious*...stuck-up..." Harold sputtered in an impotent rage. "Arrrrghh!" he roared in frustration, unable to move. *She left me so weak...her and Reginald*.

"Our brave men and women in uniform, scattered around the globe, fighting for your very lives, now have a new mission. Get home. Get to Denver. Take back your country. I, as your Commander in Chief, therefore order each and every one of you to take control of whatever assets you can and make all speed for home."

"Well isn't *that* nice," Harold spat.

"Commandeer aircraft and fly, capture boats and sail—steal a submarine—I don't care, just come home. Leave nothing but scorched earth in your wake. I

will not tolerate countries around the world rejoicing over our misfortune, after this great nation has done so much, for so many, for so long. Leave your bases and destroy anything you can't take with you..."

"So help me, when I get out of this *bed*—when I've dealt with Jayne and Reginald—you...are...next!" screamed the bedridden president.

"CAP, SOMEONE WAS DEFINITELY HERE," called out Zuka. He was across the airfield by an open hangar. The small airfield was evidently for private planes only—the hangars were far too small for even a single-seater fighter jet.

Captain Alston walked away from the burned husk of the stolen Apache and the body of the female Apache pilot laying on the ground. Judging by the flies on her corpse, she'd been dead a while.

Captain Alston had been happy to track the transponder on the Apache thanks to the geeks at NORAD, but the trail went cold here in Iowa. It'd been a long journey from Salmon Falls, jumping from civilian airport to civilian airport with a couple Ospreys and a squad of Marines on loan. But they were getting close to finding where Chad went. He could feel it.

"Look," said Deuce, holding up an empty ammo can. "*Russian.*" He tossed it to the captain and went rummaging around inside the hanger.

"All kinds of maps and shit in there, too. *Definitely* Ivan," said Zuka.

Captain Alston looked up from the ammo can in his hands with Cyrillic letters and watched the squad of Marines enter the adjoining hangars looking for clues. The two Ospreys assigned to his mission by the Commandant himself were idling at the far end of the runway, the flight crews already hooking up fuel tanks for their next jump.

"Captain! Think you ought to hear this..." said Deuce from inside the darkened hangar.

As he approached, Captain Alston could hear the radio Deuce was playing with broadcasting a speech. "You are hereby authorized to use whatever force you and your officers deem necessary to get home. Do what it takes and destroy

anyone or anything that gets in your way. If you can hear my voice, know this: You are on your own until you reach American soil. Just get home!”

“The hell is *that*?” asked Zuka.

“New president,” said Deuce.

“Turn it up,” said Captain Alston.

“I want to urge the good people of America to heed well President Denton’s dying wish to rise up against Mr. Barron and his European allies. As much as we appreciate the generosity and support of our European friends, we as a nation grow more and more apprehensive over what is taking place in our cities.

“The United Nations is sending more and more security personnel to patrol American cities—cities where the Constitution of the United States no longer is the supreme law of the land! Yes, I said it! It is abundantly clear that the United Nations is and has been in an alliance with Mr. Barron for some time.”

There was a dramatic pause and Captain Alston found himself holding his breath. When the new president’s voice returned, it was quieter, more constrained. More dangerous. “It is unthinkable that a bloated and incompetent organization such as the United Nations could have acted with such speed and coordination as they have shown, without extensive preparation in advance.

“Now—I know—you and I have heard all the excuses—the riots in the cities are forcing World Health Organization doctors to ask for military escorts. Food distribution locations have been mobbed. People are stealing from one another. While there have been disturbances in many of our larger cities, it is clear to me that these are merely thinly veiled excuses to increase a military presence. For truly, this large an international operation could not have been anything but premeditated. In my book, my fellow Americans, that’s an invasion—an act of war.”

“That President Harris?” asked a Marine lieutenant, trotting in from outside. “We’ve been picking up his speech out there—well, the pilots have. It’s on every channel for public broadcast.”

Captain Alston raised a hand for silence.

“You good people of New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and all the other occupied cities, fear not—we will not forget you, we will not fail you, will not

give up until we have pushed all the invaders—from whatever country they hail—back into the Atlantic...”

“Sir!” cried Zuka, behind an overturned crate. He stood up, holding a partially unfolded, well-used map.

Captain Alston took the map and looked at the title: Street Map of Charleston, South Carolina. He looked up at Zuka. “This is it,” he said.

“How you figure, sir?” asked the Marine.

Captain Alston turned around. “You know those little towns the Russians have been *assisting* in the south? They’re all marked on this map.” He held it up and showed the Marine the little red circles around the cities unfortunate enough to be under Russian control.

He spun his hand over his head. As his Rangers began to file out and run for the Ospreys, he called in the news.

“Overwatch, Hammer 2, Actual. The package is being delivered to Charleston, South Carolina. I say again, the package is being delivered to Charleston, South Carolina! We are moving to intercept, requesting immediate assistance...”

DENNY PUT down his rifle and picked up his binoculars. He was lying on a ridge to the north of town, peering down on the scrub brush that dominated the landscape north of Salmon Falls. After the battle, the last of the Russians had fled north, hoping to escape the wrath of the citizen-soldiers in the wilderness of Idaho’s Bitterroot Mountains.

“Picked the wrong town to fuck with, Ivan,” Denny muttered, watching the small figures jump and run into the bushes. He shook his head.

Damn near the entire town hunts big game here. We can track and shoot, probably better than the Russians. You don’t stand a chance, now that we’ve got momentum.

He squeezed his throat mic, a parting gift of Captain Alston and the Marines who came to hunt down Chad. “I got my group. Just north of town. They’re

heading toward the river.”

“Okay, Denny. We’ll come west and head ‘em off,” replied the voice of Anse Johnson. “Oh, you might want to turn on your radio. New president making a speech. Right up your alley.”

“Okay,” said Denny. He turned on the small radio in his pack and inserted the earbud. He really only carried it for entertainment should he get stranded somewhere on a hunt. It only needed one AAA battery and was about as big as his pinky finger. He had no trouble finding the speech—it was on every station that was still broadcasting.

“To the Sons of Liberty, to the good people of Salmon Falls, to anyone out there who is struggling under the yoke of oppression, I have a special message: do not give up the fight! We will support you in any way possible.”

Well, that’s cool. At least someone out there knows about us now...

Denny picked up his binoculars and went back to watching the Russians flee for their lives. One suddenly jerked sideways mid-jump and fell, lifeless, into a bush. A few heartbeats later, the echo of a rifle shot rolled across the valley floor and reached his ears.

“Got one!” called out Anse.

“You have my blessing as President pro tem, to do whatever is necessary to defeat the invaders and secure the freedom of yourself, your family, and your country. Look to the skies, my friends. Where we cannot send active support in the form of military personnel or jets, we will make every effort to airlift supplies to aid you in your fight for freedom.”

Denny glassed the rest of the Russians. Two were throwing their hands up in surrender. One of the men, his hands up, suddenly clutched his chest and fell over.

“We’re not taking prisoners,” Denny muttered. “Sorry about the inconvenience.” The other one fell into the brush at his feet. Two rifle shots cracked through the air.

“Citizens who find themselves in the unhappy situation of living in the occupied West, I say to you: fear not. Your fellow Americans are coming. I urge you to resist the Communists in any way you can. Take back your homes, your

cities and join the cause. Be merciless! This is our land, not theirs! If you can make your way to the new border, military personnel will be there to assist you.”

Denny smiled at the new president’s words. It was as if Grandfather had written the man’s speech. He keyed his mic. “All right everyone, that got ‘em. Now let’s go get that other group that ran west.”

A WELL-MANICURED HAND gently picked up a crystal tumbler half-full of Glenfiddich 1937 single-malt and swirled the walnut-colored liquid just so. The gold-rimmed crystal was raised to a chiseled, aristocratic face and the man closed his eyes at the first touch of fire on his tongue. He inhaled and savored the hint of cinnamon and cloves as the subtle flavor played its way through his mouth and spread warmth down his throat.

“*Exquisite*,” he murmured in a cultured, well-trained voice. He looked into the crackling fire just beyond his slippers and pulled the mink bathrobe tighter around his athletic legs.

“These northern winters can be so brutally *cold*—but this helps,” he said, examining the play of the fire’s light through his glass.

The large man in the business suit on the far wall next to the door nodded. “Yes, sir.”

He ignored the Swedish guard and looked out the frost-covered window, where the snow fell incessantly. “Ah, to be back in the summer sun of my youth.” He turned his attention back to the large screen mounted into the stone wall. The new President of the United States—such as it was—had been giving a fine speech. Quite entertaining.

“...Pray to God for peace, my fellow Americans; pray to Him for salvation, for sustenance, for the safe return of our fighting men and women overseas. But above all, pray to God for our complete and unconditional *victory*. God bless you all, and God bless this, the greatest land on Earth. Goodnight...”

“Yes,” said the man with a wolf-like smile. “By all means, pray, you American sheep. *Pray*.”

The side door opened and a woman who wore more skin than clothing sashayed into the room, silhouetted by the light streaming in through the open door. The man turned his full attention on her. Her flowing golden mane, the athletic thighs, the glorious bosom, the perfectly tanned skin. She was perfection, and he could tell by the way she moved, she knew it.

He put the crystal goblet down carefully on the silver tray next to his plush leather recliner. “Ah, my dear Jayne. It has been too long.”

She smirked at him. “You got a call.” In one smooth motion, she lifted the high-slit hem of her silk dress and unclipped a cell phone from the silky lace garter that snugly gripped her tanned thigh. She winked and tossed it to him.

“Oh, my dear, you are so good,” he said, catching the phone deftly in one hand.

She blew him a kiss and turned slowly on her high heels. “You have *no* idea.”

He waited to answer the vibrating phone and watched her stately exit from the room. “I *will*...” he promised himself with a smile. When the door closed behind his most promising agent, he shifted in his chair and cleared his throat. Only then did he click the phone on and put it to his ear.

“Yes?”

“Please hold for the President,” said a woman in a clipped voice.

“Oh, of course,” he replied, his voice dripping charm.

“Hello?” asked a new voice.

“Mr. President!” said the man, switching his voice to a thick Texan accent. “It is so lucky I got through to you.”

“Oh don’t play coy, with me, Reginald. I did just like you told me. Jesus, you’d think you’d give me a minute. I just gave the most important speech of my life—”

“I *know* you did,” he said, pronouncing *I* like *ah*. A proper Texas gentleman. “You did fine, just fine. Rallying the troops, propping up the base, all that jazz. Just *dandy*.”

“I told you, I don’t want you meddling—”

“Tut, tut, Mr. President. Have you already forgotten all that I have done for

you?”

“All you’ve done...for me?”

He sighed. “Now y’all need to just calm down. I want you to savor this moment, y’hear? I don’t want anything from you...yet.”

“I will not be beholden to—”

“Aw, hush now, Mr. President. Ain’t nobody said nuthin’ about no one bein’ beholden to anyone. We’ll call it...a favor. You *do* remember who got you that Speaker’s position, now, don’t you...?”

There was silence on the other end.

“And you do remember who happened to make certain...shall we say...*infusions* of cash...that suddenly put California into play for the opposition? So much in play, in fact, that our dearly departed President Denton needed to travel there urgently...right in the middle of this nasty flu business...”

More silence. Then, “What do you want, Reginald?”

Reginald laughed, his best impersonation of a good ol’ boy with a belly bustin’ guffaw. He feigned innocence. “Oh, right now, nuthin’...but we’ll keep in touch. I just wanted to tell y’all congratulations on a fine speech.”

“Goodbye, Reginald.”

“Alrighty then, Mr. President. Y’all take care, now.” He clicked off the phone and placed it delicately on the silver platter next to his brandy. He picked up the crystal and stared into the fire for a moment as he swirled the exquisitely expensive single-malt, lost in thought. A nice long sip of his favorite elixir began to chase away the doubts.

He saw the future of America in the flames.

Reginald smiled and cleared his throat. “I do so love the winter sports up here,” he said in his cultured, proper voice. Pretending to be a Texan always left his throat sore. The way those Americans talked...it was simply barbaric.

“Yes, sir,” replied the guard.

Reginald sighed. “Run along now and fetch me someone to warm my bed, would you?” He lifted the crystal tumbler and swirled the Glenfiddich with an expert hand. He sniffed the delicate aroma and closed his eyes in pleasure.

“A redhead this time, I think. I wish to kiss the flames tonight.” He took a sip

of Scotch. “What’s her name? Charlotte?” He nodded. “Yes, that one. She’s eager enough, don’t you think?”

“Yes, sir,” replied the guard’s deep voice, totally void of emotion.

Reginald laughed softly. “As if you would know. Go on, fetch.” He chuckled to himself again as the guard lumbered out of the room and shut the door quietly. Reginald took another sip of his *aqua vitae*. Everything was coming together as he had planned, just a little later than he had originally hoped. A sudden frown creased his high-born face.

Barron had been an abject failure—that much was plain to see. Still...the fool might be of some use in the coming chaos. Reginald filed that thought away and promised himself he would ponder that little gem of an idea another time. He sighed and let his fingers idly trace the gold rim of the glass at his side.

Harris would fix all that Barron had wrecked. Reginald would see to it personally this time. He would see America in ashes for what the corrupted and childish country had done to him, to his family. He was so close...Everything hinged on the flu and how long it took to mutate—if it mutated. Viruses were such fickle little things. He much preferred bullets and bombs, but one must use what one has, he supposed.

The Source was at last in the possession of his close business associates. The missing vials concerned him, but he was comforted by the thought that the imbecilic North Koreans were close to meeting their objectives and the Chinese would likely be pulled into the widening conflict.

Perhaps, he thought idly, he would be even luckier and the foolish Americans would kill each other in a civil war. Either way—through plague or war—America would fall, and she would burn. And he had lit the match.

Reginald looked once more into the flames and felt the smile return to his face.

THE SAGA CONTINUES...

The story isn't over! To see what's happening in different parts of the country, read the novella [*False Prey*](#)—you can find it wherever fine ebooks are sold, or you can join my mailing list to get a copy!

After *False Prey*, be sure to check out [*The Shift*](#), Book II in the *Wildfire Saga*, which picks up where *Apache Dawn* left off. *The Shift* is available with ever major ebook vendor, so pick your platform and get reading!

THE WILDFIRE SAGA

- 0. The Source
- 1. Apache Dawn
- 1.5 False Prey
- 2. The Shift
- 3. Firestorm
- 5. Oathkeeper
- 6. The Regent (2018)

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The inspiration for *Apache Dawn* and the future books of the *Wildfire Saga* (which began life titled *Oath of Office*) came from a news story I read sometime in 2013 about a virologist in Europe who was creating an international controversy. He had been successful in manipulating the genetic code of avian influenza viral strains to make them survive in the air and become unrecognizable by the human immune system.

I thought it incredibly arrogant of man—as a species—to think that we could modify something so potentially hazardous as the avian flu to be even more dangerous, without repercussions or fear.

What was so bad about this research, this modification? Well the virologist wanted to force the flu strain to mutate faster than it would in nature, into a highly contagious, airborne version especially dangerous to humans. A perfect killer.

Why??

In theory, it was because the scientific community wanted to see how the virus mutates—so that when it does so for real, scientists will be able to create a vaccine to target the strain and be ready and waiting in ambush, so to speak.

Okay, so we're going to ambush the flu. But...

What if...(you knew that was coming) some bad guys—like, I don't know, Al Qaeda, the Taliban, Iran, or maybe North Korea (*ahem*)—found out how these scientists created this uber-flu? (By the way, the guy in charge of this experiment wanted to publish his findings in an international medical journal.)

Common sense says the bad guys would weaponize it as fast as possible.

And thus, the story you just read was born.

As for the Department of Defense Directive in Chapter 28, it's real. Do a Google look-up on Directive No. 3025.18 and prepare to be amazed.

Sometimes, the truth really is stranger than fiction.

Marcus Richardson

August 22, 2014

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No man is an island, or so the saying goes. I would like to thank so many people that helped bring this book into existence, I fear I would need to write another volume just for the acknowledgements. So here's the abridged version:

Without the love and support—and some good-natured joshing—of my wonderful wife, I wouldn't have even attempted to write this book. Whenever I slowed down or ran out of a momentum, she was there to give me a shove in the back. Nothing says 'love' like “Stop screwing around and get back to work!”

All kidding aside, my wife is awesome.

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I need now make special mention of a certain shady character that goes by the handle “Rotag”. He volunteered to be my primary beta reader (and editor), so if you find any stupid mistakes in this book, it's his fault. Just kidding—he's a

great guy and really went out of his way to help me make this book as polished as possible. I assure you, any mistakes in this book are purely my own.

As for the rest of my family and friends—you know who you are—I hope I have expressed how very much I value your continued support and encouragement for my writing.

THANK YOU.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MARCUS GRADUATED FROM the University of Delaware and later earn his law degree. Since then, he has at times been employed (or not) as: a highly over-qualified stock boy, cashier, department manager at a home furnishings store, assistant manager with a national arts and crafts chain, an acting store manager with the same chain, an unemployed handyman, husband, cook, groundskeeper, spider-killer extraordinaire, stay-at-home-dad, and writer.

He currently lives with his wife, children, and one cheeky vizsla in Illinois—and he couldn't be happier you're taking the time to read this.

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