

AMERICAN



FIREFIGHT

a thriller
by
Warren Fisher

“Kill a man, and you are an assassin.
Kill millions of men, and you are a conqueror.
Kill everyone, and you are a god.”

Jean Rostand, Pensees d'un biologiste, 1939

Chapter 1

Middle of nowhere. Shitville, USA.

The small Californian town of Eureka clung to the Nevada border, squatting beneath sawtooth peaks that cut across the horizon. Blasted by hot desert winds, baked by the fiery sun overhead, life crawled by in the shadows.

In the town's Main Street a Sheriff's Department squad car lay parked, pulled up hard against the kerb.

Deputy Dwayne Deakins tried to ignore the braying of his new boss's voice from the driver's seat next to him. Dwayne prided himself on his lean, muscular build and was disgusted by the corpulent, sweaty figure beside him. Sheriff Roy Wallis slumped in his seat munching doughnuts from the box on his knees, sugar frosting his lips.

Dwayne was beginning to regret transferring from the LA County Sheriff's Department, something he'd done just to appease his wife's constant fears (and endless fucking nagging). Now he was stuck here, aged only 24, in this dead-end job, in a sleepy town surrounded by redneck retards.

"Yup, you done right movin' here Dwayne," crowed Wallis, "This ain't LA, we don't fuck around with the freaks here. One time, a while back, we had these tree-huggin' environmentalists up here, protestin' somethin' or other. Well we went up there and the dumb fucks had chained themselves to the trees and what have you, so we got our mace sprays and gripped these creeps in headlocks and sprayed it right into there eyes. A couple of the guys even got Q-tips, covered them with mace and smeared them right on their eyeballs. Well one of these fuckers had secretly videoed the whole thing and when the media got a hold of it, they went fuckin' nuts. So the ACLU and the other fuckwit liberals were screaming for blood and the TV people come up here and interview my predecessor as Sheriff and Mayor Quint, expecting excuses and apologies. But you know what? They were proud as hell, bragged to these journalists, said they'd do it again tomorrow, said us boys were heroes, had done them

proud. So them same journalists then go and interview the folks of Eureka, right on this street, and damned if they didn't agree!"

Wallis bellowed with laughter and Dwayne winced.

"We became national heroes. I was even elected Sheriff on the fact I was one of the officers who fucked up them environmentalists. And fact of the matter is we ain't been bothered by any such troublemakers again."

"Yeah, I remember seeing something about in on *60 Minutes* or something."

Wallis chuckled away, while Dwayne continued staring out of the car window.

Across the street he watched two men emerge from the bank and head towards a parked black Bronco. Both men were tall, over six-foot, lean and tough looking, and although dressed in expensive, well-tailored suits, had a definite military bearing. The younger one was around thirty with blond hair shorn back against his scalp. His face was tough and impassive. It was the older man who drew Dwayne's closest attention. Although around 50, he was still lean and tough. His grey hair was cropped short, his face leathery and craggy, skin drawn tight over his long face, accentuating his high cheekbones and blade-like nose. Even from that distance, Dwayne could make out his icy-blue eyes, hungrily scanning and sweeping the street, while his face remained utterly emotionless.

Dwayne watched closely as the two men split, each covering the other as they slid around to separate sides of the Bronco and slipped inside, the older man taking the wheel.

"Hey, Sheriff did you see those two guys, just got in the Bronco?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Their faces rang a bell and they were acting mighty strange."

"They weren't from around here, never seen them before. Probably just businessmen, we get all sorts around here these days, we're kind of a boom town." Wallis chuckled.

“Businessmen my ass, those guys looked more like soldiers or some kinda scary shit. I’m sure their descriptions match something came in on the Teletype in the last coupla days, specially the older guy.”

“Dwayne, you’re full of shit!” Wallis snorted, wiping sugar from his fleshy lips.

Dwayne watched as the Bronco lit up its tires and tore away from the kerb.

“Sheriff, maybe we should pull them over?”

“For what?” Wallis moaned, then sighed and shrugged. “Okay, Dwayne, seeing as you’re new, I’ll humour you. We’ll tail them for a while.”

Sheriff Wallis shifted the cruiser into gear and peeled away from the kerb.

Trailing behind at a discrete distance, the Sheriff casually drove single handed, slouched back in his seat, left arm out the window, elbow resting on the sill, hand tapping a merry tattoo on the car’s roof, a big smirk on his face. Dwayne grabbed his clipboard from the dash counter and began leafing through his thick collection of paper.

“Just let me know when you’ve figured it all out, hotshot!” Wallis chuckled away, highly fucking amused with himself.

Meanwhile, up ahead in the Bronco, the younger man craned his neck to check the rear-view mirror.

“We’ve got company, sir.”

“I know, Larsen, I’m already on top of it.” The older man replied, his eyes never leaving the road ahead.

“What’ll we do?”

“What’ll we do about what? Some dumb, redneck cop wants to take a look us over, let him. If he pulls us over, I’ll take care of it. Just keep cool.”

In the squad car, Dwayne angrily tore back and forth through his papers.

“No luck, hotshot?” Wallis was clearly enjoying himself.

“It’s in here somewhere, I swear. Something from the Feds.”

“Tell you what, we’ll pull ‘em over, just to show you how things are done around here.”

“Thanks, Sheriff.”

Wallis flicked a switch on the dashboard, filling the air with the siren’s wail, the red bubble atop the car lighting up.

“Shit!” The young man in the Bronco snarled, jerking his head around.

“Keep cool, let me do the talking, but be ready to go on my signal if it gets hot.”

The older man eased his foot off the accelerator and guided the Bronco towards the side of the road.

The two vehicles were well clear of the city limits, alone out in the dusty expanse of the desert. The squad car slipped in behind the Bronco on the roadside, pulling in snug. In the desert’s hot, blistering silence Dwayne could clearly hear the crackle of the cruiser’s leather seats and the popping of the stationary vehicles.

“Run his plates.” Wallis ordered curtly, shifting his mass as he popped his door and clambered out.

While Dwayne radioed in and waited for a reply, Sheriff Wallis settled his brown smokey-bear hat on his head and straightened his gun-belt and glanced down at his holstered stainless steel .357 Colt Python revolver. The youngsters today, like his deputies, preferred automatics, but Wallis found something reassuring about the straightforwardness and heft of a revolver. He reached down and unsnapped the strap on his holster, took a deep breath and looked about him at the shimmering desert.

“It’s clean, Sheriff.” Dwayne’s voice shattered his reverie.

“Let’s do it then!” Wallis sighed, drawing his sunglasses from his breast pocket and pulling them on.

Dwayne climbed from the car and began to move down along the hood of his car to position himself. As he watched the Sheriff walk slowly up to the Bronco’s driver’s window,

hand resting on the butt of his revolver, Dwayne reached down and unsnapped his holster and rested his hand on the solid grip of his Glock 9mm semi-automatic pistol.

The driver's window descended with a gentle purr.

"How can we help you, Officer?" Dwayne heard the warm, friendly voice of the driver clearly in the stillness of the desert air.

"That's Sheriff, asshole!" Wallis snarled.

Dwayne winced with embarrassment and glanced back at the squad car. From where he was standing he thought he caught a glimpse of something white jutting out from beneath his seat. He edged backwards, occasionally glancing back to the Bronco, but was relieved to hear the driver apologise, apparently unoffended.

"I'm sorry, Sheriff."

"Let me see your driver's license and insurance!" barked Wallis.

"Of course, Sheriff."

Dwayne leaned down into the squad car. It was a piece of paper, just as he had thought, and he bent to retrieve it. He lifted the slightly grubby, type-written page and began to read.

FBI BULLETIN TO ALL LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES:

BE ON LOOKOUT FOR ONE JOHN ULLRICH, DOB 15/6/48, MALE CAUCASIAN,
GRAY/BLOND HAIR, BLUE EYES (SEE PICTURE BELOW)

Dwayne glanced at the grainy picture, confirming his ID of the Bronco driver as this Ullrich, his eyes flicking back to the bulletin.

US ARMY (RET.)

WANTED FOR QUESTIONING IN CONNECTION WITH:

GRAND THEFT AUTO

ILLEGAL ARMS SALES

THEFT OF GOVERNMENT PROPERTY

ILLEGAL OWNERSHIP OF PROHIBITED WEAPONS

PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION OF COUNTERFEIT CURRENCY

CAUSING EXPLOSIONS

BANK ROBBERY

ASSAULT

ATTEMPTED MURDER

MURDER (INCLUDING DEATHS OF 5 POLICE OFFICERS AND 2 FEDERAL AGENTS)

Dwayne dropped the paper and span around, grabbing for his pistol.

“Sheriff!” he screamed, Wallis looking back angrily.

“What the fuck now, Dwayne?” he snarled, but seeing his deputy’s wild, panic-filled eyes and his hand coming up holding his Glock, he gripped his revolver, drawing it from his holster and spinning around to face the driver.

“Freeze!” he screamed, but he saw he was too late. The driver was smiling, his hand smoothly rising, gripping the tiny subcompact Glock 26 semi-automatic pistol. The driver fired off three quick rounds, the first catching Sheriff Wallis in the base of the throat, the second ripping open his neck just below the jawline, and the final bullet smashing through his sunglasses’ left lens, tearing through his eye and into his brain, killing him instantly.

Dwayne watched as blood and brain matter exploded out of the back of the Sheriff’s head and he crumpled to the ground, the faint red mist hanging in the air.

“Oh, Jesus!” Dwayne gulped dryly.

The Deputy heard a pop as the passenger door of the Bronco swung open and he spun and fired off a wild round that shattered the door window behind the young blond man. He glanced back at the shattered window behind him, then turned, his face still blank, but a thin smile plucking at his lips. Dwayne glanced down at the man’s hands, in which he held the unmistakable, compact shape of a Colt Commando automatic rifle, the foreshortened version

of the military M16. He had already seated a long, curved 30 round magazine and was yanking back the charging handle.

“Shit!” screamed Dwayne and dived for the ground as the air around him exploded. Frantically he scrambled on his hands and knees back along the cruiser, lunging behind the cover of his open passenger door.

Gasping for breath, clutching his pistol with one hand he reached out with the other, not sure if he was going for the pump-action shotgun propped inside the car or the radio. His hand found the radio and he stabbed the call button.

“This is Oscar Victor One, officer down, I repeat officer down!”

“Can you repeat, Oscar Victor One?”

“This is Dwayne, the fuckin’ Sheriff’s dead, I need help, I’m on Highway 11, please...”

Suddenly Dwayne’s world seemed to explode. Glass, metal shards and red-hot supersonic rounds tore through the air as the gunman methodically shredded the squad car. There was the zing and screech of metal as the car rocked back and forth, occasionally a tire exploding. When he emptied one magazine he simply reloaded and continued pouring fire into the vehicle, chewing it up from head to tail.

Dwayne scrambled backwards, his butt dragging along the ground, sobs and cries pouring from his mouth, blindly fleeing until he tumbled backwards into a roadside ditch.

Coughing out a mouthful of dust he struggled to right himself, groping for his gun in the dirt, but unable to find it he scrambled away on his hands and knees until he collapsed sobbing in the dust.

Lying still he realised the gunfire had halted and he heard what must have been the driver’s voice.

“Leave him, Larsen, we don’t have time, there’ll be more of them coming.”

Dwayne peeked over the edge of the ditch and saw the younger man yank what looked like a canister shaped grenade from his belt, pulled the pin and tossed it through the cruiser's shattered windshield. He turned and dived into the Bronco as the driver lit up its tires and tore away with a screech.

The incendiary grenade exploded, the car briefly jumping clear of the ground before crashing down and collapsing in on itself in white-hot flames.

Dwayne watched the Bronco fade into the distant shimmering heat haze and fell back into the ditch sobbing, burying his face in his hands.

In the distance came the wail of police sirens and the roar of approaching vehicles.

* * *

“Jesus Christ! What now, head for the state-line?” shouted the young blond man, Larsen, over the roar of the Bronco's engine.

“Well that's usually the best plan, but we just offed a cop, not only will we have all the local police, sheriff departments and highway patrol on our ass, but they've probably already notified the Nevada cops, they'll just be sitting at the border waiting for us. Also give them enough time we'll have choppers, SWAT teams, even the Feds all over our asses.”

Ullrich's eyes stayed calmly fixed on the road ahead.

“What's the plan then, sir?”

Ullrich laughed dryly; “Well it's kind of a work in progress.” He glanced at his companion, “No, first we're gonna skate along the edge of the state-line, check it out, but we'll probably have to go off-road to find an unmonitored area, then slip across and go to ground. It's all reliant on how smart these cops... Shit!”

Over a small rise just ahead two highway patrol cars appeared. Ullrich yanked the steering wheel around and fishtailed the Bronco a full 180-degree turn and jammed his foot down hard on the accelerator.

“Not so slack after all, eh? Tool me up, Larsen.”

The younger man leant over his seat and rifled through the bundled supplies in the back. He grabbed a Mini-SAF sub-machine gun, a short stubby weapon with no butt and a fixed forward grip, and snapped in 20 round magazine and yanked back the cocking handle.

“Unsafe it, three-round bursts.” Ullrich snapped, his face set in grim resolution.

Larsen complied and handed the weapon across, the driver taking it in his right hand and laying across his lap. The younger man meanwhile checked his Commando’s clip, reseated it and pulled back the charging handle. He seemed to find comfort in the routine. Silently the two men sat together, behind them the two squad cars clung to their tail, ahead, as yet unseen, the closing pack of Sheriff’s Deputies.

“Here they come!” said Ullrich as a group of police cruisers and 4x4s emerged as an unbroken phalanx across the horizon, rushing at them head-on.

Ullrich took the Mini-SAF in his left hand and stuck it out of his side window. Next to him Larsen raised his Colt Commando automatic rifle, braced himself, and aimed directly through his own windshield at the closing group.

“Let’s do it!” snapped Ullrich.

Both men opened up, The driver squeezing off three-round bursts from his sub-machine gun; Larsen initially firing single shots, the bullets punching through the windshield. As they closed still further, Larsen opened up on full auto, squeezing off short, controlled bursts.

Suddenly ahead, a squad car’s windshield dissolved in an eruption of glass and blood, sending the vehicle slewing across the road and slamming into another cruiser, flipping the second car clear over.

Ullrich emptied his gun and tossed it back onto his lap, and shouted, "Hold on!" and jerked the steering wheel hard over. The Bronco skidded left across the nose of a Sheriff's department 4x4, so close Larsen could see the two Deputies horrified faces through his open side window. Bringing around his Commando, he squeezed off a long burst, the rounds ripping along the length of the windshield, ripping the occupants apart.

The Bronco was now off the road, heading across the rough desert floor, Ullrich having engaged the four-wheel-drive. In his mirror he could see the remaining squad cars floundering, dropping away as they struggled across the unforgiving terrain. However there were still three 4x4s on their tail.

Ullrich looked across at Larsen, reloading his weapon.

"Get in the back, take them out!" he ordered.

The younger man began climbing back over his seat.

"Leave the Commando, use the SAW."

Larsen looked back, a broad smile on his face, then clambered into the rear. Kneeling he uncovered the big M249 machine gun, or Squad Automatic Weapon, from beneath its tarpaulin. He took a large two hundred round box magazine and slid it home and yanked back the cocking handle. Tossing away his dark glasses, he lay back in the tail of the vehicle, his back against the rear of the seats, facing out the rear of the Bronco.

Taking a deep breath, Larsen braced himself, then lunged out with both feet twice, sending the tailgate flying open. In that instant he saw the three 4x4s, all closely placed, right there before him. Before the Deputies knew what was happening, Larsen had opened up.

The torrent of automatic fire ripped into all three vehicles, Larsen with his feet braced inside the rear doorframe, guided the weapon back and forth in a gentle arcing action. The two closest vehicles were shredded by the torrent of 5.56mm rounds, metal, paint and glass clouded the air, the human occupants torn apart and the two crashed into each other, tangled into a single mangled heap. The last vehicle lasted only slightly longer as Larsen

turned and opened up again, the fire this time concentrated on a single target. The vehicle shuddered and shrieked, then suddenly erupted into a fireball. The dead, burning hulk slowly rolled to a halt.

Soon the carnage faded from sight, only the black smoke now visible hanging in the air. Larsen clambered back into the front passenger seat, beaming like a schoolboy.

“What now, sir?” he asked.

“I’m afraid that probably only bought us some time, they’ll already have choppers in the air.” Ullrich paused and looked across, “We’re going to have to split up.”

“But, sir...”

“That’s an order, Captain. Now round up your gear, we haven’t got long.”

“Yes, sir.”

Larsen leant back over his seat and began sorting through their supplies.

“Get your BDU, rations and ammo, you may have to go to ground for days. Also, as well as your side-arm and the Commando, take the MSG90 and day and night sights, you may need to set up a sniping position. Get the ghillie suit too.”

Larsen sat up holding the long Heckler and Koch sniping rifle in one hand, in the other a pack containing his gear, rolled up on top the ‘ghillie’ sniper suit, a loose jumpsuit covered with strips of camouflaged cloth to blur a shooter’s outline, conferring an almost shapeless invisibility.

“I could keep them tied up for hours if I dug myself in with this, I could buy you some time...”

“Negative on that!” snapped Ullrich, “They’ll be following me in the vehicle, you are to go to ground, keep your head down. Avoid all contact. We can both still make it out of here. I want you to head to the rendezvous in 48 hours from now, if I don’t show in 12 head back to base, they’ll know what to do.” He paused and looked across at Larsen’s questioning

eyes and added as an afterthought, “If I make it out I’ll be there in 48 hours, wait 12, if you don’t show I’ll head back to base.”

Larsen nodded, gathered his kit on his lap, slinging a pack over his shoulder. Ullrich swerved between two rocky hillocks and slowed the Bronco to a crawl.

“Good luck, Captain.”

Larsen popped his door and looked back, “Goodbye, Colonel.”

Then he was gone, simply dropping from the moving vehicle. Ullrich leant across and shut the door. Reaching inside his jacket, he unsnapped his belt holster and drew out his HK P7 M13 semi-automatic pistol, checked it, then it slid back into its holster, leaving it unfastened.

Taking a deep breath, he settled back in his seat and fixed his eyes on the ground ahead. Over the roar of the Bronco’s engine he could hear the approaching throb of helicopter rotors and he knew his time was short.

* * *

Warm wind blew through the ragged hole in the windshield, the dusty air washing over Ullrich’s grim, resolute face. Overhead he could hear the pounding of the chopper, as it swept back and forth.

Ullrich knew they were just driving him into a trap, but he had already decided that he would determine the site for the final showdown.

Overhead came the crackle of static, then the electronically distorted sound of an amplified voice broadcast from the PA on the helicopter, “This is the Police, halt your vehicle immediately, step out with you hands up, or we will be forced to open fire.”

Ullrich knew the time had come and he gripped the steering wheel tightly as the slightly elevated highway came into view.

There was a burst of gunfire from above, dirt exploded around the speeding Bronco. A string of shots tore across the hood. Steam erupted from the engine, as the radiator blew, a thick, white cloud washing back over the windshield, pouring through the shattered glass, choking Ullrich.

The Bronco shuddered and howled, the stench of burning oil filling the air, but Ullrich jammed his foot down even harder on the accelerator, in one last desperate effort.

The vehicle slammed into the elevated bank of the highway, launching itself into the air, then crashing down on the asphalt road surface. Ullrich slammed on the brakes sending the Bronco into a short, sweeping skid, finally coming to rest shrouded in a billowing cloud of dust.

Inside the crippled Bronco, Ullrich hastily stripped off his suit jacket and tie and grabbed hold of the flak jacket beside him. Climbing out of the vehicle he tugged the body-armour on, jerking the zip up and reaching back inside the cab.

Overhead, the Highway Patrol officer gripped the AR15, a semi-automatic version of the military M16, and sitting half slung out of the chopper's door, screamed to the pilot, "Take us in closer, I'll take out this motherfucker!"

The Bell Jet Ranger swept around and bore down on the shattered Bronco and the small figure of the driver emerging from the cab.

The Officer with the AR15 took careful aim, a grin on his face.

"Just a little closer... Shit! Pull up, pull up!" The Cop's voice rose to a shriek as he watched the fast approaching figure bringing up what was unmistakably a light machine gun.

Ullrich hefted the M249 around, drawing a bead on the chopper as it flailed wildly; it's engines shrieking. Too late, thought Ullrich and squeezed the trigger.

The machine gun bucked wildly in his arms, but he steadied his aim, pouring concentrated fire directly into the exposed belly of the chopper, flame leaping two-feet from the end of the muzzle.

The helicopter staggered, shuddering under the repeated blows. Inside, the pilot and the two police officers were torn apart, the high velocity rounds tearing easily through the unarmoured chopper, blood, then smoke filling the now lifeless cockpit.

Smoke and flame poured from the helicopter as it went into a final, frantic spin, spiralling out of control over the desert floor, until it crashed into a low rocky butte.

Ullrich turned and considered seeking a fresh box magazine for the M249, but it was too late as he already heard the police sirens approaching.

In the distance, from both directions, came two fleets of police cars, bearing down on him with lethal intent. Ullrich glanced at the shattered Bronco. He wasn't going anywhere; this was where he would make his stand.

He unsnapped the M249's bipod and braced himself across the hood of the Bronco, taking aim at one of the approaching groups and opening up. Ejected brass casings spiralling away through the air and clattered around his feet.

The cars began to scatter off the road, seeking cover, but not before paying a heavy price. One squad car was shredded, bullets chewing up metal and glass, the hood torn up and blown back over the roof. The shattered vehicle spun out of control and crashed into its neighbour, the two vehicles tumbling off the road in a cloud of dust and smoke.

Ullrich spun around on his heel and opened up on the already scattering second group. Bullets tore into the vehicles, but most managed to escape the road, but one car was too slow, bullets riddling it from nose to tail, glass and metal shredded, tires exploding. Slowly the car rolled to a stop, both vehicle and occupants dead.

The M249 clacked dry and Ullrich tossed it into the Bronco's cab and retrieved his Commando automatic rifle. Already sporadic pistol and shotgun fire peppered his position, but the range hindered their accuracy and punch, but he knew once they opened up with their AR15s and started moving in, he was finished.

Ullrich pulled three grenades from his pack, along with some extra magazines for his Commando, and slung them from the pouches on his flak jacket.

He stood, raised the assault rifle to his shoulder and squeezed off a short burst first one way then the other. Dropping back to one knee he tugged one grenade from his jacket, pulled the pin and dropped it only feet away from him. He rose, firing again one way, then the other, before there was a pop and purple smoke swirled up from the grenade over him until he was engulfed.

Ullrich emptied his magazine, popped it and jammed home a fresh one and yanked back the charging handle. He passed the rifle to his left hand and pulled out another grenade, pulled the pin and tossed it into the Bronco's cab, then took off at a sprint.

Holding his rifle ready, two-handed across his chest, he emerged from the smoke and began to weave to evade any fire, when he heard the white phosphorous grenade explode, it's searing flames igniting the fuel and detonating the ammunition and explosives aboard the Bronco. The fierce explosion shook the air and the crack and blasts resounded off each other as the ammo cooked off.

"Down, down!" Ullrich heard from the approaching cops.

He pumped his knees, breathing fiercely in and out, as he tore across the open desert, closing on the rocky dip ahead, the only cover.

"I see him!" A cry came from behind and immediately semi-automatic fire opened up from the roadside. Bullets tore through the air around Ullrich, the dusty ground exploding about his feet. Just a little further, he thought. Suddenly he felt a sharp blow to his left thigh, a searing heat tearing through his flesh, and he fell.

The next thing Ullrich knew he was on his face in the dirt and he realised he must have blacked out for an instant. Pain pounded through his left leg and he raised his head and spat dirt from his mouth. Bullets still tore into the ground around him.

He tried to struggle to his feet, but his leg was useless, the bone probably broken. He rolled over and saw the fast approaching cops, swarming across the desert plain. He reached up and tore the last smoke grenade from his jacket and tossed it feebly away past his feet in the direction of the cops.

The purple smoke popped and swept over the plain, blotting out Ullrich's attackers. As their gunfire intensified, he began to crawl backwards, pausing occasionally to squeeze off a brief burst from his rifle.

His back met a tall, smooth rock and he pulled himself straight against it, facing his oncoming enemy. He glanced down at his shattered leg, blood pumping from an obvious arterial wound. He wasn't going to make the cover of that dip or anywhere else, this was as far as he was going.

Smiling grimly he squeezed off the last of the ammo from the magazine in his Commando, popped it and slipped in his last.

The smoke was clearing, the hazy figures milling closer all the time. This is it, thought Ullrich, and he opened up. He worked the rifle back and forth, squeezing off short, controlled bursts. Through the thinning smoke he saw figures going down, blown backwards, spun around and dropped, whole groups scythed down. The rest hit the dirt and returned fire.

As Ullrich's rifle clattered empty, the incoming fire intensified. As his world exploded, a burst of fire tore into his left shoulder, ripping it open. He screamed in agony, his rifle spinning away.

Coughing and choking, he yanked the HK P7 from his holster and opened up indiscriminately with his pistol.

"Come and get me, you motherfuckers!" he howled, emptying the 13 rounds held in the clip. The slide locked back, Ullrich just shook the gun impotently and slid slowly down the blood-splattered rock.

Slowly the cops moved in around him, surrounding him, their guns trained down on him.

Ullrich peered up and the nearest cop jacked a shell into his shotgun.

“Let’s just waste the fucker!” he growled.

“No. I don’t think so.” The group parted and a dark-suited figure moved forward.

“I want this man, alive.”

Ullrich peered up at the figure, silhouetted in the sunlight.

“Oh, shit!” he slipped into unconsciousness.

Chapter 2

The warm, dusty wind swept down from the Sierra Nevada across the stark white fortress of the Walker Federal Penitentiary. As the desert sun scorched the blistering paint from the towering buildings, John Ullrich stretched out on the bleachers in the prison yard. Perched atop the highest seats, he stretched out his long legs and let the warmth soothe the kinks from his body.

After two months in a LA hospital, surrounded by heavily armed Federal Marshals, he had been declared fit enough for the two hundred-mile journey to Walker, where he had been placed in the prison infirmary. After a couple of weeks of ease he had been put back in general pop.

The yard was filled with throngs of orange-clad men, the roars and sheer animal noise of these hundreds of inmates rising up into the clear azure heavens. A loose game of baseball was taking place across the ways, other men pumped iron, working out beneath the fierce sun, their tattooed skin cooking. Some men played handball on the scarred courts; old T-shirts wrapped around their hands as they slammed the ball back and forth. Elsewhere men just clustered in groups, talking and scheming.

All this would appear completely normal to the casual onlooker, but upon closer inspection a more telling fact was noticeable. Each group, whether talking or playing, was clearly segregated by race. In the northern part of the yard, where Ullrich sat, all the faces were conspicuously white, while the south was exclusively black. The east and west areas were largely Latino.

In extremis man tends to revert to his primordial, tribal self.

Gazing up, Ullrich watched the guards patrolling the high walls that caged in the raging masses below. Squinting, he watched closely as the armed officers ambled past each other, occasionally stopping to pass a few words, before moving on. Their eyes hungrily following the to and fro below. The blue-clad federal guards watched the flow of the orange

tide below them, awaiting any sudden storm, each stood ready, armed with Mossberg M500 Persuader 12-gauge shotguns and AR15 semi-automatic assault rifles. Beneath the peaks of their blue baseball caps their cold eyes watched and waited for the chance to use their hardware.

Inside the walls, the inmates ran their own world; a world based on the hardest Darwinian principles. Fuck or be fucked. Don't expect any help from the guards, they just enjoyed watching. Like animals in a zoo, the keepers laying bets on who'd last longest. Hell created by some fucking Dante working in the Federal government

A sudden uproar from the south yard drew Ullrich's attention. In amongst the mass of black faces he saw a single white man appear, moving serenely through the jostling mob. Ullrich sat forward and watched the unfolding drama. The white inmate was a young man, around mid to late twenties, tall and slim, brown hair buzzed short, his face pale and thin. He moved with a mixture of cocksure assurance and diffident naiveté, head held high, eyes straight ahead, as if oblivious to the storm engulfing him.

"Yo, motherfucker, where the fuck you think you goin'?" snarled one of the mob surrounding the inmate.

"Just taking a walk, heading over the north side." The young man replied blithely.

"That's good, that's where you belong, motherfucker. You best get your ass on over there quick, boy and don't let me see your sorry fucking face over here again, less you lookin' for trouble!"

"Good a way as any to go." The man slowly ambled on.

"You said it, motherfucker!"

A huge, shaven-headed man reached out and grabbed the prisoner by the shoulder, spinning him around, his fist raised ready to strike. The white man kicked out sideways, the flat of his foot stabbing into the prisoner's straightened knee, driving it sharply back on itself with a savage crack. With a howl the man went down, the white man already turning, just

ahead of the seething mob. Curling his body and spinning on his toes, his fist stabbed out twice, hitting two would-be assailants and dropping them immediately. Another swung wildly at him; he parried the blow away with his left arm and slammed his fist into the man's face, shattering his nose. He went down, hands to his bloody face. A big figure grasped the white inmate from behind and locked him in a headlock as a second man closed from the front. He watched the man reach inside his shirt, as if for a shank. The young man slammed his foot down on his captor's instep and drove his elbow back into his stomach, loosening the man's hold upon him. Half turning, he seized a hold of the gasping man and tossed him easily over his shoulder, sending him crashing into the approaching attacker, impaling him on the crude blade of the shank. A glint of light caught his eye from behind and he slammed his elbow back into an approaching attacker, seizing his outstretched arm, straightening it, then jerking it back upon itself with a crack, grabbing the crude knife as he went down.

Spinning around, he brandished the shank, howling with rage.

"OK, which one of you cocksuckers is next?" A maniacal glint filled his eyes and spittle flecked his lips.

Two shotgun blasts rent the air and a voice boomed from the prison PA.

"Break it up, down below, step away, or we will be forced to open fire!"

Grumbling spread through the black mob. Slowly they began to disperse, one man pulling at his reluctant friend's arm.

"Leave it man, this motherfucker's psycho!"

The mob and the prisoner turned, moving quickly away on their separate courses, he to the north, they back into heart of their area in the south.

The prisoner hastily wiped the handle of the shank with his shirtsleeve and dropped it into the dust as he moved.

The electric gates slid open and a squad of guards brandishing batons, pump-action shotguns held at port-arms and wearing full riot gear, dashed into the yard, too late to do

anything but clear up the mess. The white prisoner crossed over into the north yard and was swallowed up by his brethren, while the blacks milled amongst each other, suddenly afflicted by mass amnesia.

Cursing, the guards inspected the scattered injured lying in the dust and called in the medics from the infirmary who stretchered away the bleeding, sullen vanquished. The guards returned to their watchtowers and the reports were completed, concluding yet another fight among the black inmates.

Slowly the yard returned to normal. Perched atop the bleachers, Ullrich scanned the crowds for the young prisoner. Then he spotted him, emerging from the mass, heading towards his position.

As the young inmate moved past the foot of the bleachers, Ullrich called out.

“Nice going, kid. You know how to handle yourself.”

The younger man paused and squinted up at the silhouetted figure.

“Yeah?”

“Best way to get yourself killed though. Where’d you learn to fight, Marine Corps or Army?”

“Army, 101st Airborne.”

“No shit, Screaming Eagles, me too, way back, and the 82nd, then Special Forces. You must have really fucked up to end up here, man!”

“Looks like I ain’t the only one.”

Ullrich studied the young man’s face. Although his pale face was still youthful, a thin scar bisected his right eyebrow, running down the outside of his eye, his slim nose was slightly crooked and his lips twisted by scarring, giving him a sardonic, bitter aspect. The skewed features gave the impression of a face broken and then reassembled with skills unequal to the job.

The young man ambled away.

“See you around, man!” Ullrich called after him.

The retreating figure raised a forlorn hand and sauntered away.

* * *

Ullrich leant back in the hard plastic seat, stretching his legs out beneath the scarred table, blinking against the harsh white light of the interview room. The cool of the stark room was refreshing after the unforgiving heat of the prison yard.

The door opened and Ullrich glanced up at the three dark-suited figures that entered. One, obviously a young FBI Agent, held no interest for him, but the other two were a different matter. The older man was probably in his early 50’s, but not wearing it well, his immaculately tailored suit failing to hide the relentless spread of age. A patrician profile was topped off with expensively cut grey hair. The third man was a contrast in relief. Tall and athletic, in his late 30’s, his handsome face was open and friendly, but his eyes burned with a fierce intelligence.

The two older men took seats opposite Ullrich, the junior agent taking up his post by the door.

“Well, I am honoured, Assistant-Director Lowell and Special Agent Parsons, both together. To what do I owe the honour?” Ullrich grinned broadly, spreading out his hands, palms down on the desk.

“I don’t have time for your bullshit today, Ullrich!” snapped the heavier, older man, Lowell.

“Oh yeah, you going somewhere AD Lowell?” chirped Ullrich.

“Yes,” smirked Lowell, “I’m going home to my nice home tonight. You on the other hand will go back to your cell and in two days you’re going to trial in LA and with the evidence we have just on the murder of Sheriff Wallis and nine other police officers while

trying to evade arrest would be enough to book you a place in the gas chamber. But first off we'll concentrate on the Federal charges, the murder of federal agents, robbery of federal banks, arms trafficking, et cetera. And we have enough there for the lethal injection, or if your lucky just life without chance of parole. You can enjoy getting butt-fucked by some biker before the Californian authorities get hold of you and finish the job."

"Ouch!" laughed Ullrich, "If you got so much, bring it on, boys and stop bothering me. Then Mr. Lowell can get home to his wife, oh no sorry, there is no wife, but I'm sure you've got someone waiting for you, eh, Mr. Lowell? You and old J. Edgar would have made a lovely pair! Who is your Clyde Tolson, Franklin?"

Lowell reddened, half-rising from his seat and spat, "Fuck you, Ullrich!"

The prisoner laughed softly, rocking back on the heels of his chair.

The Assistant-Director wiped the spittle from his lips, settling back in his chair, a cold smile spreading across his plump lips.

"Well you sure as shit won't have your wife coming to see you on visiting day will you, Ullrich, the cancer ate her up years ago didn't it, while you away playing toy soldiers!"

Ullrich blanched and eased his chair back down to the floor and leaned forward, his elbows on the table, his face only inches from Lowell's.

"You know, Lowell, it's going to give me great pleasure to kill you. Real soon."

Lowell sneered weakly.

"I'm sorry to break up this pissing contest, gentlemen, but I do have a few questions." Parsons cleared his throat, interjecting with a smile.

Ullrich turned and smiled at the Agent.

"Of course, Special Agent Parsons." The prisoner leant back in his chair.

"We have you, Jack, and you're not going anywhere, ever again. But we want your men. They're out there without their commander, without clear orders and we are worried what they could do."

“They have other commanders and they have orders. And you should be worried.”

Ullrich stated coldly.

“That may be, Jack, but we want them and if you play ball the Judge would obviously take that into account, and that along with your military record should save you from the death penalty.”

“So I can rot in prison for the rest of my days. Do you really expect me to give up my men to you, to betray them to the enemy?”

“No I don’t, Jack.”

“I’m a soldier and my men are soldiers and we have a code. I don’t know if you can understand that, Mr. Parsons? Sure as shit Mr. Lowell here can’t.”

“Get down off your fucking high horse, Ullrich, you and your men aren’t soldiers anymore, you’re just a bunch of rag-ass renegades. Criminals and criminals have no code!”

“You’d be surprised, Lowell, most criminals have more honour than you’d think, more than you and your sort.”

“My sort?” Lowell frowned.

“Politicians, corporate businessmen and their lap-dogs.”

“Ah, the same old refrain. You’re just a paranoid fucking freak, Ullrich!” Lowell laughed.

“Maybe, but me and my men are still soldiers. Just because the government broke faith with us, doesn’t mean we broke faith with the country.”

“Gentlemen, this getting us nowhere,” broke in an exasperated Parsons, rubbing a weary hand across his face.

“You seem like a decent enough man, Agent Parsons, maybe just a little misguided, so I’ll be straight with you and save us all some time. I will in no way cooperate with you and your investigation and I will certainly not betray my officers or men.”

Lowell groaned.

“What is it, Jack, what made you turn against the government, the country, everything you spent your life defending?” asked Parsons sincerely.

“I haven’t turned against my country, I’m trying to save it. It is the country that has turned on me. Our nation has become soft and stupid. They need a wake-up call. Our leaders are criminals and morons, and the people have become corrupted by greed and cowardice.”

“And you’re the wake-up call, Jack?” Parsons leant in close.

Ullrich shrugged, “Maybe. Someone’s got to do something and this is all I can do. I ain’t an intellectual; all I can do is fight. Once this nation of ours meant something, now everything’s fucked up.”

“Isn’t the whole world?” said Parsons.

“Sure, but that don’t mean I have to accept it. I won’t let this country be dragged down into the sewer by its leaders. I won’t allow our nation to be violated in such a way. Otherwise everything I ever fought for, everything those boys fought and died for would have been for nothing. The whole thing meaningless.” Parsons could see the pain behind Ullrich’s eyes. He thought he at last understood.

“That’s what all this is about, isn’t it Jack?” Parsons’ eyes lit up. “Your life, what you’ve done, the soldiers you’ve led to their deaths?”

“Of course it fucking is. I’ve done things for this country, shit you wouldn’t believe. Shit decent people like you don’t want to know about. Someone’s got to do the dirty jobs. I was happy to serve my country. I believed in what I was doing, so did the boys serving with me. But if this country is going down the shitter, giving up on everything that once meant anything, what was it all for? I can’t allow all that sacrifice and suffering be for nothing. I won’t allow it. It had to mean something!”

“I’ve had enough of this shit!” Lowell climbed to his feet and moved to the door. He paused as if in thought for a moment, then turned. “You know, Ullrich, I’m going to enjoy destroying you. First we’ll take your name and anything you ever achieved. Then we’ll take

your worthless life. And I'll be there to watch when you die, you piece of shit. I hope it's slow, because I'm going to enjoy every second." He snorted and left the room.

Parsons remained seated for a moment, then smiled sadly and stood. "Goodbye, Jack," he walked with leaden feet from the room without looking back.

Ullrich sat alone in his box. He absorbed the stillness. Words were shit, his time was coming. He was going to burn all this down.

All his life he had been a killer, and once that had meant something. Now all meaning had been stripped from life. This was all that was left.

The sacrifices, the lives lost, it couldn't all be for nothing.

Chapter 3

“On your feet, Ullrich!” the guard at the cell door snapped tersely.

Ullrich sat up on his bunk and swung his feet to the floor and ran his fingers through his cropped grey hair. Squinting, he looked up out of the gloom of his cramped cell to the three guards standing in the open doorway, framed by the streaming sunlight.

He stood and the guards entered, the chains and cuffs rattling in their hands. While one watched, baton in hand, the other two shackled the prisoner, ankles and wrists, fastening the chains to the harness about his waist.

“Let’s go!” snapped the lead guard.

Ullrich edged awkwardly through his cell door, his steps cut to a shuffle. The head-guard led the party down the main stairs, the other two hovering at the prisoner’s elbows.

Milling prisoners eyed the group as they made their way through the main prison complex, then they passed into the long, dark maze-like passageways beneath the prison, heading out of the main buildings. Pausing at a guard’s station, the officer in charge of the escort signed for the prisoner and a heavy metal door ahead ground open with a loud electrical wail. The party stumbled out, blinking into the fierce desert sunlight.

The yard was a hive of activity. Guards and other assorted uniformed and suited men bustled back and forth, and while Ullrich and his escort waited, he carefully surveyed the scene. At the centre of the yard was a large bus, painted a dull grey with metal grates over all the side and rear windows. Around it were three cruisers, marked as Federal Marshals, a single unmarked sedan and way over the other side a black van. Guards patrolled the walls overhead and others were stationed in the yard itself, almost all heavily armed. However they were just bit players. The Federal Marshals were taking charge, ready for the transport. They were all dressed identically in pale blue shirtsleeves and lightweight dark blue windcheaters, dark baseball hats atop their heads, emblazoned by a single star. All wore sidearms and carried an assortment of pump-action shotguns, Uzis and AR15 rifles. Clustered around the

black van were a group of figures all dressed in dark overalls, wearing combat boots, body-
armour and Kevlar Fritz helmets. These men moved with a silky assurance, wearing their
tough authority with pride. They carried Colt XM177 Commando compact assault rifles,
foreshortened M16s, or MP5 sub-machine guns, mostly the short MP5A3 with retractable
butt or the ultra-compact MP5A4 with no butt and a fixed forward grip. All the men were
checking their weapons, seating magazines, the rattle of bolts carrying across the yard.
Ullrich noted their sidearms, SIGs, and the grenades strung from their vests, and began
assessing their number.

“Good Morning, Mr. Ullrich!” AD Lowell approached Ullrich, escorted by two
tough-looking young FBI Agents.

“Lowell, I might have known you wouldn’t have missed this.” Ullrich sneered. “No
Agent Parsons this morning?”

“He does have other work to do, and now you’re all wrapped up, he has bigger fish to
fry.”

“Stop, you’re hurting my feelings!”

Ullrich jerked his head towards the black van and it’s passengers. “Your HRT, or
Special Operations Group from the US Marshals?”

“SOG, this is the Marshals show, I’m only hear as a spectator.”

“And I bet you’re loving every minute of it. These two boys your bodyguards or just
your latest catamites?” Ullrich laughed, rattling his chained wrists.

“Get this piece of shit on the bus, now!” Lowell shouted, and two Deputy Marshals
appeared, grabbing the prisoner by the elbows and dragging him onto the bus, the doors
hissing shut behind him.

Still manacled, Ullrich was shoved through a wire cage door and into a seat, one of
the Deputies slapping him across the face for good measure. Laughing the two men retreated,

slamming the door of the cage behind them, one taking up station at the door with a shotgun, the other taking a seat behind the driver.

Ullrich straightened up in his seat and rolled his head, loosening the muscles in his neck and checking out his surroundings. The rear three-quarters of the bus was caged off, the windows heavily barred and the guard at the gate had a clear view of everything. He also noticed, somewhat to his surprise, that he was not the only prisoner aboard. At the rear was a tall, rangy, balding man, head down, but Ullrich recognized as a notorious paedophile kidnapper/murderer. A wiry black youth, no more than 19, head shaved, sneered back at him from several seats back. Nearest Ullrich was the young white prisoner from the fight in the yard, staring out of the side window.

“Hey, man, don’t I get the fucking bus to myself?” called Ullrich to the guard at the gate.

“Other people gotta ride, we ain’t just gonna lay on a ride for you, then have to sort out these motherfuckers later. That okay, bigshot?” snarled the guard.

“Hell, you lay on all this security for me, then I have to share the ride?”

“Shut it, Ullrich, I don’t wanna have to listen to your shit all the way to LA!”

“Here we go!” called the driver and with a loud hiss the bus lurched forward and the convoy rolled out of the prison gates. Ullrich craned his neck, checking front and rear. Two of the cruisers took up the lead; behind the bus followed the black van, the unmarked sedan carrying Lowell and his agents and the final cruiser riding the tail.

Gradually the convoy picked up speed, tearing through the flat, arid landscape, the Sierra Nevada behind them, fading into the distance. Sun dazzled brightly off the vehicle windows, thick golden dust swirled in their wake.

Ullrich leant across the aisle in the bus.

“Hey, man, how you doing, remember me?” he called out to the young white prisoner, sotto voce.

“Sure.” he turned, eyeing Ullrich coolly, his clear, grey eyes unwavering.

“The name’s John Ullrich, friends call me Jack.” He smiled and nodded.

“Paul Riesman.” He nodded in return.

“Where they taking you?”

“Preliminary Hearing; bank robbery, firing on federal officers, attempted murder.”

“You must be looking at least twenty years!”

“No shit, got me dead to rights. Trying to cut a deal, but the asshole prosecutor ain’t playing ball. You?”

“Much the same.”

“Hey, you two lovebirds, shut your fucking mouths!” shouted the guard on the door, slamming his shotgun butt against the cage.

Ullrich straightened up in his seat, fixing his cold eyes on the smirking guard.

“Brrr! Don’t scare me, Mr. Ullrich, sir!” the guard shuddered in mock terror, laughing over his shoulder to his friends up front.

Ullrich remained still, smiling thinly, biding his time.

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The convoy had been travelling for around half an hour and the landscape around them had gradually changed; the flat, barren desert giving way to more undulating ground, the road edged by sloping, rocky rises, the vegetation more verdant.

The driver and guard up front were chatting amiably, their laughter carrying down the length of the bus, while the guard at the door whistled tunelessly through his teeth, staring vacantly into space.

Ullrich checked his fellow passengers. The paedophile still stared down at his shoes, the black youth slouched across his seat, drumming his hands to some imagined rhythm and Riesman gazed out at the scenery streaming by.

Ullrich settled in his seat, placed his hands on his thighs and braced his sneakered feet slightly apart. He waited.

The lead cruiser erupted in a fireball, no one saw the hand-launched missile before it struck, the white vapour trail following it as it streaked in from the right, its detonation immediately igniting the car's fuel tank. The car shuddered and halted dead in its tracks, the tattered, blackened shell engulfed in flame, the four Deputy Marshals aboard killed instantly.

The second cruiser slammed on its brakes, skidding wildly, fishtailing as it halted. The rest of the convoy followed suit; the screech of brakes filling the air, then a crash as the van rear-ended the bus. A second RPG streaked down from the right, this time from the rear, slamming into the cruiser on the tail-end of the convoy. The detonation of the explosive warhead blew out all its windows and tore off three of its four doors. The trunk flew open and smoke and dust swirled around the twisted wreck. Coughing and retching, a single bloody figure stumbled from the front passenger seat, his uniform blackened rags and his right arm a bloody stump. He stumbled and fell to his knees just feet from the wreck, then the car's fuel tank detonated. The blast threw flames in all directions, the man engulfed, his screams swallowed by the inferno.

“Holy Fucking Shit!” screamed the bus driver as his passengers hit the deck.

The convoy was hemmed in by the two blazing wrecks, and the rises on either side were too steep for them to climb. They were trapped.

The remaining cruiser up front gunned its engine as the driver tried to straighten his vehicle.

“You three get out and cover me, I'll try and ram the wreck clear!” the driver yelled, his voice almost cracking.

His three fellow Deputy Marshals burst from the vehicle and stationed themselves around it, uncertainly eyeing the slopes on either side. The lead deputy dropped to one knee and with his Mini-Uzi in his right hand and signalled the other two to fan out left and right. The two Deputies, one with an AR15, the other with a pump-action shotgun, began moving tentatively, weapons up, feet grinding the loose shale. The driver gunned his engine and rammed forward into the blackened wreck blocking the road, reversing then ramming again, metal screeching against metal.

The rear of the van popped open and the dark-suited SOG officers spilled out, weapons ready. They trained their guns on the slopes, eyes scanning below their Kevlar helmets and beneath their goggles. The officer in charge climbed from the front of the van and circled to the rear.

“All right, listen up. Surround the bus, dig in and keep your heads down. I want total coverage of those hillsides. Anything moves, waste it. OK, let’s go!” the team moved off.

Suddenly the hillsides exploded with automatic gunfire, the intense fusillade ripping into the convoy.

The two Deputies moving up the slopes were cut down before they could get off a single shot. The officer on the road opened up with his Uzi, climbing to his feet and backing off, squeezing off short bursts, but before he could empty his 32 round magazine a volley of shots tore across his chest, the Teflon-coated rounds easily penetrating his Kevlar vest. His Uzi spun away through the air as he crumpled.

The driver of the cruiser saw the deaths of his fellow Deputy Marshals. Screaming with fear and rage, he shifted gear, slamming his foot down on the accelerator, the car lurching forward, crashing into the wreck blocking the road. Gunfire from either side concentrated on the cruiser, ripping it apart. Bullets tore through the windshield, doors, and chassis, the interior of the vehicle an explosion of metal, glass and blood as the driver was shredded, jerking and shuddering beneath the repeated blows, his howls choked off by blood

and finally death. When the gunfire ceased the cruiser was riddled from nose to tail, a twisted wreck.

Further back the SOG men came under intense fire before they could encircle the bus. Their commander was cut down by a single round from a sniper, ripping through his throat. As he lay drowning in his own blood, his men were chopped down around him. They moved in small tight groups up the side of the bus, squeezing off bursts from their weapons. Half their number were left dead or dying in their wake before they were in position.

While the SOG team was coming under fire, Lowell and his men made their break. The driver provided covering fire with his stubby MP5KA4, firing over the hood into the left hillside, where the heaviest firing seemed to be coming from, while the other two agents hustled Lowell toward the cover of a distant hollow camouflaged by bushes and boulders. Covering Lowell with their bodies, one armed with a Micro-Uzi, the other with a Smith & Wesson semi-automatic pistol, the agents dragged the AD over the exposed ground and tossed him down into cover, diving in on top of him.

Back at the car, the FBI driver dropped to one knee, popped his empty 30 round clip and rammed home a fresh one. He yanked back the cocking handle and rose, ready to make a fighting retreat. As he cleared the hood, he came face to face with another figure, seemingly rising out of the dirt on the opposite side of the road. The two men stared at each other; the grimy suited agent and the soldier dressed in sand-coloured fatigues and floppy bush hat. The agent stared into the face, covered with brown and green paint, and was stunned to see a smile flicker across it. The driver brought up his MP5, but the soldier just squeezed off a burst from his M4, dropping the agent dead. The soldier trained the M203 grenade launcher slung beneath the rifle's barrel on the sedan and fired a single round. The grenade detonated, lifting the car several feet into clear of the ground, before crashing back down in a tattered heap.

On the bus, Ullrich kept his head down, but thus far not a single round had penetrated the passenger compartment. Suddenly a heavy burst of fire ripped through the bus cab, shredding the driver and the marshal up front, blood splattering the riddled windshield.

“Oh Fuck!” moaned the Deputy left by the cage. He squatted and clutched the shotgun closer to his chest.

“This is not happening! This is not happening!” he kept mumbling, over and over, like a deranged mantra.

“Just keep cool, man!” whispered Ullrich, in an attempt to soothe the increasingly jumpy guard.

The Deputy Marshal spun around, jacking a shell into his shotgun with a savage pump, unaware that there was already one in the breech, the unused round ejected, spinning through the air, hitting the floor and bouncing away. The guard trained his gun on Ullrich’s chest.

“These are your men, aren’t they Ullrich, this is all down to you?” the whites of his eyes flashed wildly.

“All the more reason to keep calm. You waste me and you’ll be in a world of shit. They ain’t gonna be too pleased about that, are they?”

The guard eyed him, sweat gathering on his quivering top lip.

Outside, the SOG team was being cut to pieces; the land offered little or no cover. With their attackers on elevated ground, the position was hopeless. Their dwindling numbers just drew in tighter around the bus, the dead and wounded scattered around them.

A fire-team took out the van, shredding it from end to end, but was careful to avoid the vehicle’s fuel tank.

The remaining SOG men scanned the hillsides fruitlessly. They had had no firm targets. They had targeted the enemy muzzle flashes, but to no effect. Another torrent of fire poured down on them, hitting two men, one hit by a .50 calibre sniper round that tore through

the top of his helmet, collapsing his head into a bloody mess, the another receiving a burst of automatic fire across the top of his head and shoulders, killing him instantly.

“This is fucking insane, we’re sitting ducks. Under the bus, now!” the senior remaining officer yelled and he dived under the vehicle, followed by the only other two remaining men. One was hit full across the back as he lunged for cover, the force of the blow tossing him beneath the bus.

The senior officer checked him, looked at the other SOG man and shook his head.

Slowly the fire ebbed and finally stopped. The two men could hear the soft patter of approaching footsteps, the rattle of kit and clatter of bolts.

“This is it, they’re coming!” the senior officer checked his MP5, the other man seated a fresh 30 round magazine in his Commando.

Back along the convoy, the two FBI agents with Lowell knelt, weapons held ready, their charge lying curled in a foetal ball at their feet.

“It’s OK, sir, I think they missed us!”

Suddenly a tall figure in desert BDU and matching ski mask reared up behind them, silenced M23 automatic gripped two handed, arms extended. He squeezed off two quick shots, hitting the agent with the Uzi in the face, then turned before the other FBI man could react and double-tapped him in the head, dropping him dead beside his friend. He stepped over the dead men and trained his pistol one-handed on the figure cowering on the ground.

“AD Lowell, I presume?”

Beneath the bus, the two SOG men lay waiting.

“What’ll we do? If we stay here we’ll be wasted!”

“I reckon surrender will be instant fucking suicide. I say we quit this bus and get the fuck out of here. It’s our only chance. We both pop smoke, then go fast together, no looking back.”

The other man nodded and pulled a smoke grenade from his webbing.

The senior officer did likewise, “On my word then!”

Suddenly there was a pop and a hiss. Three, then four cylindrical grenades rolled under the bus.

“Gas!” shouted one of the SOG men, “Go!” both men popped their smoke grenades and rolled them out left and right, then slid out and began to run.

Coughing and spluttering, their eyes streaming from the CS gas, the two men stumbled across the uneven ground. Out of the smoke a huge, muscular figure appeared, in BDU and gas mask. The two men reared up in horror, struggling to bring round their weapons, but the soldier squeezed off two shots from the squat SPAS 12 semi-automatic shotgun, knocking both men down in a double explosion of buckshot and blood. The soldier stepped over the bodies and ambled towards the burning convoy.

On board the bus the guard rose to his feet and began pacing back and forth. The smoke swirling around the bus thinned and it fell eerily quiet.

“Why don’t they come, what’s happening?” the guard sweated nervously.

“Calm down, just put the shotgun on the deck,” said Ullrich softly.

“Fuck you, man!” the guard spun round, training his shotgun on Ullrich.

Suddenly a single shot rang out, a bullet punched through the riddled windshield and tore into the back of the guard’s skull and he pitched forward onto his face.

The bus doors hissed open and a single figure in desert camouflage BDU and ski mask climbed aboard. He laid aside his HK G41 automatic sniper rifle and drew a silenced M23. He reached into the dead guard’s pocket and retrieved the keys, unlocking the cage door. He pulled the ski mask off, revealing a beaming face, blond hair plastered against his skull.

“Larsen, good to see you,” Ullrich stood, smiling, “Now get these fucking chains off me!”

“Yes sir, Colonel.” The young officer unfastened the restraints and reached into his webbing and retrieved a snub-nosed HK P7 automatic pistol. Ullrich rubbed his wrists then took the weapon and smiled.

“We better get moving, Colonel!” said Larsen.

Ullrich turned to the prisoners.

“Well, Riesman, you want to come with me?”

The young prisoner only hesitated for a second, then nodded once. “Yes, sir.”

“Captain Larsen, unchain Mr. Riesman and escort him to the vehicles.”

“Sir,” Larsen unshackled Riesman and led him off the bus.

“What about you, kid?” Ullrich asked the black youth.

“Fuck you, man!” he spat.

“Fair enough,” he shrugged and fired his pistol twice into the prisoner’s chest.

Moving further up the bus, Ullrich came to the paedophile. The prisoner raised both his hands, shielding his face and Ullrich fired three times directly through the man’s palms into his face. As his bloody body hit the floor, Ullrich put two more rounds in his head, then walked away.

Outside, squads of troops were checking the dead and wounded law enforcement personnel, putting a bullet in anyone still breathing.

A big, muscular figure marched up to Ullrich and saluted. The officer took in the short-cropped fair hair and face-paint, the gas mask around his neck.

“Sergeant Hooker, good to see you!” Ullrich returned the salute, “Have all the bodies placed inside the vehicles and have them rigged to burn, we might as well make identification as difficult as possible. Confusion could buy us some time.”

“Already being done, sir,” the sergeant waved two men forward with a prisoner, “With the compliments of Captain Larsen, sir.”

Ullrich stared into AD Franklin Lowell's grimy, tear-stained face. The man mustered some defiance and straightened up between the two guards holding his arms.

"You scum, Ullrich, you won't get away with this, you'll be shot down like the mad dog you are before you get 5 miles." Lowell sneered.

"I doubt it, Mr. Lowell." Ullrich waved away the two guards, "Unfortunately I haven't got time to hang around and banter." Ullrich raised his pistol and fired a single shot into Lowell's forehead. Ullrich didn't look down at the crumpled body, just calmly wiped a speck of blood from his cheek.

"The bodies are stowed, the incendiaries laid, shall I put this body aboard, sir?" Sergeant Hooker asked.

Ullrich tapped the corpse with his toe and answered, "No. Throw this piece of shit in the ditch."

Hooker nodded to the two guards. They grabbed Lowell by the heels and dragged his body away.

"Time to go, sir!" the sergeant said.

Ullrich nodded and followed Hooker to the fleet of vehicles waiting, an assortment of SUVs and a military Humvee and light truck.

The vehicles started up and pulled away, disappearing in a cloud of swirling red dust.

Behind them the incendiary charges attached to the vehicles detonated, ripping them open and swallowing them in a sea of white-hot flame.

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Within an hour, Ullrich, Riesman and Sergeant Hooker had boarded a Huey and the chopper had carried them the 25 miles to a nearby airstrip. While Ullrich's men scattered on the wind, the three men boarded a Cessna light aircraft.

By evening the plane was setting down in a gloomy, storm-swept Dallas, 1200 miles away from the ensuing manhunt.

Chapter 4

As dusk set the Bell Jetranger helicopter landed. Special Agent Jeff Parsons jumped down and looked at the still smouldering, blackened hulks stretched out along the roadside.

The FBI Agent strode through the milling crowds of fellow Bureau agents, Federal Marshals and local law enforcement personnel. He approached the burly man clearly in charge of the scene.

“Deputy Marshal Hopkins?” he asked the tall, black man in the US Marshal windcheater, who nodded in return, “I’m SA Parsons from the FBI Washington office, I was in charge of the Ullrich case.”

“I know who you are. This is Chief of Police Murray, this is his patch.” Parsons shook hand with short, grey-haired man standing forlornly by Hopkins’ side, then both Federal officers continued as if he were invisible.

“So what happened here?” asked Parsons.

“Looks like an ambush, everyone’s dead. We never even received a distress message. When the convoy was overdue we tried to make contact and when we failed we sent out search parties. A chopper spotted the smoke a little over two hours ago. My men, with your local field office and local law enforcement sealed off the area and we’re going over it with a fine tooth comb.” The grim faced Deputy Marshal recited the facts, kicking at the dirt at his feet.

“Everyone’s dead?” Parsons’ eyes narrowed.

“Best we can tell. Everything’s burned up pretty bad, IDs are impossible. Hell, we can’t even make a rough head-count at present. They used white phosphorous, burned up everything. The remains are so damaged it’s going to take the ME and his team hours back in the lab to piece everything together.”

“You’ve began a search though?”

“We’re sweeping the area, but without any witnesses or any leads, we’re pretty much in the dark.”

“No IDs on the bodies at all?”

“Just one, wasn’t burnt at all, found him by the roadside, maybe he was missed.”

“Show me,” snapped Parsons.

Hopkins and Parsons headed down to the road, a handful of subordinates with both, Chief of Police Murray trailing in their wake.

The men crossed the scarred asphalt and the two senior men passed through a circle of forensic technicians. They halted and Hopkins nodded to one of them who bent and pulled back the white sheet covering the mound at their feet.

Parsons’ face remained impassive as he stared down at the body of FBI Assistant Director Franklin Lowell. Parsons had never liked the man, but it was always a jarring experience to see someone you knew dead. He struggled to retain his outward cool. He took in the usually immaculate suit smeared with dust, the stench of the vented bowels, the frozen look of horror on the face. Between his dead eyes a single blackened bullet hole stared back at the living.

“AD Lowell, I believe?” muttered Hopkins.

“Yes,” replied Parsons, his head still down, staring at the corpse, “His body being left here was no oversight,” he looked up, “Ullrich did this, he left him here as a message to me.”

“How the fuck do you know that? We can’t even verify Ullrich is missing.”

“I know Ullrich, he hated Lowell. He isn’t among the dead, he’s long gone.”

The FBI Agent turned and walked away. Hopkins hurried to keep up with him as he strode away.

“How can you be sure?” asked Hopkins plaintively.

The men stopped and faced each other.

“Describe the scene to me?”

“How do you mean?”

“Was there any sign of dead or injured among the attackers, blood tracks, anything?”

“No, just a shit-load of scattered cartridge cases, also some fox-holes and camouflaged positions. They just hit too hard, too fast.”

“Those were your best men escorting those prisoners, a whole team of US Marshals SOG, wiped out before they could get out a message, before they could inflict a single enemy casualty.”

“What the fuck are you trying to imply, those men died defending that convoy, they were just outmatched!” snarled Hopkins.

“Exactly. Ullrich’s men are professionals, all ex-special forces: Green Berets, Marine Recon, Rangers, SEALs, Airborne, Marine Corps. All elite infantry, trained killers. All equipped with the best military hardware. Your men never stood a chance. Only Ullrich’s men could have done this. Believe me, Hopkins, Ullrich is gone.”

Parsons continued towards the chopper.

So what do I do?” asked Hopkins.

“By all means continue your search, you might find something, some evidence, some lead. Maybe, but I doubt it. But one thing’s for sure, you will not find Ullrich, he’s long gone by now.”

“So that’s it?”

Parsons opened the chopper’s door and turned.

“It’s no reflection on you or your men, Deputy Marshal Hopkins, my report will reflect that.” The FBI man smiled grimly, “Send me a full report when you have all the information, forensics, everything, especially when you have identified all the bodies, that is of the utmost importance.”

“OK.”

“Goodbye, Hopkins.” Parsons climbed aboard the chopper, slamming the door behind him. The idling rotors picked up, kicking up a storm of dust, the whine of the engine climbing to a roar. The helicopter lifted clear of the ground, climbing up into the darkening sky.

* * *

The Jetranger tore through the night sky at around 120mph; inside the occupants sat in silence. Parsons played absent-mindedly with his cigarette lighter in his lap as the silence throbbed around them. From the back seat someone cleared their throat and a woman’s voice broke the senior agents reverie.

“What’ll we do now, sir?” she asked.

Parsons turned in his seat and faced the two passengers in the rear. The woman who spoke was Special Agent Larkin, only in her late twenties, but a Bureau whiz kid, one of Parsons handpicked team on the Ullrich case. She was petite, with a pretty face framed by red hair, her green eyes fiercely intelligent. Beside her was SA Meyer, only a couple of years Larkin’s senior, also a rising star. Small and slim, dark hair trimmed short, wire-framed glasses perched on his nose. An Ivy-League law graduate, he could one day become Director if he could curb his puckish sense of humour and bleak honesty.

“I’m not sure what we can do at present, I meant what I said, Ullrich’s gone, he’ll be far away. He will have gone to ground for now. We can check known associates and haunts, but he’s too smart for that, and anyway most of his people are ghosts, just like him. No, I’m afraid we’ll just have to wait and hope. Eventually he will surface, he won’t be able to resist it.”

“So we wait until he kills again?” Larkin glanced fiercely at Meyer as he spoke, “What? It’s the truth, isn’t it?”

“Yes and no, until he becomes operational again he will be invisible. We won’t get lucky again and stumble over him. I just hope we can stop him before he kills.” Parsons said sadly.

“So you don’t think he will retire gracefully?” said Meyer.

“Jesus!” Larkin sighed.

“I do hope that was a joke. Ullrich will never stop. He believes what he is doing is right. He will keep going until he is caught or killed.”

“Looks like the latter is the better idea given today’s events.”

“You may be right, Meyer, but I hope it doesn’t have to go that far. I will not descend to Ullrich’s level. I will continue to uphold the law, I am not an assassin.”

“Do you have any idea what his next move will be?” asked Larkin.

“Only going on his past MO, but Ullrich is always unpredictable and I got a feeling he is about to step up his action. So far it has just been preparation. Now it is war.”

“Shit, I hope you’re wrong,” said Meyer.

“So do I. We’ll head directly back to Washington and assemble the full team, I’m going to need everyone pulling double shifts on this.”

“So what’s new?” said Larkin.

“There goes my social life!” Meyer sighed.

“What social life?” Larkin quipped.

Parsons turned and stared out of the cockpit window as they swept down out of the black night, the fierce lights of LAX airport scorching his retinas. They swept into the firestorm of artificial light, settling down beside the runway, the waiting Gulfstream Executive jet already turning over its engines ready for immediate take-off.

Chapter 5

They drove for around two hours after leaving Dallas, having collected a Bronco left in airport parking. They drove through the night, down busy freeways, through empty country roads. Ullrich, Hooker and Riesman sat in silence, the two older men up front, only occasionally exchanging muttered words, the Colonel almost imperceptibly checking his mirrors, while the Sergeant fidgeted nervously, constantly looking over his shoulder to check if they were being tailed. Riesman sat alone in the rear, silently watching the flat Texan plains unrolling around them.

Around midnight they pulled off the road and headed up an unmade track for about a mile and pulled up in front of a sprawling ranch house set apart from scattered farm buildings. Ullrich turned off the engine and the men sat in silence. Outside the black night was still, the moon almost full, the stars glittering in the pitch sky. Distantly a dog barked. A single light burned from the ground floor of the house.

Ullrich nodded and drew his automatic from his belt holster and climbed out. Hooker retrieved a Mini-SAF compact sub-machine gun from the small bag at his feet. He popped the 30 round translucent plastic magazine, checked and reseated it and yanked back the cocking handle and switched the safety/fire selector to single shot semi-automatic and climbed out. They left both doors open, and with the interior light disabled, Riesman sat alone in the dark.

Ullrich leant inside, his face barely visible in the moonlight.

“Wait here, don’t make a sound!”

The two men moved silently away from the vehicle and approached the house. Ullrich halted, raised his free left hand in a fist, pistol trained forward in his right. Hooker halted, his Mini-SAF gripped two-handed, forehand holding the fixed forward grip, the weapon held at shoulder height. The Colonel pulled down on his fist, then pointed away to his left into the shadows. Without a word, Hooker moved away, disappearing into the gloom, taking up position on one knee, weapon trained on the front door.

Ullrich, his pistol still raised, advanced slowly on the front door of the house, moving through the pool of light thrown from the window. He halted at the door and with his left hand eased open the screen door and rapped hard three times on the heavy wooden door, then paused before delivering a final single knock. He allowed the screen door to shut and stepped back into the shadows. The downstairs light went out and there was the rattling of locks before the front door swung open.

It was even darker in the house than out. With all the interior lights extinguished it was impossible to make anything out in the doorway.

Ullrich stood in the shadow of the doorway. After a second he lowered his pistol.

The screen door creaked open and with a click the yard was flooded with blinding light. Riesman ducked down in the Bronco, expecting an explosion of gunfire, but when none came he sat up.

Ullrich and Hooker both stood exposed in the blazing light, but had their weapons lowered. Standing on the porch, framed by the fiery light was a young woman, in her late-twenties, tall, slim and athletic, with fine Nordic features and short, wavy blonde hair. Wearing worn jeans and white T-shirt, she held two handed at waist height a stubby, compact MP5KA4 sub-machine gun. Ullrich walked up to the porch, slipping his pistol back into its holster and halted a few paces from her. Suddenly a broad grin broke across her face and she leapt down and threw her arms around his neck, pulling him close and kissing him fiercely on the lips. Riesman watched from the Bronco as the couple swayed, the MP5 hanging from her right hand in the small of Ullrich's back.

Finally the two separated, holding hands, exchanging muffled words and soft laughter. Ullrich turned smiling, looking ten, twenty years younger and waved Hooker forward. The woman embraced the Sergeant as he stood awkwardly, arms at his side. The Colonel spoke briefly to him, Hooker nodded and the couple walked arm in arm into the house.

Hooker approached the Bronco and pulled open the passenger side door.

“Colonel says to come in, after you help me with the bags,” he muttered.

“OK.” Riesman replied, stepping out, stretching his legs.

Hooker opened the tailgate and began stacking the luggage on the ground. Riesman turned and reached into the front passenger foot-well and retrieved Hooker’s small bag. Suddenly a hand grabbed him by the shoulder, spinning him round and slamming him back against the vehicle. Hooker jammed a Colt .45 automatic in Riesman’s ear and thumbed back the hammer.

“What the fuck you think you doing, boy?” he snarled.

“Just getting your bag. What’s the big fucking deal?” the younger man replied as coolly as he could being held in a chokehold with a .45 in his ear.

“You only handle what I say, when I say. You don’t get near any weapons till the Colonel says so. And you sure as shit don’t touch my stuff, or I’ll waste you quick smart. You read me?” Hooker’s face was so close to Riesman’s that spittle sprayed his face and he could see the wild mania clouding the other man’s eyes.

“I read you,” he replied softly and Hooker released his grip, slamming Riesman once more against the Bronco for good measure. Lowering the hammer of his pistol, he reholstered it.

“Now grab them two bags and get inside,” he jabbed his finger at two canvas bags set aside from the rest, then watched as the younger man lifted them and trailed inside.

Stepping through the front door, Riesman headed through the hall and down a long, wood-panelled passageway. He passed an open door and stepped back and halted. Inside was a well furnished, nicely kept living room with sofas and armchairs and coffee tables all centred around a shiny new big-screen TV and VCR. Up on a bookcase was an equally impressive looking stereo system.

On the couch, with his back to him was a small, slim figure with short brown hair. Next to him was the blonde woman from the porch.

“Can I watch TV now, Sherilyn?” he whined.

“Okay, but keep it down, Jack’s got work to do,” the woman replied soothingly.

“Okay.” he grunted in reply, lifting the remote control and switching on the TV.

“Where’d you want these bags, ma’am?” Riesman asked.

Both figures on the couch turned. The young man was in late teens or early twenties at most, but he had the glazed, slack-jawed appearance of child-like innocence and Riesman held little interest for him so he turned back to the TV and sniggered at something Letterman was saying.

“Just take them down to the kitchen at the end, Jack will tell you what to do, he’s waiting for you there.” The young woman fixed her glittering blue eyes on him and smiled warmly.

“Thanks,” he turned to leave and the woman turned back to the TV, putting her arm around the young man.

Riesman entered the kitchen and found Ullrich staring out the window. “Dump those there, Hooker will take care of them, me and you have got to talk.”

Hooker elbowed past Riesman into the room, dumping his heavy load of bags.

“Sergeant, sort out the room arrangement and luggage with Sherilyn, but first get the vehicle stashed, park it in one of the barns.” Ullrich ordered and when Hooker left, he turned to the younger man. “Riesman, come with me.”

He followed the Colonel out of the room and down a short side corridor, where Ullrich showed him into an elegant study, with a huge mahogany desk and leather swivel chair. Lining the walls were tall bookcases, all filled.

Ullrich indicated the chair placed in front the desk and Riesman sat.

The Colonel poured himself a large whisky from the selection of bottles on a tray by his desk and added ice.

“Drink, Paul? Whisky?” he asked.

“Strong spirits don’t agree with me, sir. A cold beer or soda would be good, please Colonel.”

Ullrich got a can of beer from the mini-fridge at his feet, opened it and handed it across the desk. Taking his whisky he sat behind the desk and reclined with a sigh and sipped his drink.

“It’s the simple pleasures of life that make existence tolerable, don’t you think, Paul?” he asked reflectively, turning his seat and gazing out over the moonlit fields. Riesman sat silently, back straight, eyes ahead, the order of his past military life reasserting itself.

“I met Sherilyn a couple of years back, she was a waitress in a diner just outside Dallas, working for minimum wage to support herself and her idiot brother. She adores that boy, won’t have a word said against him. He’s a might simple, looks after him like he was her own child, since their parents died when she was in her teens. Auto-wreck. Old man was drunk, not unusual for him, best I can tell. Anyway set them both up here, near where they grew up, fixed up this old ranch, made us a little home.”

Ullrich sat forward and placed his glass on the desk.

“Enough about me, time for business.” He pulled his HK P7 automatic from its holster and laid it on the desk within easy reach, “What’s your story?”

Riesman cleared his throat, “I was born in DC in 1969, father left when I was a kid. My mother worked as a waitress and later as a secretary to support my sister and me. I graduated High School and joined the army in 1987, completed basic training and volunteered for Airborne and joined the 101st. Attended Ranger school at Fort Benning, qualified, got my Ranger patch, returned to Fort Campbell with the free-faller company. Promoted to Corporal early in ‘90, worked as an instructor at Campbell on heliborne assaults.

Shipped out to the Gulf late '90, went in with the first wave of Desert Storm in January 1991. Flew around a dozen combat missions with Black Hawk choppers. Got a Bronze Star and was promoted in the field to Sergeant. After the war we stayed on, clearing minefields. One day I'm out in the field with my platoon and this raw Lieutenant, fresh in, don't know shit. Won't listen to my advice, can't even read a map. He directs us through a minefield, I point out his error, he says I'm wrong, I insist but he won't listen. The men are getting restless, they don't like it. He starts out towards this minefield, ordering the men forward, threatening charges. I countermand the order. He gets in my face, pulls his sidearm, and draws down on me, so I knock him down and disarm him. Should have just fragged him out there in the field, nobody would have given a shit, the men were with me. Back at camp I was arrested and put up on charges of gross insubordination, disobeying a direct order and striking an officer. I was shipped back stateside and spent six months in Leavenworth. My men came forward, testified to the Lieutenant's incompetence and his drawing a weapon on me, but his daddy was some sort of brass, he was armour-plated. They couldn't charge me and they wouldn't charge him, so they booted me out on some technical charge with a dishonourable discharge.

"I went back to DC, but couldn't get a real job with a dishonourable. Headed out to LA to stay with my sister, started pulling some jobs, stealing cars, knocking off bars, garages, stores with this ex-marine I met. We moved up to banks, then the Feds caught up with us. The marine's brother-in-law was driving; me and him took the bank. We came out and the Feds and cops appeared out of nowhere, all armed to the teeth. We shot it out to the car, but they took it out before we'd gone a few yards, killing the driver. So me and the marine are out, shooting it out in the street with automatic weapons. We put quite a few of them down before they got my buddy, shot him dead. I tried to break out, shooting on the run, but they winged me and put me down. I was in hospital for two or three weeks then they shipped me off to the pen."

"So the Feds are going to be hot for you, you putting down their men?" said Ullrich.

“Fuck yeah, I was looking at certain life, with a probable lethal injection if I couldn’t cut a deal.”

“The army fucked you bad, how you feel about it and officers in particular?”

“I loved the army, still do, and I worked with some fine officers. But there are too many jerks and more and more they seem to be the ones running the whole fucking operation.”

Ullrich nodded. “Let me tell you what we got here. This is my private army and we keep military discipline and rank. Everyone with me are from elite units, mostly Army Special Forces, Rangers, Marine Recon, SEALs, some of the SF boys like me have been with Delta. We’ve also got men like yourself from Airborne and Marine Corps; we just train them up. We are not criminals or some nutty right-wing militia, despite what you might have heard. We will rob Federal Banks and steal military equipment and deal in illegal arms to bankroll and support our organisation. I will not tolerate unauthorised criminal acts or any breach of discipline. Your views are your own, but I will not tolerate any inappropriate actions, on or off duty. Any breach of protocol or military code will be met with the utmost sanctions.” He reached out and touched his pistol.

“My ultimate aims are my own business for now,” he continued, “Let’s just say that this nation has lost its way. I aim to show them the error of their ways.”

There was silence between the two men.

“Are you with us, Paul?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” Ullrich rose and extended his hand and they shook. “It’ll take a few days for your clearance to come through. Until then just take it easy. You will not leave the confines of the ranch, and I suggest you stay close to the house unless escorted, Sergeant Hooker will be watching you and he can be a touch over-zealous at times.” Ullrich smiled.

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well, you’re dismissed.”

Chapter 6

“Good Morning, Gentleman.” SA Parsons stood and moved to the head of the conference table, placing the thick dossier on the table before him. He paused and took a breath, taking in the people gathered around the table, assembled for his inter-agency briefing. Present was the President’s National Security Advisor, the FBI Director, FBI department chiefs from Violent Crimes, Counter-Terrorism, Bank Robbery Unit and other offices, plus two Assistant-Directors, one Lowell’s replacement. Also there were senior officers from the ATF, Federal Marshals, Secret Service and CIA, including Company Director Allen Maxwell, a shifty political appointee. Alongside him sat Richard Hobson, a tall, thickset, muscular man with thick dark hair expensively cut. Hobson was officially an Assistant-Director, but it was well known in Washington that the long-time Agent actually ran the Company, keeping Maxwell and Congress from the more distasteful truths. Hobson smiled thinly at his old friend Parsons. Both men enjoyed the mutual respect and affection of career professionals. Alongside these suited men were two immaculately dressed officers in full dress uniform, bedecked with decorations and insignia. Both army officers were from the Pentagon, one with Military Intelligence, the other with the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

“We are here today for an update on my previous briefings, to discuss what we know of John Ullrich and his organisation. Some of you will be familiar with certain facts from my prior briefings, but given the seriousness of the current situation and our risk assessment of Ullrich, I plan to present a comprehensive picture for new-comers to this group and also due to new information obtained, chiefly from the Pentagon.” Parsons inclined his head to the two stony- faced army officers, and continued, “Who have finally seen fit to recognise the seriousness of the situation and release certain documents, although it has to be said heavily abridged versions.”

The officer from Military Intelligence, a Colonel wearing Ranger and Airborne flashes, cleared his throat and leaned forward, the overhead light gleaming back from his scalp, visible through his severely cropped steel-grey hair.

“We have released many classified documents to you, many previously deemed too sensitive and of little or no value to your investigation. Anything presently withheld is not only highly-classified, but due to its very nature, is subject to complete deniability.” The Colonel spoke softly, but firmly.

“I think all personnel present are given complete security clearance, but I catch your drift. You are of course referring to work performed for you and the CIA by Colonel Ullrich, work performed in the role of an assassin,” snapped Parsons.

“I have no knowledge of any such operations, and if I did, I would not be at liberty to discuss them,” replied the Colonel.

“I’m sure we can all use our imagination.”

“Enough!” snapped the FBI Director; “Can we proceed.”

“Yes, sir,” said Parsons, opening the dossier before him. “Lights please,” the overhead light were extinguished, the room lit only by desk lamps along the table. An agent at the rear of the room switched on a projector and waited.

Parsons cleared his throat; “John Ullrich was born June 15th 1948 in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, the only child of Jan Ullrich and Elizabeth Muller. His father had fled Nazi Germany in 1936 as a young man, due to his left-wing politics and the fact he was Jewish on his mother’s side. A qualified engineer, he got work in the oil industry, primarily working on drilling in design and construction. During the war, although fit and of military age, he was exempted military service, his work deemed of vital importance. 1945, met Elizabeth Muller, married six months later. She travelled with him while he worked, largely in Texas and Alaska. Returned to Minneapolis in early 1948, pregnant, while Jan remained away at work. Gave birth in June to baby son, John. Returned to Texas, to the Dallas-Fort Worth area

January 1949 and set up home there, the father by now pretty firmly based. Here they established your average unremarkable, all-American family.”

While Parsons spoke photos of Ullrich, his friends and family appeared on the screen erected behind him. The faces aged as time unravelled, but through the unfolding years Ullrich’s eyes remained the same: cold, insolent and dangerous.

“In October 1956, when John was eight years old, Jan Ullrich was killed, along with twelve other men, in an explosion on a Texas drilling platform. The mother and son moved to North Carolina, where Elizabeth’s younger sister was living, she being married to a serving army officer, a Captain with the 82nd Airborne stationed at Fort Bragg. Two years later Elizabeth Ullrich committed suicide, drug overdose, apparently, her son discovering the body. He was ten. Consequently, the sister-in-law and her husband took him in and raised him as their own son.

“By all accounts the sister-in-law and her husband were excellent parents, raising the boy as their own, cherishing him as they were unable to have children themselves. John Ullrich distinguished himself at school, both educationally and athletically. In High School he was the star-player on the football team, and was well liked and popular, although school reports mention a tendency to remain aloof.

“His academic guaranteed him a scholarship and place at an Ivy-League College, indeed he received offers from Princeton and Yale. However he decided he wanted to go to West Point and join the army. His uncle, the adopted father, now a Lieutenant Colonel pulled a few strings and in the fall of 1966 John Ullrich arrived in New York and began his four years at the Military Academy.

“At West Point, like everywhere else, Ullrich excelled, popular and respected by his peers, marked out as a fast riser by his superiors, becoming first captain of his class. He graduated summer 1970 and volunteered for Infantry.

“He completed Ranger School, and one remarkable incident while at jungle school on the northern Florida coast marked him out. One of his fellow students was captured by the Ranger instructors, trussed up and bundled away. Now something like this had happened earlier, a soldier captured, then held and tortured, physically and psychologically for two days, to simulate enemy capture and interrogation. When he was released this earlier soldier was broken and he was returned to his unit in disgrace, without his vaunted Rangers patch. Well this second man captured was a good friend of Ullrich, a fellow graduate of the West Point Class of ‘70. So that night, heavily armed, fully camouflaged, he heads out into the swamp, tracks the instructors and their prisoners to a run-down old hut. He checks it out and launches an assault, single-handed. Tossing in smoke and concussion grenades, firing off bursts from his M16, he captured the three highly trained Ranger instructors and freed his friend. Together they tied up the instructors and beat them badly before leaving them gagged and blindfolded. The two young officers returned to camp and completed the course. Word of this got to Charlie Beckwith, the legendary Special Forces officer, and later founder of Delta Force, who had recently completed a tour as an instructor at the Ranger School. Suitably impressed he marked out Ullrich and kept an eye on his progress. After completing Ranger School, Ullrich was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) and sent to Vietnam.

“A year after graduating from West Point, Ullrich was promoted along with his whole class to First Lieutenant. In combat he distinguished himself winning a bronze and silver star and two Purple Hearts. Universally popular with officers and men, his platoon had the highest body count in the 101st, with some of the lowest casualty figures. On the 10 March 1972 Ullrich, now a Captain, left Vietnam with the last of the Screaming Eagles, returning to Fort Campbell. Back in the US he applied for and received transfer to the 82nd Airborne at Fort Bragg.

“During this period his adoptive father died of lung-cancer in a VA hospital near Bragg, having retired on medical grounds a year earlier. Ullrich was with him and his aunt

when he died. Meanwhile at Bragg, he got his jump status up to spec and worked as an instructor while awaiting assignment. Less than six months after arriving back in the states, Charlie Beckwith, also stationed at Bragg with the 5th Special Forces Group, approached Ullrich, whose career he had followed and invited him to join Special Forces. He accepted. After his 17 week selection course and subsequent specialist training he returned to Vietnam.”

Parsons cleared his throat, “As you may understand, gentlemen, details of Ullrich’s career become sketchy from here on in. Officially, US military involvement in Vietnam ended in ’73, the year Ullrich returned with 5th SFG. Ullrich and his 12 man SF unit seemed to operate deep behind enemy lines. Sabotage and, it is rumoured, assassination were the main operational targets, as well as training South Vietnamese troops and irregulars. It is around this time that Ullrich seems to have made links with CIA operatives.”

Parsons glanced from the blank-faced army officers and CIA men, and continued.

“It is also unconfirmed that at this time Ullrich set up smaller, four man squads, effectively to operate as hit-squads.”

No response was evident from either army or CIA parties.

“1975, Ullrich was on one of the last choppers out of the US Embassy compound as Saigon fell, barely escaping to an aircraft carrier waiting just offshore.

“During the late 1970’s Ullrich helped Beckwith set up Delta, the older man’s long cherished dream of a US army formation based on the British SAS, whom Beckwith trained with for a year, 1962-63. 1st Special Forces Detachment-Delta (or Delta for short) was created on 19 November 1977; its prime task was to deal with terrorism threatening American interests.

“The establishment of Delta was set at around 1200 men, organised like the SAS into 16 companies sub-divided into 4 man teams, like Ullrich had operated in Vietnam. Fearing they would lose their best men, elite units like Army Special Forces and the Rangers did their

best to hinder recruiting. However this didn't stop Beckwith from selecting 53 men out of an original 185 volunteers and by early 1979 the group amounted to 79 men and had expanded to 99 by fall. Within twelve months, Delta Force had become so proficient that it could handle any type of anti-terrorist assignment.

“Around this time Ullrich met a young female lawyer based in Washington, Jane Miller, a former military lawyer with JAG, now practising as a civilian. They married in 1977.

“Also from late 1977-78 Ullrich spent a year long secondment with the Israeli Sayeret Maktal, Unit 269, or the Unit as it's simply known, fresh from their rescue of the hostages from Entebbe. Here he picked up tips for the new US Delta unit. Also he made useful, life-long contacts among the Israeli military and intelligence community.

“Rejoining Delta on his return and setting up home at Fort Bragg, Ullrich seems to have enjoyed some degree of stability. His wife became pregnant, but lost the child and the couple learned they could have no more children.

“1979, Iranian ‘students’ break into the US Embassy in Tehran and take all 53 staff members hostage. Delta Force is charged with their rescue and Operation Eagle Claw is devised, wherein Delta soldiers and US Rangers were flown into Iran and delivered to a secluded area some 500km south of Tehran, codenamed Desert One. From there, US Navy helicopters would fly them to the embassy for the rescue. Ullrich went with Beckwith when he briefed the President and White House staff. On this occasion, recounted by Beckwith in his autobiography, then presidential-advisor and until recently our Secretary of State, Warren Christopher seemed genuinely upset by the prospect of having to shoot and kill the Iranian guards. He suggested instead they only shoot them in the legs, a suggestion Beckwith had to gently dissuade them from. Anyway this could be seen as an omen and certainly added to Ullrich disillusionment with politicians. Authorised, the operation proceeded, but dogged by problem after problem, culminating in the mechanical failure of three of the helicopters,

leaving them short. Beckwith aborted the mission. During the evacuation a helicopter and C-130 collided on the ground after refuelling, killing five USAF crewmen and three Marines. Mayhem set in and the troops fled the site, the Marine pilots abandoning their choppers, leaving equipment and classified papers for the Iranians when they arrived two days later. Ullrich was disgusted by the failure, recognising planning contaminated by inter-agency politics, lack of political commitment and a desperately over-manned, over-elaborate plan. What most disillusioned him was not the inevitable failure of the rigid military high command and politicians, was that Beckwith had sided with them, to Ullrich's mind, losing his nerve. Although the Colonel was only dealing the cards dealt to him and protecting his men's lives, his caution soured his and Ullrich's friendship, and thereafter they drifted apart.

“When the media laid the blame at the military's, and more specifically Beckwith's, door, an incensed Ullrich leaked information to the press indicating the failure was simply a matter of a lack of political will, or ‘moral cowardice’, as he was quoted as an unnamed source in the New York Times. Although Beckwith publicly acknowledged sole responsibility for the decision to abort the mission, Ullrich believed the operation would have succeeded, but for what he saw as the incompetence and cowardice of Washington. Ullrich blamed the government, citing the lack of back-up plan in the event of an accident and their lack of will and always half-hearted support. By going to the press, Ullrich, now a Lieutenant Colonel, was risking his career, even imprisonment. When he was linked to the leaks, all hell broke loose. Although there was no direct evidence, it took all Beckwith's clout to save Ullrich's career. The army backed off, determined to avoid a scandal involving such a highly decorated officer. However, Ullrich was removed from Delta and returned to 5th Special Forces Group. His career as a future General, even Chairman of the Joint Chiefs was finished.

“During the early eighties Ullrich was largely based at Bragg, officially working as an instructor in covert warfare and Psy-Ops, but is believed to have become more deeply

involved with the CIA, working as a freelance operative. The Agency acknowledges he worked occasionally as a consultant, but we have reason to believe his function was more active, including covert operations and even wet work. In short he was an assassin.”

The men around the table eyed the contingents from the CIA and the military, all of whom remained blank-faced, except for the Agency Director, who shifted uneasily.

“Although he could have been viewed as a security risk, given the Iran hostage affair, it is reasonable to assume his knowledge of sensitive information was limited to his own operational affairs, facts that would have damaged him as much as the Agency, if revealed.

“ Also in the early eighties Ullrich was sent to Nicaragua to train and assess the right-wing Contra rebels, and on his return his report didn’t make welcome reading in the Reagan White House. Although the report was classified and disavowed, such terms as, ‘ill-disciplined’, ‘inept and dangerous’ and ‘crude and corrupt’ leaked out.

“From 1984-5 Ullrich was stationed in Israel, working as a liaison with Aman, Israeli military intelligence, as well as Mossad and Shin Bet. This was at a time concurrent with events later known as the Irangate affair, or Iran-Contra. Although it’s reasonable to believe Ullrich knew of this operation, we believe he played little active part, especially in the plan to use the extra money raised from selling arms to Iran to fund the Contras, given his low opinion of the Nicaraguan rebels.

“1985, Ullrich returned to Fort Bragg to resume his ostensible role as an instructor, and to continue his nebulous work for the CIA. Also around this time his wife, Jane fell ill, suffering from ovarian cancer. Initially treatment was successful and she went into remission, however in late ’86 she suffered a recurrence and died in June 1987.

“It seems after his wife’s death he threw himself even deeper into his work with the CIA, embracing his no doubt ruthless, violent trade with new vigour. In late 1987 he was promoted to full Colonel, but his duties at Bragg, or in any other official military role seemed to be shrinking, we can only assume his work with the Agency grew.

“He seems to have been involved in Special Ops. In Panama and during the Gulf War, but details are at best sketchy. In March 1993 Ullrich applied for retirement from the army, and after more than thirty years in the military, he left the army in May. However, as best we can tell, Ullrich then went to work full time for the CIA, although as a freelance operative, his duties thinly defined in official records. Our best bet is he was now purely a full-time assassin.

“In January 1994 his aunt, his adoptive mother and only remaining close family member died, aged 65, in a car accident.

“Although still working for the Agency, he seems at this point to have more or less vanished from view, still operational, but to all intent and purposes, invisible.

“In the spring of 1994 a series of well-drilled bank robberies started, all Federal banks, all carried out with military precision, the perpetrators well armed and highly trained.”

“The teams were usually four man, three in the bank, one outside, driving. Initially there were no serious civilian casualties, just some beatings as an incentive. Also around the same time weaponry from US military installations started to go missing, and then, even more worryingly, serving soldiers, officers and enlisted men started disappearing, all from elite units, Special Forces, even Delta, Rangers, Marine Recon, as well as some from Airborne and Marine Corps units. All had links with Ullrich, being friends or men who had served with him or under him at some point, or had been trained by him. It seems he planned not only to form a private army from ex-servicemen, but also to plunder the military’s ranks of its best men, men he knew he could trust.

“In ‘95 the action stepped up a gear with a series of bomb blasts at government buildings across the country and with several fatalities during robberies, chiefly when confronted by law enforcement. But still they hadn’t lost a man. The FBI had received word of suspicions among the military and intelligence community that Ullrich was somehow involved in these incidents. We investigated, with little help from the Pentagon or Langley,

and without Agency help, it was impossible to trace Ullrich. Toward the end of '95 huge amounts of high quality counterfeit currency began to flood the market, we believe from Ullrich. It is likely he received the plates from contact in the Russian military and intelligence community, men he had made contact with since the fall of the Iron Curtain. It is widely believed the Soviets kept plates for the production of US currency, whose production and distribution would destabilise and cripple our economy. It is likely Ullrich is attempting a similar tactic, probably with the help of former and serving Russian Spetsnaz Special Forces men and GRU military intelligence officers. Consequently, the Secret Service came on board, joining our team.

“By now the death toll was rising, chiefly among law enforcement officers during robberies and government employees in the bomb blasts. We were satisfied a year ago that Ullrich was our man, and finally the CIA supplied us with his location in January '96 and agreed to set him up for us, arranging a routine meeting between him and his regular contact. We waited; an ambush set up with a FBI HRT assault team in position, the area sealed up tight, but he never showed. Ullrich was gone, disappeared; he simply vanished. A week later the CIA contact, who set him up, was found dead in his Virginia home, a single bullet in the back of the head.

“And so the crimes continued until a Californian Sheriff and his deputy stumbled over Ullrich a little over three month ago. But now we've lost him, and I fear his operations are about to enter a new, even more violent phase.”

The President's National Security Advisor cleared his throat, “One thing I'm not clear on, when did Ullrich cease to be an employee of the CIA?”

“Well,” the Agency Director coughed, “His position was terminated in January 1996, last year, when the FBI came to us and we tried to bring him in.” the man flustered.

“Holy Shit! You had suspicions about this guy for around two years, and while he was conducting armed robbery, counterfeiting and bombing the hell out of the Federal

Government, you are telling me he was on our payroll. This just gets better and better. What exactly was Ullrich's job at the Agency?" snapped the National Security Advisor.

"Well it is somewhat unclear, officially he was freelance, employed and utilised by officers in various departments. There is little hard evidence, no paper trail, everything was highly classified, very sensitive, complete disavowal." The CIA Director shifted uneasily in his chair.

"So you are saying that Ullrich was an assassin!" asked the astonished presidential advisor.

"It would seem likely, given his qualifications. But there is absolutely no evidence, no proof. It can't be linked back to us."

"Well that's something. What do we know of the men with Ullrich?"

"We have a pretty clear picture, all are from elite units as I have said, have links with Ullrich previously. We have the names and files on all those men on active duty whom vanished over the last couple of years and are believed to be with Ullrich. Also we have files on former servicemen from elite units who are believed to be working with him. However we believe there are many more operating for him who are unknown to us, some of whom may still be serving within the military and even the CIA, feeding him information and supplies. Also there are foreign nationals, former and active servicemen, Russian and Israeli. These men are probably not actively involved in the violence, but must be supplying and otherwise helping Ullrich. He had a very high profile and was popular with special forces types, not just in the US, but around the world."

"Terrific, and who knows what dirt he's got on us. How many men does he have?" asked the National Security Advisor.

"Impossible to be sure. He seems to have cells all across the country. Our best estimate is between 30 and 50 active combatants at any one time, at least as many as support staff, maintaining supplies and bases and spies. But any estimate of his non-active people it is

pure guesswork, who knows how many sleepers he has within the military and intelligence community.” said Parsons.

“Shit!” snarled the presidential advisor.

“I have a brief presentation of a couple of people definitely with Ullrich, if I may?”

Parsons waved to the projectionist.

A picture of a thickset young man in jungle fatigues, a can of beer in his hand appeared on the screen behind Parsons. His cold, flat eyes stared back into the camera. “This is Floyd Hooker, pictured here in Vietnam, 1970. Born 1950 in the mountains of Arkansas, mother died in childbirth. From a long line of white trash. Father was some kind of labourer, a casual worker and odd job man; he never held a job for long. A drunk and a mean one apparently. He and his son lived in a cabin, hunted animals together, for food as much as sport, and his father wasn’t completely inebriated he used to savagely beat the child and leave him chained up when he was out drinking or working. When Floyd was 15 he cut his father’s throat while he was passed out drunk. He spent three years in a juvenile detention facility and when he was 18 the Judge told him he could go on to Jail or join the army and serve his country. He took the latter. Completing basic training, he was assigned to the 101st Airborne and sent to Vietnam, 1969. Besides learning to read in jail, he also learned about the use and selling of illegal narcotics, something he put into practice on the flourishing marketplace of Vietnam. He was investigated for dealing and also for three drug-related murders and several beatings, but there was no proof. Hooker either killed or terrified the witnesses into silence.

“Ullrich arrives in Vietnam 1971 and takes command of Hooker’s platoon. He spots a nascent ability in Hooker as a good soldier, the PFC already proving himself an adept and enthusiastic killer. The young Lieutenant takes him in hand, straightens him out, by threats or promises, or both, and Hooker becomes the perfect soldier. Loyal, obedient and utterly ruthless. Indeed, his army psych-profiles already had him pegged as a psychopath, but I suppose a psychotic killer harnessed and properly directed can be a formidable weapon, and

that is just what Ullrich did. When the 101st left Vietnam, 1972, Hooker was a Corporal. He transferred with Ullrich to the 82nd on his return to the US and then as a Sergeant went with him to Special Forces. So a pattern was set for the rest of his career, as he followed Ullrich from posting to posting. He was Ullrich's right-hand man; his attack dog and he kept him on a short leash. He didn't follow Ullrich into Delta, Beckwith wouldn't have him, recognising how unstable and dangerous he was. He thought a psychopath like Hooker would be as likely to kill all the hostages along with their captors, seeing it as the logical, simplest solution. Hooker stayed at Bragg with the 5th SFG and remained in close contact with Ullrich.

“When Ullrich was dismissed from Delta, he and Hooker hooked back up together and remained together to the end of their military careers, Hooker largely operating as some kind of ad-hoc aide.

“He retired at the same time as Ullrich and seems to have continued operating with him with the CIA. As far as we know they are still together.”

The photo on the screen showed an older, but little changed Hooker, in dress uniform, with green beret and jump boots, bedecked with ribbons and insignia, his Sergeant's chevrons worn proudly on his sleeve. The picture taken shortly before his retirement showed his fierce, cold eyes undimmed by age.

“Also with Ullrich is Captain Michael Larsen, identified by the Californian Sheriff's Deputy as the man with him before his arrest.”

The screen showed a handsome young man dressed in full army uniform.

“Born 1969, in New York City to a wealthy family, father a Wall Street Banker, mother blue-blood socialite, homes across the country. Larsen himself appears the mirror image of the young Ullrich, popular, successful at school, goes to West Point in 1987, first captain of his class, graduates top of his class 1991, goes through Ranger School and joins 82nd Airborne. Meets Ullrich at Fort Bragg, trained by him, helps him gain entry to Special Forces early '93, just before Ullrich retires. Two men remain friends and keep in contact.

Larsen, by now a Captain, is a rising star, being groomed for a top slot in the corporation. Between 1994 and 96 equipment and weapons start to go missing from Bragg, along with other bases, CID investigates, but picks up no leads. Late 1996, more than six months after Ullrich's disappearance, Larsen vanishes. There isn't a word or a single sighting of him until California, just over three months ago, but he had vanished by the time Ullrich was captured."

"How close are you to recapturing Ullrich, or getting any of his men?"

"We following all leads and keeping known associates under surveillance, but there's too much we don't know, he has an entire secret network set up. To be blunt, sir, we're not even close, he won't make another mistake, last time was blind luck."

"You said you're expecting an upsurge in his activity?"

"I have no proof, it's just a feeling I have about the man. Everything so far has been small-fry to him, he is just getting ready, funding, arming, I think something big is coming, soon."

"Any ideas?"

"Anything, he's capable of going the whole way."

"You mean the President himself?"

"It's entirely possible, it may not be imminent, but I can see it in his game-plan."

There was a pause. The room was silent, the only sound the rasping breath of National Security Advisor. He visibly blanched, his skin becoming clammy. Parsons thought he was going to blow his breakfast or having a fucking stroke.

"Shit," he finally whispered. "I better report back to the President." he stood unsteadily and quickly gathered his papers, his aides following suit. "I expect you to keep me apprised of any and all developments, SA Parsons, and anything you need contact me directly."

The overhead light came on and the men began to stand, muttered voices filling the room.

“Good day, gentlemen,” the National Security Advisor muttered breathlessly and hurried from the room.

The door closed with a thud behind him. Murmured voices rose from the shadows in a low moan. Parsons stood alone. Now they all knew what he’d know and believed for months, but dared not admit even to himself.

They were in a world of shit, and a big fucking storm was coming their way.

Chapter 7

Sherilyn Groves pulled into the yard of her ranch and parked her Bronco. Climbing out, she lifted her two bags of groceries and walked into the house. The screen door slammed shut behind her and she walked down the passageway to the kitchen. Passing the living room, she heard the TV and paused and turned.

Inside she saw her brother, Billy sitting on the couch alongside Paul Riesman. The older man, wearing faded jeans, a white T-shirt and sneakers, sat with a cold can of Coke in his hand, a pack of Marlboro Lights cigarettes and Zippo lighter on the arm of the couch. The two were sitting in silence, seemingly engrossed by the TV program, an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

“What you boys doing?” she asked in her Texan twang.

Her brother turned, “Hi, Sherilyn!”

“Just introducing your brother to the pleasures of good television,” said Riesman, half turning and smiling.

“He always preferred the original *Star Trek* show,” she said.

“Yeah, I know, but I pointed out the shortfalls of kitsch, and wised him up. Now he’s with me, Jean-Luc Godard is superior in every way to the porky buffoon, Kirk,” smirked Riesman.

“Right on!” chirped Billy.

“Later I’m going to show him the other two new shows, *Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager*. I’m going to turn young Billy here into a regular TV connoisseur,” said Riesman, sipping his drink.

“That’s nice. You boys just holler if you want anything,” she said, turning to leave.

“Thanks, Sherilyn!” called Billy, already transfixed by the TV.

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Riesman.

She paused, “How many times do I have to tell you, Paul, you can call me Sherilyn.”

“OK, Sherilyn.” She swore he blushed, his ears pinkening, as he turned back to the TV.

In the kitchen she started to unpack her grocery bags, stacking the produce in the cupboards.

She heard footsteps descending the stairs and Hooker entered the kitchen, his Colt .45 automatic pistol in a holster on his belt, a small box under his arm. He shook his head disgustedly, getting a can of bear from the refrigerator.

“What’s up, Hooker?” she asked.

“Them two dead-heads sitting in front of the TV all day. Least Billy got an excuse, but that new guy?” the big man growled, shaking his head, “Don’t know what the Colonel was thinking, bringing him in, I don’t like it.”

“Maybe if you lightened up, sat in front of the TV for a while, you wouldn’t be quite such a jerk sometimes!” she sniped.

Hooker paused, looked at her, his broad head slightly tilted to one side, regarding her, as if lost in reflection.

“Nope, don’t think so,” he replied seriously, blinking his eyes and ambling out of the room.

Sitting on the couch, Riesman heard the screen door open and slam shut. Looking up he saw the huge figure of Hooker sitting down in the bench outside the front window. He pulled his .45 from his holster, popped the magazine out of the heel of the butt, pulled back the slide to eject any round in the chamber, inspected the chamber through the ejection port and released the slide. Then he swiftly field-stripped the pistol, laying out the parts on the table before him, opening the box he placed down beside them and taking out his tools and beginning to methodically clean the weapons individual parts.

A Jeep Grand Cherokee pulled up in the yard in a cloud of dust. The tall, blond figure of Michael Larsen climbed out and walked up to the porch. Smiling, the two men

greeted each other, shaking hands, before Larsen took a seat next to Hooker on the bench. The young officer took a sip from Hooker's beer and they exchanged a few muffled words while Hooker reassembled his pistol, ramming home the magazine and reholstering it. Larsen pulled out a pack of cigarettes, offered one to Hooker, then took one himself. He lit both with an expensive looking lighter and both men sat back, smoking, and staring out in silent reflection.

In the kitchen Riesman could hear the rattle of pans and smell cooking.

The TV show finished and Billy started flicking through the channels with his remote.

Riesman heard an approaching engine and sat forward to see a dark Bronco pull into the yard, Ullrich climbing from the driver's seat, Major Byron, Ullrich's second in command, emerging from the other side, both men heading up onto the porch and greeting the others.

Riesman climbed to his feet and headed out of the room and down the passageway to the front door. He paused just inside the screen door and listened.

"How are things progressing with the operation?" asked Larsen.

"Major Byron assures me everything will be in place in two days, then we just have to choose our time to strike," replied Ullrich.

"We'll show those FBI assholes who they're fucking with!" snarled Hooker.

Riesman opened the screen door and stepped out onto the porch. Hearing footsteps the four closely huddled men turned and looked at Riesman, eyeing him coldly for a moment.

"Afternoon, Mr. Riesman, glad you're here, I've got news for you." Ullrich smiled.

Riesman shifted uneasily, "Sir?"

"Major Byron checked you out, reviewed your military record," he paused, as if for effect, "You're clean."

The men stood, frozen in silence for a moment. Ullrich laughed, "Jesus, you looked like I was going to put a bullet in your head!"

They all laughed, including Riesman, somewhat uneasily.

“Congratulations, you’re in, you’re one of us,” he shook Riesman’s hand

“Yes, sir, thank you, sir,” said Riesman.

“Congratulations, Sergeant Riesman!” Ullrich saluted and Riesman returned it sharply, drawing his heels in and straightening to attention.

The men laughed, except Hooker, who eyed the new soldier uneasily. Larsen slapped Riesman on the back, welcoming him aboard.

“For the time being you will stay with me,” said Ullrich, “I’ll help break you in, train you up and fill you in on our overall mission, although precise operational matters will remain strictly confidential and need-to-know, at least for the time being, just a standard precaution, you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“After lunch we’ll go out to the range, see what you got! You have any preference for sidearm and rifle?”

“Glock 19 pistol and Colt Commando assault rifle, unless that’s a problem, sir?”

“Hell no! Hooker, sort that out after lunch.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What about you, Major, staying for a bite of lunch, maybe some afternoon R&R?”

“Wish I could, Colonel, but I’ve got to get back.”

“Very well, contact me when everything is in place.”

“Yes, sir.” Byron saluted.

“Good luck, Major.” Ullrich returned the salute and both men shook hands and bade farewell.

As they watched Byron drive away into the distance in his Bronco, Ullrich slapped his hands together, “Well, gentlemen, how about a little lunch!”

Chapter 8

The crumbling brick buildings of Washington DC's black ghetto crowded the potholed streets that ran down to the polluted Anacostia River. Set back from the river's edge, looking like a twelve-story apartment complex, stood a government building, the upper floors of which housed the FBI's Washington Metropolitan Field Office. Those who worked there called it Buzzard Point, the actual name of the spit of land.

The FBI Headquarters, or the J. Edgar Hoover Building as it was officially named but never called by the agents and others who worked there, on Pennsylvania Avenue, was seen by the public as the hub of the Bureau's nationwide activities, but in reality it housed the administrative agency that set policy and oversaw the activities of 55 field offices, each with its own territory. Aside from a few laboratories, its function was almost entirely bureaucratic.

WMFO, or Buzzard Point, was just such a field office, but because its territory included the 'District' and surrounding suburbs, its investigations often assumed a national scope.

Six-foot high grey carpeted office baffles separated one squad from another; the contained office areas referred to by the agents as bullpens. The Ullrich Task Force bullpen contained twelve desks, thirteen including that of the team secretary, a severe, matronly woman called Iris Lessing. Her thin, hard appearance face belied a warm, if formal nature, and she had become a vital part of the squad, acting as a kind of den mother to the largely young agents.

While Iris sat, her dark hair drawn tightly back, half-moon glasses perched on the tip of her nose, scratching notes in her shorthand pad, SA Jeff Parsons sat perched atop the edge of his desk, dressed in shirt-sleeves, a coffee mug cradled between his hands, addressing the assembled agents. Almost all those hand-picked by Parsons were in their late twenties or very early thirties, fresh-faced, eager, fast-risers within the Bureau. The assembled men and women were all highly gifted, highly qualified, the bold, clean, high-tech new face of the

FBI. All had college degrees, most doctorates, in fields as diverse as law, medicine, psychology, computer design and programming and even business administration. Parsons had selected them from field offices across the country, from Quantico, especially the profilers and medical experts; some had even been snatched straight from the FBI Academy. He needed their skills, their unrefined, unjaded insights, and most of all he needed to be able to trust them. Leaks could well prove to be a problem with Ullrich's links to the intelligence community, and older hands were potential security risks.

One figure stood out in the sea of young faces. SA Phil Meeks, at 41, was the only man on the team older than Parsons, but the senior agent had known him since joining the Bureau and trusted him with his life. Besides, the burly former Marine had skills Parsons was much in need of. In today's high-tech FBI Meeks possessed the old-fashioned, but essential, talents of an investigator, the dogged mind, tough-willed skills of Q&A and interrogation, the capacity to strong-arm suspects and charm witnesses, a dedication to classic, but unfashionable leg-work. The younger agents saw him as a dinosaur, a relic, and it was an image he cultivated, taking pleasure in tweaking their noses. Unlike the smartly-dressed whiz-kids, he wore a crumpled, shiny suit, long in need of a clean, creased shirts and stained ties, scuffed shoes, greying hair shorn Marine style, probably for a buck-fifty, his broad leathery face often covered by a day or twos beard growth. In addition to his constant smoking, especially in non-smoking areas, and occasional whisky breath, his language was colourful to say the least, peppered with expletives and defiantly non-PC terms. The squeaky-clean, politically correct younger agents were frequently appalled, just as Meeks intended.

Parsons set aside his mug and stood and approached a large-scale map of the United States, dotted with pins.

“So no confirmed sightings of Ullrich or known accomplices?” he asked.

“Nothing credible.” said one young agent.

“Just fruit-loops. Saw him with Elvis, getting off a flying-saucer,” muttered Meeks, lighting another cigarette. While the others remained silently stony-faced, the small, bookish Aaron Meyer stifled a snigger. Parsons had noticed that Meeks had become a hero and something of a role model for the young Ivy-League law graduate.

“Well we didn’t expect anything else. What about known associates, anything from the wire-taps?” asked Parsons.

“Zilch, nada,” said Meyer, “Maybe we could send Phil in to strong-arm them, sweat them in the box!”

“You been watching too much TV, kid. You’d be as likely to get anything out of these motherfuckers, almost all are ex-military or intelligence types, gung-ho special forces nuts and spooks. They’re about as likely to crack as you are to get a date, Aaron.” Meyer blushed as Meeks guffawed.

“Any foreign nationals in the country, anything from abroad?” Parsons sighed.

“We’ve got one Israeli contact of his stationed at their embassy here in town, a Shimon Betser, officially some under-secretary for commerce, but he’s a spook, former paratrooper, now he’s Mossad. Ullrich worked with him on both his stints in Israel, in the seventies and eighties.” said one agent, a young, studious looking woman, pushing her spectacles back up her nose.

“How long has he been here?”

“Three months, also another Israeli national, David Yariv, 35, a serving soldier with the paratroopers and the Unit, a known contact from the eighties, is on leave for six months and travelling around the US, sightseeing. Been here less than a month.”

“Have we got a track on him?”

“He pops up now and then, but then vanishes again. Perfectly natural of course, bumming around the country by bus and train, occasionally hiring a car, staying in a motel,

all paid in cash of course, from where we don't know, we can't track him from automatic tellers, and he keeps dropping our tails and vanishing."

"Last seen?"

"Grand Canyon, of course. Always pops up at some tourist trap or other, uses a credit card to book into a motel, draws money from an automatic teller, all modest amounts. Stays visible for a day or two, then vanishes again. Five days since the last sighting."

"Let me know when and where he pops up next. Anything abroad?"

Another agent replied, a tall, athletic young agent with a crooked smile, "Russian police had been tracking former intelligence and military officers suspected of involvement in illegal arms sales and other illicit business. One, Yuri Pletsov, 42, former Spetsnaz special forces officer and GRU military intelligence agent, has vanished. Top dog in military, Colonel, expected to become one of their youngest Generals ever until he was dismissed, being under suspicion of plotting a military coup with others, planning to assassinate President Yeltsin and seize power. Since then he's been equally high powered in the world of organised crime. Suspect in several gangland related killings and the murders of police officers, businessmen and government officials."

"Sounds familiar."

"Last seen in Moscow, ten days ago, then disappeared without a trace, along with two known associates, Nikolai Maxim and Mikhail Burghov, both mid-thirties, both ex-Spetsnaz. It's believed Ullrich may have met Pletsov in the early 90's, both took part in the first joint Russian/NATO military exercise and moved in similar circles around that time. Of course we don't expect Pletsov to try and enter the country under his own name, but he has access to high-grade forgeries from former GRU and KGB operatives. No sightings as yet."

"Could already be in the country, there are plenty of ways for a spook with his resources to slip in, he isn't going to fly into JFK or Newark, he could slip ashore from an old

Russian spy-ship, anything. If he's smart he may even enter Canada or Mexico and sit tight and wait to be contacted by Ullrich," said Parsons, scanning the map.

"So no contacts, sightings, no attributable criminal activity! Nothing on any of the military personnel who disappeared and are now probably working with Ullrich?" the agents shook their heads and Parsons turned, "So we have nothing?"

SA Jane Larkin cleared her throat, "With respect, sir, there is the matter of the missing prisoner!" Parsons frowned, "The missing body from the convoy ambush, Paul Riesman, his present location remains unknown."

"Not entirely unknown, you have Riesman's military and criminal record, ex-Sergeant in the 101st Airborne, highly decorated veteran, discharged to become heavy-duty armed robber. We are proceeding with the assumption he has been recruited, he fits the profile. He's with Ullrich now."

"Taken on spec, change or return, if he doesn't work out he could end up like Ullrich's other rejects," Meyer shaped his hand into a pistol and pointed his index-finger at his head, "Boom, bullet in the head and a shallow grave."

"Not so shallow, we haven't found any bodies yet. All that's rumour and speculation, Meyer," snapped another male agent.

"It's obvious, isn't it, if you don't shape up... Ullrich isn't going to allow any leaks," said an overexcited Meyer.

"That all maybe so, but it doesn't get us anywhere right now, until we know otherwise, we work on the assumption Riesman is with Ullrich, we add his name and ID to the others circulated across the country. At present he is as invisible as Ullrich."

Parsons moved back to the desk, adjusting the holster on his belt holding his Smith & Wesson 10mm semi-automatic pistol and perched himself on the edge of his desk. He looked around the room at the eager faces of his team. On the warm summer's day almost all had removed their jacket and sat in shirtsleeves, revealing their personal weapons fitted in holsters

attached at their waists. Most of the men carried S&W 10mm automatics like him; the pistol especially designed for the Bureau, while the rest of the men and women wore the more compact SIG P228. But as they sat there pouring over their reams of paper, the guns were useless, and they would remain useless until they had a target.

“We have nothing then. We don’t know what to expect next, we can only guess.”

Parsons sighed, rubbing his hands across his face.

“Didn’t stop you volunteering your guesswork to the National Security Adviser and the White House. I hear the President’s shitting himself, keeps cancelling appearances, won’t go out. His advisers want your head on a platter, reckon you scared the B-Jesus out of him.” Meyer called out, causing a ripple of raucous laughter to pass through the group.

“Okay, okay,” said Parsons, smiling broadly, struggling to suppress a laugh.

“I mean the President ain’t exactly the bravest guy in the world, you know!” giggled Meyer.

“Hey,” called Meeks, “Everyone calls the President a coward for dodging the draft for Vietnam, but it takes a brave man to marry and stay with a wife like his, that frosty bitch scares the hell out of me!” he bellowed with laughter.

“Brrr!” Meyer shivered, “Know what you mean, she ain’t exactly warm and soothing, I just shrivel up thinking about her!”

“Hey knock it off, you Neanderthals!” snarled SA Larkin.

“Oh sorry, I forgot, Larkin here worships our first lady, models herself on her, that’s where she gets her warm and charming personality from!” Meyer raised his hands in mock defence.

“Fuck you, Meyer!” Larkin snarled and Meeks and Larkin high-fived while the rest of the group laughed on.

Parsons retrieved his suit-jacket from the back of his chair and pulled it on.

“I’ve got to go out for lunch, to meet someone. The rest of you stay here, you got to work through, double-check everything. You can get take-out,” he said as he moved out of their bullpen.

“Can we get Chinese?” called Meyer.

“Whatever,” said Parsons and left.

* * *

Parsons drove his Bureau-issue dark sedan through the busy lunchtime traffic, reaching the centre of DC and its glistening white monuments almost half-an-hour later. He parked his car and walked the short distance to the small green in front of the Lincoln Memorial. He approached the bench where a single man sat reading *The Washington Post*. He took a seat next to him and gazed into the bright, sunlit distance.

CIA Deputy-Director Richard Hobson folded his newspaper and laid it on his lap. Interlocking his fingers he watched Parsons out of the corner of his eye.

“Well, Jeff, how’s it going?” he asked.

“It isn’t, we haven’t got shit. You?” Parsons replied.

“Nothing from our people, Ullrich and his people have gone completely to ground.”

“Won’t be for long. Have you heard anything from our man inside?”

“Nothing. No contact, he hasn’t picked up any of our messages at the dead-drop areas, or left anything for us. No telephone messages, nothing.”

“Not surprising, I suppose. Chances are they are keeping a close eye on him at the moment, especially with them all keeping their heads down. Do you know whether his records have been checked?”

“Hard to tell, we had the records switched and planted, they’re sitting there waiting.”

“The switch is secure?”

“The whole operation is secure. Only you and I know all the details. The operatives used only know of their limited role, and that’s how it’ll remain. One of my most trusted men switched the files, and he along with those who doctored them up, don’t know anything, they just did their parts and walked away.”

“I just hope he’s okay.”

“He knew what he was doing when he volunteered. I have faith in his abilities.”

“You should do, you recommended him.”

“Don’t lay that shit on me, he’s one of your men, an FBI Agent with the HRT at Quantico, yours was the final decision, I just saw his military record and experience as a useful tool.”

“Jesus! I just don’t want another death on my conscience. As it is it looks like we’re going to have to wait until Ullrich surfaces again and makes another hit. One way or another it looks as if more people are going to have to die before we stop Ullrich.”

“Perhaps now you will give further consideration to my recommendation for a terminal solution.”

Parsons turned on Hobson, gazing fiercely into his eyes, “You mean kill Ullrich, execute him. Don’t you realise that’s how you created this monster in the first place. Ullrich was one of your assassins, now you want to assassinate him.”

“The fiasco last time we arrested him should show you the folly of further lawful procedures. Besides, after your little warning to the President, you’ve finally scared him enough to sign an executive order.”

“He’s sanctioned the killing?” asked Parsons, aghast.

“Not yet, but he will.” Hobson spoke calmly, smiling, “It’s not just our terrified President trying to save his own skin, he’s been constantly counselled of the security threat Ullrich poses if he ever comes to trial.”

“You mean the embarrassment he could cause. He knows too much dirt doesn’t he?”

“He knows where the bodies are buried, if he comes to trial and blabs, the shit’s really going to hit the fan. With that, and his natural terror, our Chief Executive will sign the order any day now.”

“But what about Ullrich’s men, his army?”

“Cut off the head, kill the beast. Besides, we can eliminate enough of them at the same time, and if our man on the inside works out, we’ll have enough names and evidence to deal with the rest. The small fry can be charged, they don’t know enough to be any risk. The others will have to go with their leader. One way or another, with Ullrich gone, his little army will be finished.”

“I won’t be a party to this, I’m not a killer. If he goes down in the line of fire, fair enough, but I will not become an assassin, like Ullrich. I will not descend to his level. I will pursue the lawful course using all means, but I will not be a party to a hit-squad.” Parsons sat forward on the bench, his voice rising.

“Take it easy, Jeff, I might not even come to that, I was only thinking out loud, blowing off a little steam, your way may still work, I’ll back you. But you have got to be aware of the reality of the situation, I’m on your side, but there are others in the White House and elsewhere who want you removed from this case, for all their own reasons.” Hobson laid a reassuring hand on Parsons’s shoulder.

“Okay, okay. But remember, I’m an FBI Agent, I am sworn to uphold the law, not to set it aside when convenient.”

“Your a damn boy-scout, is what you are!” Hobson laughed, “I just wish I had the luxury of your principles.”

“I got to go.” Parsons stood.

“Sure. By the way, how’s married life treating you? What’s it been, 18 months?”

Parsons paused and smiled wanly, “Yeah, just fine, only Sarah keeps complaining she doesn’t see enough of me.”

“You should take a little time, I don’t mean leave or anything, just don’t be working all the hours God sends, back off a little. Let your team pick up the slack. Besides you said you’ve got nothing on Ullrich until he surfaces.”

“Maybe you’re right. Anyway, I better get back. Contact me if you have anything, especially any word from our man.”

“You bet. Take care, Jeff.” Hobson smiled and reopened his newspaper as Parsons walked away.

* * *

Parsons headed through the slow moving traffic, moving down to the Anacostia River, Buzzard Point almost in sight. He wound down his window and let the warm breeze play over his damp face.

His cell phone buzzed and Parsons reached into his jacket, pulled it out, opened it and held it to his ear.

“Agent Parsons.” he said, guiding the car down the sloping road to the river.

“Jeff, how are you?” John Ullrich’s voice came through clearly, causing Parsons to almost swerve off the road.

“Ullrich, where are you?” Parsons slowed his vehicle, gripping the phone tightly.

“What, no more ‘Jack’, I thought we were on first name terms? Aren’t we friends?” Ullrich asked pleasantly.

“You know we aren’t friends, I gave up being civil after you killed more than twenty Federal Marshals and four members of the FBI in your escape.”

“Nothing personal, but you managed to remain polite after the other Police officers and FBI Agent I killed, did I cross a line, can you tell me where it is, for future reference?”

“What do you want, Ullrich?” Parsons snapped.

“Just delivering a message.” the line went dead.

Parsons snapped shut his phone, checking through his car windows, scrutinising the surrounding motorists, the pedestrians on the sidewalks. Parsons didn't get it, what was Ullrich talking about? He accelerated his car and headed toward Buzzards Point.

Within minutes he was within sight and drove up to the gate, reaching inside his jacket for his pass.

Suddenly there was a huge explosion, and the twelve- story building ahead erupted, thick white clouds of dust and smoke engulfing it. Parsons' car leapt several feet clear of the ground as the air around was rent by the searing blast. Parsons dropped down across the front seats as his windshield exploded, shards of glass and shattered masonry blasting into the car. He howled in anguish as the massive concussion threatened to blow his eardrums and glass and jagged masonry sliced into his face like shrapnel.

Slowly the noise stilled, smoke and swirling dust engulfing the entire Buzzard Point peninsula and an eerie silence descended.

Parsons' battered sedan, windows shattered, tires burst, paintwork scarred, scorched and blackened, lay lifeless in the gateway. Slowly the driver's door creaked open and a tattered, bloody figure stumbled out. Parsons cuffed the blood from his eyes, but more spilled from the gash in his forehead. He stumbled a few steps, sliding along the length of his car, his Smith & Wesson automatic dangling from his left hand.

Slowly the clouds of dust cleared, the smoke thinned, but there was no building to be seen. The twelve-storey government building was gone, in its place stood two crumbling pillars, between them a shattered mound of debris engulfed in sheets of white-hot flame.

Parsons stared at the shattered ruins and slid down the side of his car, falling to the ground, his pistol dropping from his hand. Tears streamed down his blackened face, leaving trails through the bloody soot.

Parsons' phone buzzed and he pulled it out, lifting it to his ear and heard Ullrich's voice.

"Message delivered."

* * *

They were all dead, the whole of Parsons' team; the entire Ullrich Task Force wiped out with a single blow. Although it was only an hour and a half since the blast, and some survivors had been found, mostly people outside the building during the explosion, or blown clear, Parsons knew they were all dead. Indeed given the severity of the damage and fire only now brought under control, there was little chance of any identifiable remains being found.

Parsons sat on the tailgate of an ambulance, the paramedics having patched him up, but he refused to leave the scene yet and go to hospital to be checked out, despite the risk of shock.

Having briefed senior Bureau officials, he sat alone, wrapped in a blanket, his face covered with stitched wounds and dressings, a bandage wrapped around his head. Pale-faced, his eyes sunk in deep hollows, he stared blankly off into space.

Richard Hobson approached his friend and sat beside him in the ambulance's rear-doorway.

"You okay, Jeff?" he asked softly, but Parsons didn't reply, "You really ought to go to the hospital, get yourself checked out."

"There must have been almost five hundred people in that building, only a fraction of them FBI or other law enforcement branches, most were just innocent people working in innocuous government offices. Why did Ullrich have to kill them all? Just to get my team?"

"I don't think that was it, although he did want to damage the investigation. This was bigger than that; he was hitting at the very government itself. This blast dwarfs Oklahoma

City, he obliterated this building. It was symbolic, if he was determined to destroy the investigation, why did he let you live?"

The two men sat in silence for a few moments.

"About your plan, your terminal solution?" asked Parsons blankly.

"Yeah, what?"

"Let's do it, let's kill this motherfucker."

Chapter 9

The dark sedan swept up the main thoroughfare, pulling up alongside the curb of the broad sidewalk that ran alongside the large glass and metal building that housed the Denver's First Federal Bank. The four smartly dressed men inside all hid behind dark glasses. Along with their suits and ties, they wore lightweight combat boots.

Riesman sat in the rear of the car, alongside a hard-faced Ranger called Cooper. Michael Larsen was in the front passenger seat, another other Ranger, Parker, behind the wheel. The team had flown into Colorado from Texas the previous day on orders from Ullrich.

Larsen and Cooper carried Colt Commando automatic rifles hidden beneath their jackets on short slings, their butts fully retracted. Their long, curved 30 round magazines were loaded with green-tip rounds, 5.56mm bullets with a tungsten carbide penetrator at the tip that could penetrate armour. Across the driver's knees there rested a Mini-SAF sub-machine gun, loaded with a thirty round transparent plastic magazine.

The men checked their weapons, while Riesman watched. He had not been allowed to carry a rifle, only sidearms. He guessed he was still on trial, whether they worried he'd whack his buddies or wig out and grease a load of civilians, he wasn't sure. Either way, he accepted the order without question. He checked his Glock 19, chambering a round and sliding the pistol back into his holster. He hoped to even things up by carrying plenty of extra ammo, one 15 round magazine already loaded, another two spare attached to his belt, alongside his holster. Also, concealed beneath his jacket he wore black webbing like a waistcoat, slung with six extra magazines and two flashbang stun grenades. Also he carried his sub-compact 9mm Glock 26 in an ankle-holster as a back-up weapon. Both guns were loaded with Teflon-coated rounds.

All four men wore lightweight bulletproof vests, which would probably stop a pistol round, but if they came up against cops with automatic rifles they would be pretty much

useless. All wore black leather gloves and each of the passengers in the car had hidden in their ears clear plastic radio-receivers, all fed into the radios and scanners manned by the driver in the car.

An hour earlier, two former intelligence whizzes of Ullrich's had hacked into the bank and had disabled their silent alarm, leaving the oblivious employees totally vulnerable.

Larsen nodded to the driver, Parker, and turned to the two men in the rear and flashed a grin, "OK, let's do it!"

Larsen was the first out of the car and into the bank. He moved through the lunchtime throng, checking the interior. He took in the manager at his desk and the main vault door open, plus two security guards. One was thick-set and in his fifties, probably ex-cop, standing near the doors, chatting amiably with a young female employee. The second guard was little more than a pimply teenager, a wannabe cop. Both men carried cheap Ruger automatics

A few seconds later Cooper entered the bank and moved to a side counter, ostensibly to fill out a form. Finally Riesman entered, stationing himself inside the doors.

Larsen scanned the bank one final time, then nodded once to his two men, turned, bent and pulled on a black ski mask. Cooper did likewise. Riesman swallowed once and pulled a heavy black sap from his belt, moved up behind the older guard and swung down heavily, striking him across the back of his neck. The man dropped and hit the floor face down. Riesman bent over him, pulled out a hoop of plastic flex plastic hoop of flex and secured the guard's wrists. Before rising, Riesman paused, pulled on his ski mask and then straightened up, drawing his pistol.

The staff and customers, who had turned to see the commotion, screamed, but a sudden shout from the rear of the bank drew their attention away.

"This is a robbery, nobody moves, nobody gets hurt!" shouted Larsen from behind his mask, his Commando assault rifle aimed from the shoulder.

Meanwhile, Cooper raised his rifle and bore down on the other guard, shoving the muzzle of his weapon in the callow youth's face. "Don't even fucking think about it!" the Ranger snarled. The youth blanched. "On your face!" Cooper barked and the guard dropped to his knees. Cooper knocked him flat onto his face and secured his hands with flexi-cuffs and removed his pistol and stuck it in his own belt. "Don't you fucking move now!" he said, straightening up.

"Everybody down on your knees, hands on your heads. If you can't kneel, sit. Don't speak, don't move!" the staff and customers fell to the floor, the only sound in the bank a gentle whimpering among some of the female customers. "Nobody try to be a hero. We're here for the bank's money, not your money, your money is insured by the Federal government!" Larsen marched the length of the tellers' counters, rounding the end; he approached the manager, on his knees by his desk.

"Give me the keys!" Larsen barked.

"I don't... I can't..." the man whimpered.

Larsen grabbed him, hoisting him to his feet by his shirtfront, "Don't you fucking lie to me!" Allowing his rifle to fall back beneath his jacket, he held the manager at arm's length with his left hand, and punched him once hard with his right. Blood streamed down the man's face, into his mouth and over his chin. There was a gasp from the hostages; sudden violence and copious blood always did wonders for order and compliance. Larsen tore open the manager's shirt, hanging around his neck on a thin chain were two gleaming metal keys. He tore them free and shoved the man back to the ground. "You stay there and don't fucking move or make a sound!"

Larsen walked to the open vault entrance. He checked Cooper across the way from him, rifle raised to his shoulder, sweeping the kneeling hostages. He nodded, glanced over to Riesman by the doors, pistol held two handed in a combat-stance, covering the hostages and the main entrance.

Larsen used the keys to open the inner door and moved into the heart of the vault. Inside, on trolleys, were three large pallets wrapped in plastic. Larsen pulled three large collapsible bags from beneath his jacket and opened them. From his pocket he pulled a switchblade knife, snapping open the blade. He lifted the first slab of cash, placed it in one of the bags, sliced open the plastic with his knife, turned the package over and emptied it into the bag, tossing the empty plastic away. He repeated this twice more, then slid one of the bags down the length of the vault.

“Go!” Larsen shouted, Cooper appeared, hoisting the bag over his shoulder, its strap crossing his chest. Bearing the huge weight as if with ease, he walked the length of the bank, brandishing his rifle. He paused at the door, nodded to once Riesman and headed out. Outside he paused, allowed the rifle to slip back underneath his jacket, pulled off his ski mask, ran his hand over his hair and replaced his dark glasses. Without hesitation, he marched across the sidewalk, through the milling pedestrians. He popped the front passenger door, leaving it ajar, then opened the rear door and slipped inside. Leaning forward he clutched his rifle across his knees and slapped his fellow Ranger on the shoulder and gave a short laugh.

Inside the bank, Larsen emerged from the vault, slid one packed bag across the floor to Riesman and then slung the other across his shoulder.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, we are leaving now. I suggest you stay exactly where you are and do not try to leave the bank or raise the alarm for at least ten minutes. If you do, it could prove fatal!” called Larsen as he walked through the bank, keeping his rifle drawn and aimed.

Suddenly a door opposite Riesman opened and another uniformed guard appeared. His jaw dropped open aghast and he quickly snatched his pistol from his holster, bringing it up.

“Down!” screamed Larsen and Riesman dropped to one knee, squeezing off three quick shots, the bullets tearing into the guard’s legs, shattering his kneecaps. The pistol spun

out of the man's hands, as he screamed in agony, but Larsen brought his rifle round and squeezed off a three-shot burst, the bullets ripping open the guard's chest, dropping him dead.

Riesman slung the bag and both men stormed out of the bank, tearing off their masks, and hastened across the sidewalk, bewildered pedestrians looking around, having heard the noise, but seemingly unable to process it. The two men jumped into the car, Riesman in the rear, Larsen up front.

"Go!" barked the Captain and the sedan peeled away from the kerb and headed off into the downtown traffic.

"The shooting's just been reported, cops are on the way," said the driver, listening into the scanner.

"What the fuck happened?" asked Cooper.

"Another guard. We wasted him," muttered Riesman.

"Another guard? What the fuck do you mean, there were only meant to be two!" the Ranger snapped back.

"Does it matter, just shut the fuck up!" snarled Larsen.

The men drove in silence through the swiftly moving traffic.

"Cops!" called the driver, looking in his rear-view mirror. The men turned and saw a squad car a couple of cars back.

"Shit!" cursed Cooper, pulling round his rifle. Riesman fingered his pistol uneasily.

"Hold it!" said Larsen as two more cruisers streaked past them in the opposite direction, lights flashing, sirens blaring. The driver behind them slowed, signalled, then swung out of the traffic, pulling a U-turn in the centre of the street and sped off in the opposite direction, switching on his lights and siren.

"Nothing, they haven't made us, we've made it, we're clear!" called Parker, unable to keep the joy from his voice.

Near the city limits, they ditched the car and switched to another vehicle and sped out of Denver into the mountains. Fifteen minutes later the bomb left aboard the abandoned getaway car detonated, the blast ripping the vehicle apart. The broken wreck dissolved in a sea of white-hot flames, black smoke billowing skyward.

Chapter 10

Parsons entered the FBI Building on Pennsylvania Avenue. Surgical dressings still covered some of the injuries on his face. In addition to various nicks and bruises, a livid scar traversed his forehead, held together by nearly 20 stitches.

With the destruction of the Buzzards Point Field Office he had been assigned offices in the Hoover building to head up a new Ullrich team.

He passed through the metal-detectors and a guard checked his pass. As he crossed the foyer, a voice called out, "Special Agent Parsons?" He turned to see a small wiry man, mid-30s with short, dark hair hurrying towards him.

"Yes?" replied Parsons to the eagerly smiling young man.

"I'm Agent Philip Newman, the Director assigned me to you as an aide, to help you set up the new team."

"I'm not sure there's going to be a task force. I have two agents in mind to work with me, if I can have them reassigned. We don't have time to set up a team and get them up to speed, and at this point I'm not sure additional manpower would do us any good."

"I understand, the Director has told me to advise you that you have carte blanche, you will be operating with his direct authority, reassignment of personnel will be no problem. You will report directly to the Director, and only the Director. Through him you will be liaising with the White House and the other agencies involved." Parsons nodded.

The two men entered an elevator and travelled up five floors. Newman led Parsons down a maze of corridors and opened a door. Inside sat a young blonde woman, only in her mid-twenties. She smiled sadly up at Parsons in a pitying way he had become familiar with.

"This is Miss Hopkins, she will be your secretary." Newman said brusquely, but Parsons paused to shake her hand as she rose.

"Miss Hopkins," he said.

"It's Laura, sir. It will be a pleasure working with you," she coloured slightly.

“Thank you, Laura.” He was suddenly struck by the difference between this young attractive woman and his former secretary, Iris, whose her hard face and formal manner belied her kind nature. He felt the memories and emotions welling up. He blinked away the sting of tears and hurried inside his office, shutting the door behind him.

“There are offices allocated down the hall for any personnel working with you.” Newman stood at the desk, as Parsons slumped into his chair.

“What’s your background, Newman?”

“Well sir, I graduated in law from Princeton, joined the Bureau and after the academy I worked at the Chicago and Los Angeles Field Offices. After three years I was promoted here and since then I have worked for the Director’s office.” He said proudly.

Parsons rubbed his face, and said through his hands, “So you’re not a Field Agent.”

“I did work in the field during my time in Chicago and LA, I worked on some high-profile white-collar fraud cases, also I cracked a case of some corrupt public officials.”

Parsons sat forward, sighing wearily. He pulled forward a sheet of paper and drew out his pen, writing down two names. He leant across the desk and handed the sheet to Newman. “Those are the two agents I want. SA Willis is with the Organised Crime Unit, SA Vansen is with the HRT at Quantico.”

Newman scanned the paper, “Right, sir, no problem, I’ll get right on it.”

For a moment Parsons thought the agent was going to salute, but he just turned swiftly on his heel and headed to the door. Opening it, he came face to face with the powerful figure of Richard Hobson filling the doorway. The CIA man grinned broadly and snatched the paper from the other man’s hand, scanned it and handed it back. Newman opened his mouth in shock, as if about to protest, when Laura, the secretary, hovering at Hobson’s elbow, announced, “Deputy-Director Hobson to see you, sir.”

Hobson breezed past the aggrieved Newman and then guided him out the door, “That’ll be all, Agent!” He shut the door firmly behind him.

“Jesus, Jeff, what the hell was that?” laughed Hobson slipping into the seat across the desk.

Parsons shook his head, “Would you believe my aide, courtesy of the Director.”

“Well he’ll be a lot of use!”

“I’ll keep him out of the way, maybe try and get rid of him later. Anyway he could prove useful, let the Director think his spy is watching me.”

Hobson sat back in his chair and lit a cigarette, “The names?”

“Agents I want assigned to me.”

“Just two?”

“All I need, we got to travel light. I need people I can trust. Besides, it looks like our private source is our only lead at the moment. Any further word from our man?”

“Not yet, but there is something else, something I think you should see.” Hobson put out his cigarette and stood, pulling a videocassette from his case and crossed the room and slid it into the VCR in the corner. Blurry black and white images filled the TV screen.

“What am I looking at?” asked Parsons.

“First Federal Bank in Denver, robbed yesterday.”

“I heard.”

“Looks like our boys.”

“I agree.”

“This is the surveillance tape.” The two men watched the flickering frames.

“Here’s our first man.” Hobson paused the tape as a tall blonde man walked through the front doors, the camera catching his face only for a second as he moved inside. “I’m having this enhanced, but I’m pretty sure this is Captain Michael Larsen, at present AWOL from the United States Army Special Forces.”

Parsons sat forward.

Hobson unpaused the tape and let it run on. “Here’s number two, we don’t get a good shot of him, an ID will be unlikely.” The second suspect moved to the side of the bank, face averted. “And finally number three.” A tall, slim, dark-haired man entered and stood inside the door and waited, the camera clearly catching his face for an instant.

“Jesus!” Parsons rounded his desk.

The tape ran on. The man inside the door knocked down the guard and in seconds the now masked robbers had secured the bank and subdued the occupants. Larsen gained entry to the vault, got the money and sent the first man out of the bank. Finally Larsen and the man by the door prepared to make their exit, when the guard appeared from the side-door. They watched in silence as the guard drew his weapon and fired, but was then gunned down where he stood. The two robbers left the bank and Hobson switched off the tape.

“We’re fucked!” muttered Parsons.

“Calm down, I’m dealing with the tape, I’ve got my best technicians working on it. The crucial images will be significantly blurred by this afternoon.”

“This is bad.”

“It was Larsen who fired the fatal shots.”

“We’re losing control of this situation.”

“Everything is under control. Trust me.”

The two men stood in silence, the morning shadows crossing the room.

Chapter 11

Riesman had returned from Denver with Larsen the day after the robbery. Back at the ranch in Texas, the Captain had reported to Ullrich and the satisfied Colonel had congratulated the new recruit, welcoming him into the heart of his organisation.

Ullrich, having made clear that there were no restrictions on the Sergeant now, had taken him through rigorous training in the Killing House and on the shooting ranges, concentrating in particular on his sniping skills. In addition to his Glock pistols and Colt Commando assault rifle he had been issued with a HK MSG90 automatic sniping rifle, fitted with a 10x telescopic sight and capable of holding a 5 or 20 round magazine. Working in close concert with the Marine sniper, Suarez, he had practised his precision shooting in a variety of conditions and environments: day and night shooting, hitting moving and static targets, obscured and open, shooting under hostile fire. Suarez had taken Riesman aside and the quietly spoken, taciturn Marine had tutored him in advanced camouflage and concealment, wearing modern sniper suits, ghillies, covering himself with foliage, paint, then merging into the landscape for hours on end, waiting patiently without movement, weathering the cramps and boredom, the exhaustion, then moving silently and invisibly from position to position. Meanwhile, Ullrich had taught Riesman techniques of silent killing, using silenced firearms, knives, garrotes and bare hands. With detailed training in martial arts and unarmed combat, Riesman could soon stalk, kill and escape silently, eliminating and vanishing without trace.

After a week, Ullrich declared himself satisfied and promised Riesman that they would have a chance to test his new won skills soon.

Ullrich left the ranch with Larsen and Hooker leaving Riesman alone at the ranch, with only Suarez and Sherilyn and Billy for company. While Suarez disappeared out each morning with his rifle, Riesman would spend his spare time, after some physical training and cleaning and test-firing his weapons, with Billy, and occasionally Sherilyn too.

Usually Riesman and Billy would sit and watch TV together or play video games on the Playstation Sherilyn had bought her brother. Also Riesman had retuned the old piano in the den, as best he could, and after banging out some pieces of music, he was now trying to teach Billy to play a few tunes. Meanwhile, Sherilyn would look on, happily smiling, before the three of them would share a pleasant, leisurely lunch together.

After a couple of days, Sherilyn asked Riesman to travel into the nearby small town of Maddock with her to pick up some groceries. Mid-morning they climbed into her Bronco and she drove them the ten miles into town.

Maddock was a ramshackle town, dying by inches, home to a little over 100 souls, a fast dwindling number, most of those remaining the old and the hopeless. The small homesteads on its outskirts were often run-down and boarded up. The town centre was little better, dust -swept and crumbling, as if an unforgiving nature was reclaiming it for itself, swallowing it bit by bit. A grocery store and a couple of seedy bars were the only hub of a downward spiralling universe.

Sherilyn parked the Bronco out on the street and she led Riesman into the grocery store. Across the street he noticed three young men hanging around outside one of the bars. From a distance it appeared they were around their mid-twenties, but they slouched around and leered at Sherilyn like slack-jawed teenagers. Their apparent leader, a big, awkward young man with short reddish hair called out, “Hey, Sheilyn! Hey, baby!” and blew a kiss and waggled his hips suggestively then collapsed into giggles with his two cronies. Sherilyn held her head high, imperiously ignoring their catcalls. Riesman eyed them as the two of them entered the store.

Ten minutes later the two of them emerged from the store, Riesman carrying a bag under each arm, while Sherilyn carried one, counting the change in her spare hand. With her head down she said, “ I got to pop in to see a friend down the road before we leave. It’ll only take a minute, we’ll put the groceries in the car, you can wait for me there.”

While she spoke, Riesman watched the three young men come reeling eagerly across the street. Sherilyn opened the Bronco's rear door and started stowing the bags.

"Hey, Sherilyn! How you doing, baby?" a voice called from behind, but she didn't turn, putting away the last bag. "Hey, Sherilyn! Goddammit!" the voice rose in pitch and Sherilyn turned sighing, and stood hands on her hips, staring at the motley group. Riesman stood back a pace, leaning against the car.

"What is it, Bud?" she asked in an exasperated voice, tapping her foot.

Bud, the leader, although large built and thick-set, was an even less impressive specimen close up, his pale, podgy flesh marked by faint acne and his light red-blond hair and the almost invisible eyebrows and lashes, along with his watery eyes and turned up nose gave him a porcine aspect. His two scrawny sidekicks hovered behind him, giggling. Bud puffed and wheezed, apparently winded by the hasty crossing of the street. Even from a few paces away, Riesman could smell the liquor on their breaths.

"Hey, baby, no need to be like that, ain't you glad to see old Bud?" he grunted lasciviously.

"I haven't got time for this now, Bud."

His face coloured angrily and he clenched and unclenched his fists, "Too fucking good for me now are you, didn't use to be, not before your big-shot boyfriend came along. Where is the old fart today? Off with his boyfriends?" he snorted.

"There's no need for this." Sherilyn said calmly.

"Fuck you, bitch!" he spat, "Who's this sorry piece of shit here?" he nodded to the slouching Riesman, "One of your old man's boyfriends? This faggot ain't gonna help you none!" he blew a kiss at Riesman, who remained impassive. "How about you come and have a drink with me, Sherilyn. I'll show you what a real man is like, I'll fuck you like you never been fucked before, I'll soon straighten you out! Chuck and Floyd will look after the faggot, maybe show him a good time!" His two friends sniggered.

“No thanks, Bud, if I wanted to sleep with a dumb animal, there’s plenty of livestock on my ranch, all smarter and with better personal hygiene than you!” Sherilyn said softly and in the sweetest tone.

Bud flushed bright red, “You fucking bitch!” he reached out and grabbed her by the wrist, but she twisted free and stamped down hard on his instep. He let out a bellow of rage and pain, and swung his arm around and backhanded Sherilyn across the face, knocking her to the ground. “Down in the dirt, where you belong, bitch!” Bud screamed triumphantly.

Riesman moved forward quickly and stabbed out with his right foot, driving it hard into Bud’s knee, sending it back on itself with a crunch. He crumpled with a pitiful wail. While his two friends looked on, frozen in shock and fear, Riesman stepped up to the prostrate figure writhing on the ground and placed a foot on his throat and pushed down on his windpipe.

“Think you ought to apologise, Bubba,” he stated simply, as Bud gurgled, struggling for breath. Riesman looked down at the twisted leg, the knee clearly shattered. “Looks like you need a doctor, you must be in a shit load of pain.” He pushed down harder on his throat.

Sherilyn climbed to her feet and dusted herself down. Gingerly touching the red mark on her cheek, she stepped forward, looked down at Bud, her lips curling back in a sneer. She spat on him and drove her foot down on his shattered knee. Even with a foot on his throat, Bud squeezed out a blood-curdling shriek.

“You ever come near me again, you dumb, cracker shit, I swear to God, I’ll fucking kill you!” For good measure she kicked him hard between the legs, then looked up at the two friends, “Get the fuck out of here, you greasy little motherfuckers.” She snarled and the two terrified young men took off up the street, never looking back.

A dark stain spread across the front of Bud’s jeans and he whimpered.

“Ah, Jesus, Bubba, can’t you control your damn bladder!” Riesman snorted, “Not feeling so tough now, eh? Fear ain’t a nice thing, is it?” he squeezed down on his throat,

Bud's face turning purple. "Now you just apologise, and we'll be on our way." He eased his foot off.

Bud coughed and choked, struggling for breath, but managed to wheeze, "I'm sorry, Sherilyn."

"Miss Groves." snarled Riesman, lowering his foot down against his throat.

"OK, OK. I'm real sorry, Miss Groves!" he gabbled.

Riesman stepped back and knelt by the sorry looking figure and patted his face, "Now ain't that better?"

Standing, Riesman took the scowling Sherilyn and led her back to the Bronco. She gathered herself, and taking the keys from her purse, she climbed behind the wheel and started the engine. Riesman climbed in and as they pulled away he looked back in the mirror at the lonely figure sprawling on the sidewalk, wailing and writhing, but ignored.

They passed the town limits and Sherilyn pulled up at the edge of the road.

"Do you mind driving, Paul, I'm a little shook up," she said.

"Sure," he got out and rounded the vehicle while she slid across the seats. Taking the wheel he reached out to turn the key, when Sherilyn reached out and touched his hand.

"Thank you for helping me, Paul," she said softly.

"Weren't nothing, anyone would have done the same." He muttered.

"Not just Bud, everything," she choked back a sob, wiping a tear from her eye.

Riesman shifted nervously.

A tear rolled down her cheek and with a sob she reached across the cab and threw her arms around Riesman, burying her face in his shoulder. He awkwardly held her, uncertain as what to do, muttering "It's okay now, everything's okay," while trying to ignore the feeling of her breasts pressed hard against him, the scent of her hair in his nostrils.

Slowly her crying stilled and she straightened up in her seat, wiping her face.

“I’m sorry, Paul.” She said, “I didn’t mean to embarrass you, I was being a fool.” She smiled shyly.

“That’s okay.” Riesman said. He started the engine and accelerated away.

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A couple of days later men started arriving at the ranch. Most made a point of introducing themselves as former Special Forces, Rangers, Marine Recon, SEALs and one or two Airborne like Riesman. The men milled about the ranch, cleaning and firing weapons, working out, sparring, preparing for war beneath the fierce, unforgiving Texan sun. Finally the soldiers numbered around thirty when Ullrich arrived with Hooker and Larsen. They gathered the men together and the briefing began.

Above them dark storm clouds gathered, knotted and writhing across the black sky.

Chapter 12

“Special Agents Willis and Vansen to see you, Agent Parsons.” Laura announced and showed the two visitors in.

“Take a seat, please.” Parsons said indicating the two chairs in front of his desk and the two agents sat facing him, looking at him patiently.

SA Frank Willis was black, tall and athletic, his noble profile framed by his short-cropped hair. In his mid-thirties, he had come through the FBI Academy just after Parsons. The two men had been friends for more than ten years, both high-fliers in the Bureau, assigned to elite posts, Counter-terrorism, Organised Crime/Drugs and Violent Crimes/Major Offenders, and had worked together on various occasions. Parsons respected his judgement and trusted him implicitly. SA Rachel Vansen was in her late-twenties, slim, athletic, dark-hair cut short, brushed away from her pale-skinned face. Although certainly attractive, her dark watchful eyes betrayed not only a fierce intelligence and wit, but also a steely inner toughness. A double major in Psychology and Law, she had passed up a posting with Violent Crimes in profiling at Quantico for assignment to HRT, the FBI’s elite national special weapons and tactical unit for high-risk combat scenarios and hostage situations. Chiefly they were the national armed counter-terrorism force. Within this traditionally male preserve, she had flourished and now commanded her own team. Parsons had met her as an instructor at Quantico and had kept an eye on her since.

“Glad you could come. You’ve read the dossiers I sent to you?” Parsons got straight down to business.

Both nodded, Willis saying, “You don’t seem to have much to go on at the moment. Surprising really, you have so many of the Ullrich’s people named, known associates and haunts targeted, yet no clear leads.”

“Not so surprising really. Ullrich is a trained intelligence operative, and far from stupid. He knows every move we are going to make before we make them, he can read every play, he knows the book backward and forward.” said Parsons.

“Then maybe we should tear up the book,” said Vansen.

Parsons smiled, “My thoughts exactly.”

“Does he have sources on the inside?” she asked.

“More than likely. We must proceed that he has the Agency and Army intelligence thoroughly infiltrated. He seems to have active sources and sleepers within the military and intelligence community. CIA, NSA and the army are leaking like a sieve. We may also have to assume that the Bureau is compromised.”

“Shit!” mumbled Willis.

“He’s had years to set up his operation, throughout his career he has made friends and contacts not just in the US, but across the world. He is a highly respected, highly decorated soldier, and from all indications an expert killer and intelligence operative. He will not stop, he will not deal. What his ultimate aim is, if he has one, I don’t know, but he will continue to escalate his actions until we stop him.”

“By all lawful means?” asked Vansen, her lips curling into a smile.

Parsons paused, looking across the desk at the two agents.

“We may have to bend the rules.” he paused, “If it proves necessary, we may have to go beyond lawful means.”

Willis sat forward, “What are we talking about here, whacking the guy?”

“Nothing so extreme, not yet, I hope. The last thing I want is agents and other law enforcement personnel running around the country, shooting it out with Ullrich’s army, we don’t want a full-scale war!”

“Looks like you’re too late, Ullrich’s already done that. I’d be happy to put the bastard down after what he did at Buzzards Point!” Willis sneered.

“We’re all pissed, but the fact of the matter is Ullrich and his men are better than us. His people are the military elite, trained killers; you saw what happened to the Marshal’s SOG, cut to pieces, apparently without inflicting a single casualty against Ullrich. If our people go out, trying to face down Ullrich and shoot it out, they’d be wiped out, not to mention innocent bystanders.”

Vansen, leaning back in her chair, smiled, “With the greatest of respect, the HRT is superior to the SOG in every way, funding, weapons, training. We’ve trained with the Special Forces, even with Delta, at Fort Bragg. I’d put our people up against theirs anytime!”

“One crucial difference. Ullrich’s men have that specialist training, plus combat experience, but they also have nothing to lose, no rules to abide by. They don’t care about the law, about civilian casualties; they can act with absolute freedom. They are like terrorists, but with the finest military training in the world, possibly with a direct line into our intelligence community.”

“Maybe we are going to have to get a little dirty too then,” said Vansen.

“Maybe, but I hope we can avoid that, if at all possible.”

“So what leads do we have?” asked Willis.

“We are maintaining surveillance on all existing targets, but our best bet seems to be the Israeli connection and the missing Russians.”

“You’re sure about the Israelis?” asked Vansen.

“These two, the embassy official and the vanishing tourist are known associates. Charlie Beckwith, with his admiration for the SAS, was a confirmed Anglophile. Ullrich has similar firm links with the Israeli special forces and intelligence agencies. We know that he respects the Israelis and in particular their military, and is an ardent Zionist. Whether this is purely a matter of military respect, or something deeper, based on his father’s Jewish roots, we don’t know. Either way, it is a respect that is reciprocated. So we are keeping the diplomatic official, Betser, under close surveillance. Also the embassy is bugged.”

“Holy Shit!” breathed Vansen.

Parsons tapped his nose; “Also we’re trying to get a firm fix on the tourist, Yariv, nothing yet. Also the Agency is trying to locate Pletsov and the other two Russians. We believe they are somewhere in northern Mexico.”

“Anything else?” asked Willis, “What about this Riesman, the guy who broke out with Ullrich, is he significant?”

“Not really, just a grunt, we assume he is with Ullrich now.”

“What about the Denver robbery, I heard he was made as one of the perps?”

“There is a possible ID, but the only picture showing his face is too blurred. It’s too vague, wouldn’t stand up in court.”

“Who said anything about court?” smiled Vansen.

Parsons continued, “I’ve got agents in Field Offices across the country on this, but all are working on a need to know basis. Only we three will be privy to all information, we have to keep this case sealed tight.”

“Just us. And the Director of course,” said Willis, grinning.

“Yeah, right!” laughed Vansen.

Parsons smiled, “So you’re both in?”

“You bet!” said Willis.

“All the way,” said Vansen, her dark eyes shining.

“Good.” Parsons shuffled his papers.

“What do we do now?” asked Willis.

“Wait.” said Parsons.

* * *

Parsons met Hobson on the bench in front of the Lincoln Memorial.

“You did a good job on the surveillance tape.” Parsons said.

“I have the best people working for me. The face is so blurred they’ll never make a firm ID, we’re clear.”

“I just hope has hasn’t gone over to Ullrich, if he has, the shit’s about to start flying.”

“Take it easy, he’s a stable operative, I have faith. He was in an impossible situation, he was returning fire. Anyway it should have solidified his credibility.” Hobson smoothed his trousers, stretching languorously.

“Have you had word from him?”

“Not yet, soon, when he has information.”

“I just got a feeling something bad is about to happen.”

Chapter 13

The Georgia home of former US President James Earl Carter stood in the centre of rolling fields, the large, white ranch-house set back around 500 metres from the main road, at the end of a long, straight drive.

It was a dark, chill, starless night, the air still, only the gentle chirp of crickets and the distant murmur of traffic breaking the silence.

A small white-painted brick guardhouse stood at the gate, inside two Secret Service Agents sat, dressed in windbreakers, listening to the radio, playing cards. Beneath their jackets both men wore SIG P228 automatic pistols, propped against the wall, within easy reach, were a Colt Commando automatic rifle and a Mossberg M500 Persuader 12-gauge shotgun.

The thin, tinny sound of the music from the radio seeped out of the guardhouse, fading away into the black night.

On a small rise, some 300 metres back from the gate, overlooking the house and estate, squatted Colonel John Ullrich and Sergeants Hooker and Riesman. All three men wore black fatigues, combat boots, webbing and body-armour and their faces were covered by black ski masks. Riesman wore his Glock 19 on his belt, his Commando rifle slung over his back, set in front of him his HK MSG90 sniping rifle, its bipod propped on the lip of the dip they lay in, an image-intensifying sight fixed atop it. He stared down the night-sight, targeting the guardhouse. Hooker held a silenced HK MP5 sub-machine gun, his Franchi automatic shotgun slung across his back, his Colt .45 automatic hanging from his belt. Ullrich had his Colt Commando lying beside him; in a shoulder holster he carried a silenced HK P7 and on his belt a SOCOM M23 .45 automatic.

Next to Ullrich lay a large transmitter and each man wore earpieces and throat-microphones. The Colonel stared through his image-intensifying binoculars and checked his watch. He pressed transmit, "Stand by," he whispered.

Spread across the rise were three two man sniping teams, armed with HKs and Remingtons, scattered around the edges of the estate were four man assault teams, all garbed in black, with faces painted, or wearing ski-masks. The assault teams, all wearing image-intensifying goggles, carried silenced MP5s and Mini Uzis, at least one man on each team with a rifle, usually a Commando or a Galil SAR. In addition they carried silenced pistols, M23s and SIG P228s mostly, although the two SEALs carried sound-suppressed 9mm Mk22 Smith and Wesson automatics fitted with 'Hush Puppy' silencers. The pistols and sub-machine guns were loaded with hollow-nosed slugs for maximum stopping power; the rifles with Teflon coated rounds, in case of heavy body armour. Also they carried knives, garrottes and assorted killing tools. Their aim was close quarter silent killer. In the event of failure, assault teams armed with SAWs, M60s and M4s fitted with M203 grenade launchers stood ready.

Intelligence had informed the attackers that the Secret Service detachment at the house had been bolstered, from 16, half on duty at any one time, to 20, 10 constantly active. Two in the guardhouse, two in the main house, one of whom would be sleeping up stairs, the rest would be patrolling the estate or in the main Secret Service block house, a control centre and dorm located in a bungalow to the side of the main house, alongside it a modern camper-trailer. Obviously they were worried about a potential assault, but not worried enough.

The sniper and assault teams watched guards move about the estate, lit up in the green glow of their night-sights, their breaths fogging the air.

Ullrich had made it clear that the operation had to be carried off in complete silence, anything less would be seen as a failure.

Along the straight road stretching past the front of the gate, a car's headlights came dimly into view.

"Eagle 2 on his approach, Eaglet get in position. All Eagle teams stand by!" Ullrich whispered, his eyes not leaving his binoculars as he tracked the approaching vehicle.

As the drone of the engine grew, one of the Secret Service Agents turned. “We got company!” he picked up his Mossberg shotgun and moved to the door, the other agent picked up his Commando assault rifle and yanked back the charging handle and flicked the safety/fire-selector to semi-auto.

The car pulled up; it was a marked Georgia State Police Cruiser. Behind the wheel, the officer wound down his window and waved cheerfully.

“Shit, I’ll see what the dumb cracker wants,” the agent with the shotgun tucked his weapon under his arm and opened the door. As he walked to the car, his fellow agent moved into the open door.

“Evening boys!” the grinning driver called out cheerfully.

“What can I do for you, officer?”

“Had a report of some suspicious characters in town this evening, thought I better come by and check you out!”

“Really? No, we haven’t seen anything,” the agent moved in closer to the car.

“Well doesn’t hurt to be sure,” the officer beamed.

“We appreciate the courtesy,” nodded the agent.

“Ain’t nothing,” the deputy’s hand came up, holding a silenced automatic and fired three times, the shots mere coughs. The rounds struck the agent once in the neck and twice in the head, the hollow-tipped bullets blowing out the back of his head and killing him instantly. The other agent’s mouth fell open in horror, but as he went to raise his rifle, a black-clad figure rolled around the door, knocking the gun down and out of his hand. He locked his arm around him and rammed his knife between his ribs, burying the double-edged blade right up to the hilt, twisting it savagely. As the gasping agent sagged to the floor, the attacker pulled out his knife and sunk it into his heart. The black-clad man rose and watched the life ebb from the man and then moved to the door. He nodded to the driver of the cruiser, a wry grin

still on his face. He shifted into gear and pulled away, slipping into the night. Alone in the dark, the attacker dragged the other dead agent into the guardhouse and shut the door.

“Guardhouse secure. All Eagle Assault teams go.” Ullrich whispered.

All around the estate, black figures slipped under and over fences, belly crawling, or running crouched low, moving fast across the open ground.

Four Secret Service Agents patrolled the grounds surrounding the house, their weapons slung, three with MP5s and one with a Colt Commando. They played their flashlights across the ground in front of them as they moved, cursing the chill, deathly early hours. They used to use dogs, but the former President and his good lady wife complained about the noise they made at night, even highly trained guard dogs going nuts when they got the sniff of a gopher or jackrabbit. So they moved silently, rubbing their hands against the chill.

Agent Dick Fields was gasping for a cigarette. He had told his wife he had given up, but he still sneaked one now and then, and right now he had the craving. He checked his watch. Another half an hour, then he'd duck off for one, that would keep him going until the end of his shift. He paused, thinking he heard a rustle. He played his flashlight around him. Nothing. Must have been the wind. Then, suddenly, just off to the left, a dark shape reared up. What the fuck, he thought, quickly bringing his light round. A thin coil of wire looped around his neck and the figure behind him drew the garrote in, slicing deep into the flesh of his throat. His breath choked away, Dick Fields struggled and kicked in eerie silence. Slowly he felt his life slip away. As his vision faded, he saw a black hooded figure lean over him and shake his head.

Eagle Team 3 spotted its man, heading straight towards them. Sergeant Chuck Philips, a black, rugged former Ranger waved to Sergeant Nick Hauser, another Ranger, to follow him. The thin, wiry man tracked his squad leader. Splitting, one took either side of the approaching agent's path. As he passed between them, Philips grabbed him, jerking his head

back and slicing his neck open. As the agent gurgled, Hauser came around and plunged his knife repeatedly into the man's chest and stomach. Finally they let the bloody body fall, taking a foot each and dragging the corpse away by the heels.

Agent Jack Clark caught the flicker of a flashlight, its beam momentarily climbing skyward, then tumbling away, before vanishing. Weird, he thought, unslinging his MP5 and moving silently forward. The cool air brushed his cheek; the silence was almost tangible, as if he were tearing through its very blackness. He had switched off his flashlight, feeling his way through the darkness. He didn't call in, one of the others might have just stumbled and broke his light, he didn't want to look a fool, the guys wouldn't let him forget it. He couldn't see anything and began to wonder if he had imagined the whole thing. He lowered his sub-machine gun.

"Hey!" a voice whispered behind his ear and he spun around, but his weapon was torn from his hands and an arm reached from behind his back and a hand placed over his mouth. An apparently bug-eyed figure moved out of the gloom ahead, lunged forward and plunged a knife deep into Clark's chest, tearing open his heart and killing him instantly.

The final guard, Mark Johnson, could wait no longer, his bladder felt as if it were about to burst. He trotted up to a tree and yanked down his flies and relieved himself. "Ahh!" he sighed, emptying himself, his urine splashing noisily against the tree and upon the flowerbed beneath.

Sergeant Charles Dawson, former Special Forces and Delta, moved surprisingly quietly for such a big man, swiftly and silently edging up behind the urinating agent. He lifted his silenced M23 and placed it against the base of the man's skull and squeezed the trigger. The pistol spat and the lifeless agent thudded into the tree trunk, bounced off and crumpled at Dawson's feet.

"External threat neutralised," a voice reported to Ullrich over the radio.

"Very well, proceed to target two," he ordered.

Inside the main guardhouse, three agents were on duty, two in front of a computer console, the bank of monitors feeding back images of the estate from the security cameras. They also controlled all security lighting and electronic security measures, plus radio communication within the estate and with local and national law enforcement. The other agent sat at the table, a Colt Commando rifle field-stripped in front of him as he cleaned all the individual parts. Down the corridor ten off-duty agents were asleep in the dormitory.

“Time for the routine radio check,” said one of the agents at the console to the other.

The door beside them, which led to the dorm, creaked slowly open.

“What can’t you guys sleep?” laughed one of the men as he turned from the monitors.

Standing in the doorway were two black-clad, masked figures with silenced MP5 sub-machine guns raised to their shoulders.

“Shit!” the agent reached for his weapon, but the two attackers opened up, squeezing off three round bursts. Bullets tore into the heads and necks of the men at the console, killing them instantly. The man at the table leapt to his feet, pulling his SIG automatic from his belt holster, but one of the gunmen slipped through the door, putting two bursts into the agent’s upper chest, knocking him down. In the smoky silence that followed, the gunman stepped over the prostrate agent by the table, switched his weapon to semi-auto and fired a single, silenced round into his head.

The second gunman moved to the front door, unlocked it and pulled it open and two other men in black slipped silently in and moved down the corridor. They paused outside the dormitory door and readied their weapons, softly drawing back the cocking handles of their silenced MP5s and switching to full automatic. They nodded to each other and slowly opened the door and slipped inside. Each side of the long room was lined by a row of five bunks. The dark room was still, only the gentle breathing and occasional muffled snore betraying the ten sleeping men. The gunmen separated, each standing at the head of a row of beds, their sub-

machine guns raised. They paused then nodded to each other and opened up, raking the sleeping men with automatic fire, the bullets ripping through the blankets and tearing into the sleeping men. The steady stutter of the gunfire wasn't broken by a single cry or shout as the agents were slaughtered where they lay. The two gunmen emptied their 30 round magazines, paused and reloaded, then switching to three round bursts, they walked the length of the room firing a burst into each ravaged body. Finished, they turned and left the blood splattered room, the stench of cordite filling the smoky air.

“Target two secure,” a voice reported to Ullrich.

“Very well, proceed to final stage, Eagle Claw 2,” he whispered.

Agent Dale Jones was glad he was inside, as he padded towards the kitchen. He moved through the gloomy downstairs rooms, grateful he was in the warm and dry, unlike those poor suckers outside. He was careful to move quietly and not to knock anything over, he didn't want to risk not only waking President Carter and his wife, but worst of all his boss, Agent in Charge Jonas Stern, a raging bull of a man, who would take great pleasure in gutting the young agent. He thanked God Stern was asleep upstairs, just being around the guy scared the shit out of him.

He padded into the darkened kitchen, opened the refrigerator, the interior light throwing out a glowing pool around his feet. He removed the carton of orange juice and headed over to the counter, switched on the counter-top light and got a glass. Pouring himself a drink he headed to the kitchen table and sat down and drank down a long draught of juice, sighing gratefully and wiping the back of his hand across his mouth.

“That better?” a voice whispered out of the darkness and two black-clad figures edged forward out of the shadows, both holding silenced automatics trained on the sitting agent. Jones froze in horror, the glass shaking in his hand. A third figure in black BDU, wearing a matching ski mask moved out of the dark, between the two other gunmen.

“Put down the glass,” the third man whispered and Jones swallowed nervously and complied, his eyes never leaving the man’s masked face. “Put your hands palm down on the table top,” he ordered, the agent obeying.

The gunman pulled out a chair opposite Jones, reached up and pulled off his ski mask. The agent looked at the tall, blond, handsome, young man staring sadly down at him, a quizzical smile crossing his lips.

Captain Michael Larsen slipped into the chair and faced the fearful Secret Service Agent.

“Is everyone asleep upstairs?” he asked, the agent nodded mutely. “President Carter, his wife and the senior Secret Service Agent?” Again Jones nodded. “Good,” said Larsen, smiling reassuringly.

Dale Jones smiled back weakly, looking deeply into the other man’s piercing blue eyes.

Larsen lifted his hand above the table and fired a single round from his silenced M23 automatic pistol, the bullet slamming into the agent’s forehead. A pink mist swirled around his head like an aureole and he fell gently forward, his head sagging onto the tabletop.

On the hill across from the house, Ullrich’s radio crackled.

“Mission accomplished,” he heard Larsen’s voice.

“Very well, proceed with the withdrawal,” he ordered, a smile crossing his lips.

Slowly the armed force withdrew from the estate and within twenty minutes they had vanished into the night.

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Secret Service Agent Jonas Stern woke at 6.30am and shaved and showered before dressing.

As the bright Georgia sun rose and its warming rays shone through the windows, the stocky,

muscular, dark-haired agent descended the main staircase. He liked to be up before the Carters, both early risers, to check the situation, and get his men in line.

As he reached the ground floor and crossed the hallway, he was struck by an eerie stillness. Although it was still early, something felt wrong. More irritated than worried, he hastened into the kitchen.

As Stern entered the large kitchen, he had to blink to grow accustomed to the gloom, the sun not yet having reached the north-facing room. Slowly he made out the figure of Agent Dale Jones, slumped in his chair, head resting between his hands on the tabletop.

“Goddammit, Jones, you lazy cocksucker, wake up!” the thickset senior agent strode across the room. As he reached the slumped figure he paused and looked down. The soles of his shoes seemed to be sticking to the floor. Looking down, he noticed a dark, sticky puddle spread around the seated agent. He bent lower, as the fingers of the sun reached out across the stained floor. Sucking in a breath, Stern stood and reached out, grasping Jones by the collar, jerking him upright. He gasped as he stared into the bloodless, lifeless face, the eyes rolled back into the skull, the blackened hole punched through his forehead, the rear of his skull a distorted, mushy pulp. Blood covered his shoulders, face, chest and lap and bled down into a stagnant pool around his feet.

Stern looked closer at the dead agent’s chest. Pinned to his front was a message on a white piece of paper inside a clear plastic sheath, its edges crusted with dried blood. He squinted at it in the gloomy light, the words in bold print. It read:

GREETINGS FROM DESERT ONE.

Stern let the body fall back to the table and drew his SIG P228 automatic pistol and hurried outside.

Stumbling through the door onto the sunlit lawn, the first thing he saw was a sprawled, bloody figure in a windbreaker. He turned and saw another. Rounding the house,

he made out two more bodies. Fighting the rising panic, he dashed to the Secret Service command centre, bursting through the front door, pistol raised.

When he emerged he stumbled ashen faced and slumped against the cool wall. He sucked in air to fight his rising nausea and looked down at his trembling hands. He did not understand what had happened here, only that death had come calling and he could still fill its chill breath on his neck.

Chapter 14

Parsons and Agents Willis and Vansen arrived at the Georgia ranch late morning. They parked their dark, FBI fleet sedan and walked across the house's grounds. Heavily armed Secret Service and FBI Agents patrolled the grounds, while medical technicians were loading white shrouded bodies into black, zip-up body bags.

The three agents entered a side-door to the house, where they were met by two senior Secret Service men: Assistant-Director Carl Huberman, a slim, dark, fortyish man from their Washington headquarters and Agent Jonas Stern, the thick-set agent in charge of the Carter protection detail, and SA Richard Masters from the FBI field office in Atlanta. While Masters made the introductions, Parsons noticed the shocked, white face of Stern who stood silently at the edge of the group.

As two medical technicians unloaded the dead body from the chair at the kitchen table and zipped him in a body bag, the group moved to the table.

"So the entire Secret Service detachment was liquidated in silence, you didn't hear anything, Agent Stern?" asked Parsons. The Secret Service man shook his head, shame mixing with shock on his face.

"So, does this look like your man, this Ullrich character?" asked SA Masters.

"Certainly bears all the hallmarks. I was told there was a note?" Parsons replied.

Huberman handed a clear plastic evidence bag to Masters, who passed it to Parsons. He lifted it up to the light, reading the note inside the blood-encrusted plastic sheath.

"*Greetings from Desert One,*" he read aloud.

"You know what the fuck that means?" asked Masters.

Parsons nodded, "For one, it tells me that this was Ullrich's handiwork. Desert One was the staging post in the Iranian desert during the aborted hostage-rescue mission in 1980. Operation Eagle Claw went to shit and the mission was cancelled and in the botched pullout eight men died and an embarrassment of valuable equipment and classified documents were

left behind. Although it was the mission commander, Colonel Charlie Beckwith who ordered the abort, Ullrich, one of Beckwith's right-hand men, blamed the military top-brass and Washington, Carter's White House in particular. He felt Carter lacked the will, the moral resolve, and he balked at the first chance. He never forgot and it was his bitterness over this that destroyed his military career and started him on the path that led here."

"In that case why didn't he kill Carter. Why did he leave not only him and his wife, but also Agent Stern here alive?" asked Huberman.

"You're right, he could have easily killed everyone, indeed to have done just that would have made the operation significantly easier. Instead he had to complete the mission in total silence in order not to alert the occupants of the house." Parsons paused, "Ullrich was sending a message, not just to President Carter, but to us all. From my meeting with him and my reading of his character, I don't think Ullrich bears a grudge towards Carter personally, indeed I think he respects him as a man of principle, a man of honesty and decency and so by Ullrich's reckoning, a man of honour. However, it is just these qualities that Ullrich believes made him unsuitable for the Presidency, and therefore had no place interfering in military operations. But beyond his revenge on the former President, I think the ultimate aim of this mission was to send us a clear message, that no-one is safe, that he can hit when and where he likes, that we are at his complete mercy."

"Fucking cocksucker..." snarled Stern, Huberman cutting him off with a look.

"Where's President Carter and his wife now?" asked Parsons.

"He's at a secure location, a safe-house, surrounded by elite Secret Service Agents, all heavily armed and highly trained. He's perfectly safe," said Huberman.

"Safe!" snorted Vansen from Parsons's elbow, a crooked grin crossing her face.

Stern lunged forward, his lips twisting in a rictus of rage. Huberman and Masters grabbed a hold of him and struggled to restrain the struggling agent. Parsons cut Vansen a stern look and stepped forward.

“I apologise for Agent Vansen. But she does have a point. Ullrich has made it perfectly clear that no one is safe. This isn’t a personal criticism of the Secret Service; we have all suffered at Ullrich’s hands, the Bureau, US Marshals and various law enforcement agencies. He and his men are highly trained and highly motivated, at present I don’t know how we can be sure of stopping him.”

Stern was cooling off, but his fierce, staring eyes never left the unflappable Vansen.

“So what the hell do you suggest?” snarled Huberman.

“I don’t think President Carter is in any immediate danger, if Ullrich wanted him dead, he would be by now. However it is best to keep him under wraps for now. Also I suggest you increase protection on all high-profile targets, especially the President.”

“I’ve already ordered that, but you don’t seriously think he could be planning to go for the President, that would be suicide?” snapped Huberman.

“Maybe, but I think that is irrelevant to Ullrich and his men, he is capable of anything.”

“Fucking nut!” Huberman sneered.

“Unfortunately not. While we may regard Ullrich as extreme, even out of control, he knows exactly what he’s doing, and he and his private army have been trained to do whatever he wants. The carnage here is nothing to the havoc he could unleash. We can field our best precautions, assign our best people, but ultimately Ullrich is better, and he will not stop.”

“I’d stop the fucker!” growled Stern.

“I don’t doubt your abilities, Agent Stern, but if you went up against Ullrich, you would be as dead as your men.”

The Secret Service Agent clenched and unclenched his fists.

“Stern, go outside, get some air, we’ll be out in a minute,” ordered Huberman and Stern left muttering, casting evil glances back at Vansen.

“I apologise for Agent Stern, I can assure you he is an excellent officer and an exemplary man, but as you can imagine, he is not taking last night’s events well. He blames himself, and comments from your people don’t help the situation.” Huberman glanced at Vansen, who smiled.

“As I said, I’m sure no offence was meant, we’re all a little on edge about all this.” Parsons replied in an emollient tone.

“What progress have you made on the Ullrich investigation, are you close yet?” asked Masters.

“We have several leads, but of course everything is classified. It’s not easy, but we’ll get him.” Huberman and Masters nodded sagely.

“Well, gentlemen, We have to be on our way, if you can send all your reports to my office in Washington, I can give a fuller evaluation to what happened here.”

“Thank you for coming, Agent Parsons.” Huberman shook the FBI man’s hand and Masters showed them out.

As Parsons, Willis and Vansen headed back to their car, the female agent murmured, “Several leads? They must be highly classified, last time I looked, we had zip, precisely zero!”

Parsons paused and turned to Vansen, “What did you expect me to say, we have nothing,” he snapped. “Nineteen of their men have just been slaughtered, their agency’s reputation destroyed, and I’m supposed to say we’ve got nowhere; that the men who did this are clear and we are nowhere near them, that Ullrich is free to do anything he likes while we sit around twiddling out thumbs?” For the first time that he had known her, Vansen almost looked ashamed and cowed. She shrugged. Parsons continued, “And I can do without your smart-ass comments, inter-agency co-operation is the cornerstone of our job, and your wisecracking does not help relations!”

The party walked on to the car. Among the Secret Service and FBI Agents Rachel Vansen saw the stocky figure of Agent Jonas Stern glaring at her. As she watched him from the corner of her eye, she felt sure that given the chance, at this moment he would have killed her stone dead. She made a note to try not to wise-off so often, to watch her mouth, but despite her best intentions, her mouth frequently acted before her brain got into gear.

The three agents climbed into their sedan and pulled out of the gate and drove away, the thick, red Georgia dust swirling in their wake.

* * *

Later that night, the ringing of the phone by his bed, woke Parsons. His wife, Sarah answered it.

“Okay, just a second,” she handed the receiver to her husband, “It’s Richard Hobson.”

“Yeah?” he grumbled, dry-mouthed into the receiver.

“Jeff, hope I didn’t wake you, old buddy?”

“What do you think, it’s gone two in the morning, what the hell do you want?”

“Sorry, I haven’t been to bed. I’ve got news.”

“Not good, no good news comes at two in the morning.”

“On the contrary, I’ve heard from our man, and this time he had more to say than hello.”

Parsons sat up, “What did he say?”

“He’s given us a little something. Well, actually he’s given us a big, juicy prize.”

Chapter 15

In the foothills of the white-capped Rocky Mountains of western Montana, James Byron left his motel room and climbed into the front passenger seat of the dark Cherokee Jeep. At the wheel sat a tall, sandy-haired man in his early thirties, Carl Weber, a former Special Forces Sergeant, whom Byron had known and worked with for more than three years. Weber shifted the Jeep into gear and pulled out of the parking lot. A large U-Haul truck pulled out behind them and the two vehicles sped out of the wet, grey-shrouded town, heading off into the mountains.

They drove for more than half an hour, steadily climbing, the damp air growing chilly, the pine trees edging the road growing thicker. Eventually, nearing the base of the bare, snow-topped peaks, they emerged from the forested slopes and pulled into a large clearing and parked.

Byron climbed from the cab of his Jeep and waited as he heard the sound of approaching vehicles. He nodded to Weber, who slipped out of the Cherokee, an MP5 sub-machine gun with collapsible butt in his hands. He yanked back the cocking handle and rested the weapon in the crook of his arm. Behind them, two men climbed out of the truck. The passenger, Hicks, former Marine Recon, a stocky, dark-haired man, carried a Colt Commando automatic rifle, Harris, the driver and also former Marine Recon, held a compact MP5KA4, without a butt and with a forward grip. The still mountain air was filled with a metallic rattle as both cocked their weapons.

Three vehicles pulled into the clearing, a shiny, new Jeep 4x4, a beat-up old Pick-Up truck and an equally battered old heavy truck, its olive paint chipped and flaking, the chassis scarred with rust. They parked around fifty-yard across the clearing and turned off their engines and waited.

The front door of the Jeep popped open and a squat, barrel-chested man climbed out. He squinted across the clearing, adjusting the gun-belt around his waist, his swollen belly

spilling over the waist of his pants. He reached inside his car and pulled out white, well-starched Stetson and planted it on his head. From the passenger side of the Jeep, a tall, rangy, consumptive-looking man emerged, and the two men moved across the open space dividing the two parties. Byron and Weber started out to meet them.

Hicks and Harris waited by the truck, fingering their weapons, as they watched more figures spill from the other two vehicles. Eventually an additional six men dismounted, a rag-tag bunch, a mixture of young, gawky youths, paunchy middle-aged men, all shabbily dressed and heavily armed. Their weapons were a strange mixture of new and old, M16s and AR15s alongside battered shotguns and even an old Springfield bolt action rifle with scarred wooden furniture. The shambling, motley crew shifted uneasily, eyeing the newcomers, who just stared back with wry amusement.

Byron and Weber met the two men in the clearing. Standing face to face the contrast between the two parties was stark, Weber and even the comparatively slim Byron were both magnificent physical specimens; tall, muscular, their bearing confident, even noble. The other two men, one soft and flabby, the other emaciated and sickly, were obviously unfit, puffing from the short walk, and as they stood, stooped in the drizzle, they shifted nervously and grinned stupidly.

“Major Byron, good to see you!” the fat man wheezed.

“Mr. Wilson, you have the merchandise?” replied Byron.

“Of course, 50,000 rounds of ammunition, the agreed assortment of 9, 5.56 and 7.62mm rounds, full metal jacket and hollow point, all military-issue. You have the money?”

“Of course.” Byron nodded.

“Shall we!” Wilson held out his hand toward his waiting truck and the four men walked over. Two waiting men released the tailgate letting it fall with a crash.

Wilson pulled a folded sheath of papers from his coat pocket and held them out to Byron, "The inventory, I think you'll find it all in order." Byron handed the papers to Weber, who clambered aboard the truck and began checking the wooden crates.

"The money?" whispered Wilson.

Byron lifted the metal case in his hand and laid it on the open tailgate, opening the catches and lifting the lid. Watson closed in and started counting, fingering the money lovingly.

Byron eyed him coldly and spoke, "I don't see why we couldn't meet at your compound, don't you trust me?"

Wilson carried on counting while he spoke, "We don't like strangers up at our haven, and I couldn't be sure whether you would bring niggers with you."

"Never have before, have we? We're sensitive to your beliefs."

"Yeah, but you do consort with niggers, spicks and god knows what else!"

"We fight alongside all those who are able and answer the call," replied Byron tersely.

"Well our beliefs are that the white man is the master and he will not be polluted by consorting with inferior races."

"Then I guess we will have to agree to disagree." Byron said pleasantly.

"What about your boss, Ullrich?" muttered the skinny man, his voice a dry rasp rattling in his chest.

"What about Colonel Ullrich?" asked Byron.

"I heard he was part Jew, so they said on the TV, and part Jew is a Jew, vermin is vermin!" snarled the thin man.

"Didn't think you believed the media, Luther, thought they were pawns of the Zionist Occupation Government?" Byron smiled, "Maybe they've got to you, you know, mind control, waves put out over the air."

“Fuck you, Byron!” Luther spat. “Why’d they lie about something like that? Your boss is a filthy Jew-boy!” his skeletal face pinkened briefly, before returning to its deathly pallor. “You saying they lying, Ullrich ain’t no Jew?”

“I’m not saying anything, Luther, I’m just here to buy some ammunition,” smiled Byron.

Wilson looked up, “Why don’t you come join us, Major Byron, our militia group needs men like you. A good Aryan like you shouldn’t be consorting with Jews and niggers, come back to your own kind!”

“I’m happy where I am.” Byron said as Weber jumped down. “Everything okay, Sergeant?” he asked.

“Fine, Major.”

“With your permission then, Mr. Wilson?” Byron asked and the militia leader gathered up his case of money and nodded. Byron waved his truck forward. The vehicle ploughed across the muddy clearing and pulled up and positioned itself tail to tail with the militia truck. Weber, Hicks and Harris started to shift the crates of ammunition into their truck.

“You must be planning some war, Major Byron?” said Wilson jovially as they watched the truck, being loaded.

Byron just smiled and nodded.

“You just make sure to kill some more of those nigger-loving government cockroaches. We liked what you did to that FBI building, next time you should do the White House, even the Jew UN building in New York!”

“Yeah, the Jew-N!” sneered Luther. “Or wouldn’t Ullrich like that!”

“First off, I always found the UN profoundly anti-Israeli, so not quite the Jewish cabal you suggest.” Byron sighed, “Second, you seemed inordinately interested in Colonel

Ullrich's family background, you wouldn't be trying to hide a nigger in the wood-pile yourself there, would you, Luther?"

"You watch your fucking mouth, Byron, I'll take out your Jew-loving ass right here, right now!" spittle flecked Luther's lips, his hand brushing the hilt of his Colt .45 automatic, hanging from the holster on his belt.

"I don't think so, Luther." Byron smiled indulgently; his hands hanging relaxed by his side.

"Boys, boys, let's not fight each other, we share the same enemy." Wilson cooed.

"Truck's loaded, Major." Weber reported.

"Very well, we must be on our way. It's been a pleasure doing business with you gentlemen." Byron smiled pleasantly and turned to leave.

"You let me know when I can be of use, anytime!" Wilson called as he ambled away, the bag of cash clutched to his chest.

Byron paused for a minute and turned to the waiting Luther. "Hey, Luther, don't pay too much heed to what they say on TV, after all, according to them, you and your cronies are just a bunch of in-bred, mentally defective, drooling psychotics, and that can't be so can it?" Byron grinned at the enraged militiaman, winked and turned, strolling back to his parked vehicle.

In the Cherokee, Weber said, "I don't know how you put up with those freaks, Major, those two are like a psychotic Laurel and Hardy."

"Needs must, when it comes to business, Sergeant. Lets get going, we can get this load to the airstrip in less than two hours, sooner I get away from these fucking assholes, the better."

The Cherokee and the U-Haul truck slipped out of the clearing, ready to descend out of the bitter mountains.

From in amongst the dense trees, camouflaged figures watched the two parties leave, eyes pressed to binoculars, automatic weapons by their sides.

“Target Alpha is on its way down,” one of the shadowy figures whispered into his microphone, then the men melted back into the forest.

* * *

Lower down the mountain heavily armed ATF and local police officers swarmed around their roadblock. Set back behind a phalanx a squad cars, Richard Hobson and Jeff Parsons waited, dressed in dark windcheaters over Kevlar vests, handguns drawn, Parsons a Smith and Wesson 10mm automatic, Hobson a SIG P228. Both men squatted behind their dark sedan, the head of the ATF team came scuttling across, HK MP5 sub-machine gun slung over his shoulder.

“They’re on their way down, should be here in a few minutes,” reported the ATF man.

“Head count?” asked Hobson.

“Two in the U-Haul truck, two in the Cherokee. Your man Byron is in the front passenger seat of the Jeep. They’re armed with automatic weapons.”

“I want these men alive, especially Byron, I don’t want some Waco-type bloodbath!” muttered Hobson.

The ATF man flushed angrily, “My men know their orders.”

“Agent Parsons and I have to keep clear, our source has to be protected. This has to look like a purely ATF/Police operation. Bureau and Agency involvement is classified, you get that?”

“I get it,” he muttered tersely in reply, and moved off back to his men, unslinging his weapon and pulling back the charging handle.

“You could do with some work on your diplomatic skills, Rich,” whispered Parsons.

“Fuck ‘em. We can kiss and make up later, right now they need to know who’s the boss!” Hobson snarled.

Parsons shrugged grimly and the two men hunkered down and waited.

The Cherokee and the U-Haul truck swept down the mountain road, the steep incline gradually easing. Byron stretched in his seat and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, stuck one in the corner of his mouth and flicked open his Zippo lighter.

“No wonder the people up in this part of the world go wacko, this place really is the asshole of the world.” Byron muttered. Weber slouched at the wheel laughed as the Cherokee swept around a steep bend.

“Shit!” screamed Byron, tearing the unlit cigarette from his mouth.

Spread out across the road was a solid barricade of marked police cars and heavily armed men, most dressed in dark outfits emblazoned with ATF in bright yellow lettering. The road, for hundreds of yards back, was jammed with cops and federal officers and their vehicles, and among the trees, men with automatic weapons were dug in.

“Jesus!” cursed Byron as Weber slammed on the brakes and wrestled with the wheel. A voice outside, distorted by the amplification of a megaphone, bellowed something about stopping and stepping from their vehicles with their hands up.

Byron reached across and seized Weber’s MP5, unsafing it and switching to three-round burst.

“Get off the road! Get off the road!” Byron bellowed, pulling out the HK’s retractable butt and raising it to his shoulder.

Weber engaged the four-wheel drive and peeled off the road, mounting the steep grassy bank.

Dark-suited ATF SWAT officers scattered, but many were too slow, as they were bounced off the speeding Jeep's hood or crushed beneath its heavy wheels. In panic, some opened up on the speeding vehicle.

"We got fire!" screamed the ATF officer in charge down on the roadblock, and the men around him instantly opened up on the escaping Jeep and the approaching truck. Hundreds of rounds ripped into the two vehicles, the truck's tires exploding, the metal rims of the wheels grinding into the road surface sending sparks flying. With an agonising shriek, the truck lurched to a halt around a hundred yards short of the roadblock.

"Direct your fire, goddamnit!" howled Hobson as he tore through the ATF men pouring fire into the two vehicles, angrily waving the pistol in his hand.

The ATF man in charge tried to regain a semblance of control, ordering his men to reduce their fire, to pick their targets carefully, reminding them they wanted them alive. But the men's blood was up, as they watched the Jeep speed round the barricade, scattering and hitting their fellow officers.

Inside the Cherokee, Byron squeezed off burst after burst from his sub-machine gun, aiming directly through the windshield, the bullets punching through the glass. All around, he saw men going down, his fire slamming into them.

As they rounded the mass of police vehicles, Byron reloaded, ramming home a fresh 30 round magazine and yanking back the cocking handle.

"Over there!" Byron pointed, "Take that turning!" Over on the right they were approaching a clear right turn.

Hunched over the wheel, Weber grunted, jerked the wheel around and slammed back onto the road surface, shifting back into two-wheel drive for maximum speed. He clipped a parked cruiser and approached the junction.

"Almost there." muttered Weber.

Suddenly the side window of Weber's door shattered and a single round slammed into the side of his head. He shuddered and fell forward onto the steering wheel. The vehicle swerved wildly and a blood splattered Byron reached across, struggling to get a hold of the wheel. As the Jeep veered across the road, Byron looked up and saw them rushing headlong into the thick trees.

The Cherokee, going more than 70 mph, bounced over the roadside ditch and slammed into the trees, its hood crumpling around a thick, knotted trunk. The shattered vehicle lay lifeless and let out a long plaintive howl as the horn blared.

"Shit!" shouted Hobson, "Get some men over there, no more shooting, you better hope Byron's still alive, or god help you!" The ATF chief dispatched a squad who dashed off to the wrecked Jeep.

The doors of the U-Haul truck popped open and the two men jumped down. Hicks, the passenger, fired his Colt Commando automatic rifle from the shoulder, squeezing off short, controlled bursts on full automatic. His 5.56mm rounds slammed into the roadblock, the bullets zinging off the metal of the parked cars. Instinctively, the ATF men ducked for cover. Meanwhile, Harris, the driver was also out, firing his compact HK MP5KA4, squeezing off three-round bursts as he moved off the road and onto the grass verge edging the forest.

"Come on, Hicks, let's get the fuck out of here!" Harris bellowed above the gunfire.

Hicks emptied his 30 round magazine, flipped it over and slammed home the inverted fresh mag taped to the other side. As he brought up his weapon, a sudden burst of fire from the barricade slammed into his knees, ripping them open. He crumpled to the ground, his rifle tossed clear.

"Hicks!" Harris yelled from the edge of the forest.

"Go! You go, get clear!" he cried through gritted teeth.

Harris paused, guilt gnawing at him, then he nodded and slipped into the forest.

A heavily armed ATF squad moved in on the sprawling Hicks. He heard them edging closer, their scuffling footsteps only feet away. Fighting through the pain, he reached inside his jacket and pulled out his SIG P228 automatic pistol, pulled back the hammer and jammed it into his temple. Laughing, he pulled the trigger, blood and brain matter splattered in an arc around his head.

The ATF men flinched at the blast of the shot and edged in to check the body.

“Shit! What a fiasco!” muttered Hobson angrily.

“We got a man in the treeline!” someone shouted and the ATF men opened up on the shadowy blur of Harris moving away through the trees.

“Goddamnit! Cease fire!” Hobson bellowed, snatching a Remington 700 bolt-action rifle from one of the ATF snipers. “If you want a job done properly, do it yourself!” he muttered, aiming through the 10x telescopic sight. The ATF men watched him in silence, as he tracked the running figure. Slowly he exhaled and squeezed of a round, the rifle bucking in his hands. The bullet ripped through the air at 2800 feet per second and slammed into Harris’s right shoulder, shattering his clavicle and scapula, paralysing his right arm. The velocity of the round along with the momentum of him running, picked him up and threw him forward, slamming him headfirst into a tree-trunk, knocking him out cold.

Hobson handed the rifle back to its owner and ordered derisively, “Go and get him, and try not to get this one killed, will you.” He turned and headed back to the waiting Parsons, “Let’s go and check on Byron.”

The two men hurried over to the wrecked Cherokee. Fighting through the massed ATF men, they found paramedics tending to the passenger, still apparently unconscious, his left eye blackened and almost swollen shut, his nose bloody and lip split.

“What’s the score?” Hobson asked one of the paramedics.

“Driver’s dead, but this guys going to be alright, stunned, he’ll come round soon, but there is a risk of concussion and I’d like to have him x-rayed.” he replied.

“Fair enough, get him into the ambulance, I want two ATF men in the vehicle with you, a cruiser leading you and I’ll follow in my car. Let’s move!” Hastily they extracted Byron and stretchered him over to the waiting ambulance, Hobson and Parsons following.

The ATF chief approached, “The other guy’s alive, should make it, you just fucked up his shoulder, and he knocked himself unconscious.”

“Well two out of four isn’t bad for you clowns, I suppose. Get him in an escorted ambulance.” Hobson turned on his heel and walked away.

Approaching the ambulance, a paramedic called out, “He’s coming round.”

Hobson climbed up into the rear of the ambulance and looked down at Byron, his eyelids fluttering. Finally, his one good eye came open and focused on Hobson’s face. The CIA man leant down and whispered into Byron’s ear.

“Now I own you, motherfucker.”

Chapter 16

Early evening and Larsen entered Ullrich's study. The Colonel sat behind his desk; Hooker was lounging in one of the armchairs.

"Michael, I've just had some disturbing news. Byron's been captured in Montana, they've also got Harris, he's been wounded. Weber and Hicks are both dead." Ullrich said calmly.

"What happened?" asked Larsen.

"It appears there was a tip off. The ATF and the local police were waiting for them after the meet. They ambushed them coming off the mountain. Byron was pretty beat up; Harris was hit in the shoulder. They've spirited Jim away to some secret location, no doubt they're going to sweat him, but I know we can rely on him to limit the damage. Harris is under guard in hospital."

"What do we do?"

"We find the rat."

"Any suspicions?"

"Has to be those fucking militia freaks, they hit Byron after the meet and they never touched Wilson and his cronies. I should have known we couldn't trust those motherfuckers." Ullrich whispered quietly.

"What do you want me to do?" asked Larsen.

"Get a team together, we're going to pay the Montana Militia a visit and teach them a lesson."

* * *

The following night, the sky above the Rockies in Montana was inky black. The chill air was still, the ground damp and crisp underfoot.

The Militia stockade, 'Haven', was a large oval shape, around 250 yards across its widest part, its perimeter ringed by thick wooden stakes driven deep into the ground, each about 10 feet high, a dense mesh of razor-wire strung between each post. Two wooden guard towers stood at each end of the compound, standing around 15 feet. A single, unmade road led up to the front gate, the back of the stockade stood against a sheer rock-face.

The compound was silent, the only sign of life a single armed guard in each tower.

Amongst the dense trees, dark figures moved silently. At each end of the outer perimeter a single shadowy figure started to climb the tall, verdant pine trees. Each man, dressed entirely in black, their faces covered by ski masks, wore metal spikes attached to their heels and thick leather belt-harnesses around their waists. Looping the harness around the tree trunks and driving the spikes into the wood, they slipped up the straight trees.

The first guard in his tower thought he heard a faint rustle in the trees. With his AR15 rifle slung over his shoulder, he leant over the edge of his tower and peered into the shadows. He squinted, vainly trying to make anything out. Dismissing the sounds he leant back inside his box.

The crossbow bolt whistled through the air and ripped into the guard's neck. With little more than a strangled gasp, he crumpled to the floor of his tower. Lying on the bare wooden floor, he clawed vainly at his neck, as his throat filled with blood. Silently the guard drowned in his own blood.

The second guard in his tower heard nothing, the callow youth leaning against the ledge and staring dreamily into the forest, thinking of the girls back in town. He believed what Mr Harris said about the government, the inferior races and the coming apocalypse, but he sure wished he'd let girls come up to 'Haven'. Standing guard for the white master race could be awful lonesome.

The dark figure in the tree across from him brought up his HK assault rifle, an image-intensifying sight fixed to the top of its carrying handle. Attached to the end of the muzzle was a combined noise/flash suppresser. He took careful aim.

The youth in the tower sighed sadly, but he never heard the muffled cough as the soft-nosed 5.56mm round ripped into his brow, blowing his brains out the back of his head in a fine mist. The dead guard slumped quietly to floor of his tower.

Back at the other end of the stockade, the dark-suited, former SEAL slipped a new bolt into his crossbow. He aimed and fired. The bolt flew silently, then thudded into the side of the guard-tower. He waited, but hearing no response, he proceeded. The bolt had carried a fine, high-tensile steel cable over the stockade wall, and with it firmly anchored in the tower, he attached the other end to his tree. Removing his crossbow, and with his silenced MP5 sub-machine gun slung securely across his back, he slipped a well-oiled pulley-wheel harness over the cable and gripped each end of the harness strap in his hands. Pushing out gently, he abseiled down, slipping silently over the stockade wall.

Inside the compound, two men stood guard inside the main gate. Both men were well wrapped up against the chill night and stood stamping their feet and rubbing their hands. Although Mr Harris, and especially Luther, despised smoking, both men furtively puffed on cigarettes, standing together, talking in muffled voices, both with their rifles slung.

Out of the shadows, a dark figure emerged, slipping in close, silenced S&W automatic gripped two-handed. He fired once into the first man, pivoted and double-tapped the second, both men crumpling silently. He moved closer, leant over the bodies, putting two rounds into each. He holstered his pistol and unslung his MP5. He silently swung open the main gates. Heavily armed, dark-suited figures, all masked, swarmed through the gate and silently fanned out.

George Wilson eased his substantial bulk into bed. Dressed in silk pyjamas, his thinning grey hair smoothly brushed, he put on his reading glasses and lifted the book beside

his bed. Although it was about one in the morning, Wilson liked to read a few pages before he went to sleep. Usually he preferred a nice little thriller, something undemanding, like the latest by John Grisham or Patricia Cornwell. However, all he had to read right now was some book by the British historian, David Irving, purporting to prove that the Holocaust was an elaborate fraud. Luther had lent the book to Wilson, urging him to read it. Sighing, he opened the tome. Well at least it would help him to fall asleep.

As Wilson struggled through the first pages, he thought he heard movement outside, then muffled voices suddenly choked off. He dismissed the noises, but decided to have a word with Luther in the morning about the men disturbing his rest.

Slowly his eyelids grew heavy and sank; the book drooped in his hands and sagged into his lap. He began to quietly snore.

Wilson awoke with a start as he his bedroom door crashed open. Bewildered, unsure how long he had been asleep, indeed if he was still asleep, he blinked wildly, his mouth opening and shutting like a beached fish. Two men, wearing matching ski masks and carrying automatic weapons, burst into the room.

“What, what...” the flustered Wilson gabbled.

The stockier of the two men grabbed him by the collar of his pyjamas and tore him out of bed, tossing him onto the floor. The man grabbed Wilson’s hair and jerked his head upright.

“On your knees, cocksucker!” the thickset man snarled and Wilson complied, but the man kept a grip of his hair, tugging at it, threatening to tear it from his scalp.

A tall, slim, muscular man strode into the room. He reached up and pulled the ski mask off his head, revealing grim, chiselled features and close-cropped grey hair.

“Ullrich, what the hell’s the meaning of this?” the militia leader tried to sound tough, enraged, but only sounded panic-stricken.

Ullrich slung his Colt Commando and unholstered his M23 automatic pistol. He crossed the room in two quick paces and swung the pistol around in a backhanded arc, slamming it across Wilson's exposed face. The pistol-whipped militia leader crumpled to the floor, a clump of his hair left in the stocky man's hand.

"Don't insult my intelligence, Wilson. You didn't think I'd come calling when you sold my people to the law!" Ullrich barked.

"I don't know what you mean?" the man snivelled.

Ullrich nodded to the thickset man, he reached down, grabbed Wilson by the hair and jerked him back onto his knees. The fat man squealed, his hand held to his cheek, blood welling between his fingers.

"You haven't got much hair left, you can't afford to have Mr Hooker here rip any more out." Ullrich snarled.

"Please, tell me what you want!" the man sobbed.

"Tell me why you did it, why you sold us out?"

"I don't know what you mean, honest I don't!" Wilson whimpered.

"Byron and his men are ambushed straight after leaving you, carrying ammunition you sold them. But the ATF only took them, they don't come after you, you tell me why."

"I don't know, I didn't say anything. I know they were arrested, but I didn't have anything to do with it. Maybe they don't know about me, maybe they haven't got around to me yet, they might still mean to arrest me!" he babbled.

"They must have known about the meeting, they must have tracked them coming in and leaving, how else would they know, and if they were going to arrest you, they would have swept you up at the same time." Ullrich paused, "No, you're the rat, Wilson, if not you then someone else in your group. You're responsible whatever way you cut it."

"No, please, only me and Luther knew about the meeting, it wasn't me, it must have been him."

“Well we’ll talk to you both. You confess, you die quick, you don’t, it’ll be a long night.”

“Please!” Wilson wailed.

Ullrich nodded to the masked Hooker who jerked Wilson to his feet. Grabbing him by the scruff of the neck he forced him out of the door, marching him, bare-foot along the wood-floored corridor and out of the building.

Emerging from the building, Wilson saw his men lined up, on their knees, hands on heads, in two lines, running either side of the track from his building to the front gate, about twelve men in each line. Hooker shoved him down onto his knees and pulled his Colt .45 automatic from his holster and jammed it in his ear.

Shivering, kneeling on the cold concrete step, Wilson looked out at his frightened men, lined up beneath the stark floodlights. Standing around them and the entrance to his hut, around fifteen to twenty men in black fatigues levelled their automatic weapons on the cowed prisoners.

“Where’s Luther?” Ullrich asked the man in charge of the prisoners.

“No sign of him,” he replied.

Ullrich turned on Wilson, “So where the hell is he?”

“I don’t know, he was here,” he whimpered.

“You sure he isn’t down in town, collecting his thirty pieces of silver. I’ll ask you again, where is Luther?” snapped Ullrich.

“I don’t know, he was here,”

The Colonel nodded once to one of his men. The man walked up behind the closest two prisoners on the left, raised his silenced automatic pistol and fired a single round into the back of the first man’s head. As he toppled forward, the executioner turned and fired again, a second man pitching forward.

An audible gasp rose from among the prisoners, one sobbed aloud.

Ullrich turned, “Well?”

“I don’t know!” Wilson screamed.

Ullrich turned and nodded. The executioner moved down the line, fired twice more, two men fell dead.

“It’s up to you. You can tell me where Luther is, or you can just confess you are the snitch.” The Colonel whispered, almost soothingly.

“How many times, I didn’t tell the police anything, it must have been Luther, he was here, but now he’s gone.”

Ullrich turned and waved. Two men stepped up, levelled their silenced MP5 sub-machine guns and opened up, mowing down the remaining eight men in the left line. When they ceased fire, having emptied their 30 round magazines, they reloaded and waited. Wilson stared in horror at the bloody, twitching bodies, lying beneath a pall of stinking smoke.

“Are you fucking insane, Ullrich?” screamed the militia leader hysterically.

The side-door to one of the compound buildings crashed open and a skeletal figure dashed out, an M16 clutched in his hands. As Luther dashed across the compound, he opened up on full automatic, spraying indiscriminately. Two of Ullrich’s men went down, the rest dived for cover. The skinny man covered the open, lit area in seconds and headed into the shadows, towards the open gate.

Out of the darkness stepped a figure in black. The masked man raised his Colt Commando to his shoulder. Luther saw him and brought his weapon around, opening up on him. The dark-dressed man stood firm, drew a careful bead and fired a short volley directly into the chest of the approaching militiaman. Luther was hurled backwards, his rifle spinning into the dark. He hit the ground hard. The masked man, his rifle still raised, edged up to the sprawling figure, looked down into his eyes, levelled the muzzle of his weapon on the man’s face and fired two quick shots into his forehead. The gunman put up his weapon and strode across the compound toward Ullrich.

“Well done, Riesman.” Ullrich smiled.

The rest of his men were back on their feet, dusting themselves down and checking the two casualties. One soldier walked up to the Colonel.

“Report.”

“Briggs is dead. Harper’s been winged, his vest took the worst of it, but his arm will need a little work.”

“Shit. Okay take care of Harper for now, we’ll get him to a friendly doctor. Get Briggs in a body-bag, we’ll take him with us.”

Ullrich turned and walked up to the kneeling Wilson.

“I suppose the question of who is the informer is now moot. I only wish I had time to deal with it.” Ullrich raised his pistol and fired a single round into Wilson’s forehead. The man toppled over, the Colonel stepped over him and put two more rounds into his upturned face.

Turning around, he nodded to his waiting men. A group of around five or six men raised their silenced MP5s and opened up on the remaining twelve prisoners, the gunfire mere splutters as they raked the kneeling men, mowing them down, the air clouding with red mist. In the silence that followed, the men reloaded, then checked the dead and dispatched any survivors.

Ullrich looked down in disgust at Wilson’s corpse. “Let’s get the fuck out of here!” he muttered, turning away.

Hooker stepped over the corpse, paused, turned and gave it a savage kick. An officer approached Ullrich. “What shall we do with the bodies?” he asked.

Ullrich paused and looked back.

“Let them rot.”

Chapter 17

Outside a nondescript house out in the Virginia countryside, Hobson and Parsons parked their dark sedan beside two similar vehicles. They entered the house, past the sentry on the porch carrying an HK MP5 sub-machine gun.

Inside, Hobson nodded to two dark-suited men sitting in the lounge and proceeded down the stairs into the basement, Parsons close behind.

“We flew Byron out of Montana yesterday and had him stashed in this Agency safe-house. The guards are all men I can trust, hand-picked.” Hobson said as they descended into the dimly lit basement.

“What about Harris?” asked Parsons.

“He was flown into DC this morning. He’s in hospital, under heavy guard.”

The two men moved along a gloomy corridor, ahead a pool of light spilled onto the floor, sitting in it on a folding chair sat a stocky man in shirtsleeves. The two visitors stopped, Hobson greeting the man.

“George, how’s our guest?”

The thickset man stood. Balding, around forty, with a bull-neck, the muscular man emitted a course air of menace.

“See for yourself, he ain’t saying jack-shit.” George nodded to the brightly-lit window in front of him. Behind the two-way mirror, in a starkly lit, bare room sat James Byron in a rickety wooden chair, his right wrist and forearm in plaster. His right eye was swollen shut, the flesh discoloured, his nose puffy and slightly crooked, his bottom lip split

“How hard you leaned on him?” asked Hobson.

“We been nice-as-pie, just like you asked.” shrugged George.

“Okay.” Hobson led the two men into the room, the CIA man nodded to the Agent inside, who stood and left without a word. Hobson sat in the chair across the table from

Byron and opened his briefcase, pulling out a manila folder, laying it in front of him. Parsons and George took up stations by the walls.

Hobson opened the folder, read for a few moments, then looked up and smiled at Byron. “Well, James, you have a most impressive record, and I have the unabridged version. The dirty truth is all here, uncensored. Cornell, OTC, missed Vietnam, but joined Special Forces, Psy-Ops, worked extensively in Central and South America, subversion, destabilisation, assassination. You were an intelligence whiz, worked with us boys in the Agency as well as Military Intelligence. Distinguished yourself in El Salvador and Nicaragua, plus sojourns in Panama and Eastern Europe and the Middle East. You’re a Reagan wet dream: a morally ambivalent, duplicitous, killer-genius. Shit, you should be President!” Hobson laughed.

Byron just smiled.

“You and Ullrich go way back. You can tell me, what’s his big plan, or has he just gone fucking nuts?” asked Hobson leaning across the table.

“You wish,” he continued smiling.

“So what’s his objective?”

“I haven’t seen John Ullrich for almost two years. Now that’s all I’m going to say until I see my lawyer.”

Hobson sat back in his chair and laughed loudly, “Oh come on, surely you’re not that dumb. We aren’t going to Mirandize you; we don’t give a shit about your constitutional rights. You’re not here, this isn’t happening. Your ass belongs to me, I could waste you right now, and no one would give a shit. Wake up, you’re a traitor, raising armed insurrection against the government of these United States. The gloves are off.” Hobson’s face hardened and he leant across the table, “You better start talking. I want to know not only where Ullrich is, I want his operational plans, who he’s working with, the whole picture.”

Byron just stared back.

Hobson stood and walked around the table, slowly moving behind the shackled prisoner.

“You worked for long enough in the intelligence field, you know what I can do to you, how I can make you suffer. Eventually you’ll talk.”

“I was also trained to withstand interrogation and torture.” Byron said.

“True, that’ll buy you time, but nothing else. Eventually you will talk, everyone does.”

Hobson stopped behind the prisoner and swung his open right palm around, slapping it hard over Byron’s right ear. The compression of pressure inside his inner ear ruptured his eardrum. The prisoner toppled sideways and crashed to the floor. Hobson stepped over him and drove his heel down hard on the man’s plaster-cast wrist. With a crunch the cast gave way and his foot ground down into the fractured wrist. Byron choked off a cry, gritting his teeth, the tears welling up in his eyes. Hobson looked down at the sprawling man and ground his heel in deeper.

“This only the beginning, James, you know it can only get worse. Answer my questions and it’s all over.” Hobson lifted his foot and walked away.

Gasping, Byron hissed through his gritted teeth, “Not the subtlest of approaches.”

“Yeah well, I’ve had a frustrating few weeks!” the CIA man shrugged, “I know torture has proved to be an unsuccessful tool in interrogation, the information obtained unreliable, but it helps work off that tension and frustration.” Hobson closed in and swung his foot around, the toe of his shoe driving into Byron’s temple, flipping him over. “We’ll move onto the more refined techniques later, I don’t often get a chance at such hand on work these days.” He jammed his foot down on the prisoner’s windpipe, watching as his face contorted, his flesh turning from scarlet to purple.

Parsons cleared his throat and stepped away from the wall, “I think I’ll wait upstairs.”

Hobson lifted his foot and nodded to George, who lifted the prisoner, righting him in his chair. The CIA chief approached his friend at the door. "You okay?" he asked, and Parsons nodded. "You know this is the only way, you did agree!" he whispered.

Parsons swallowed dryly. "I know, but this is your area of expertise." He turned and left the room, closing the door after him.

Hobson turned, shaking his head, raising his eyes heavenwards. He walked past the other CIA man and rifled through a soft canvas grip.

"Fucking FBI!" muttered George.

Hobson removed a short metal rod from the bag and checked it. Turning, he walked briskly up to the slumped prisoner.

He leant in and jammed the electric stun-baton into the man's ribs, the sudden charge ripping into him, his body shuddering spastically. Hobson withdrew the baton, then rammed it home again, a sob escaping Byron's tight lips.

Hobson withdrew the electric baton and circled the desk.

"Now shall we continue?" he muttered.

George stepped around the seated prisoner, rolling up his sleeves. Bracing himself, his feet planted squarely apart, he raised his fat, ham-like fists and proceeded to pound the shackled prisoner. Byron doubled up; grunting quietly as the blows tore into his belly and slammed into his face.

As the blows rained down, Hobson stood and watched quietly, his eyes unwavering.

* * *

Three hours later, the two interrogators broke for a drink and rest. When they returned Hobson sat across from Byron. He looked at the pitiful wreck across the table from him. Byron's face was beaten almost unrecognisable, swollen and discoloured, his features bloated

and grotesque, both eyes swollen shut, his lips torn and raw, blood seeping between his broken teeth. Blood matted his hair and splattered the front of his white shirt. The two CIA men had washed their red-stained hands and changed their stained shirts. Both fingered their bruised, grazed knuckles.

“Well, James, enough of our fun. I know we could go on all day, wire your genitals up, maybe ‘Yellow Submarine’ you, stick your head down a used toilet. Shit, we could even use old Mussolini’s one of pouring gallons of castor oil down your throat, or a shit-load of other stuff from back across the years. Just the stuff from Nam would keep us busy for days. But we both know that wouldn’t get us anywhere.” Hobson laughed.

Byron sat slumped in his chair, a bloody, broken wreck, his eyes peering back from swollen slits.

“Now it’s time to get down to business!” The door opened and a slim man in a suit entered, a small black case in his hand. The man laid his case on the table and opened it. “Things have come a long way since the days of sodium pentothol, the things we can do with drugs now are incredible, things have advanced so far, even since you left the intelligence field!”

Byron watched as the man drew a clear fluid into a syringe, squeezing off any excess air.

“The doctor promises me that one shot of this and you’ll be happy to tell us all we want to know, not only will you be unable to help yourself, you’ll be all too eager.”

George rolled up Byron’s sleeve and the doctor fastened a tourniquet around his upper arm, found a vein and injected the drug.

“Thank you, Doctor.” Hobson nodded and the man left.

“All we have to do now is wait.” Hobson leant back in his seat, smiling contentedly.

Byron stared back. Slowly he seemed to work his jaw, then his lips parted and he gritted his bloody teeth in a broken grin.

Hobson frowned, at first just smiling back, but the prisoner just gritted his teeth tighter in an even broader grin. The CIA man sat forward and he heard Byron wheezing with laughter, his chuckling seeping through his broken teeth.

“Shit!” Hobson leapt to his feet, “Get the fucking doctor, now!” he screamed.

George jumped up, “What’s up?”

“Don’t just stand there you cretin, get him!” he bawled and the other man dashed out of the room.

Hobson bent down over the prisoner and struggled in vain to pry open his jaws. Byron’s laughter grew.

The CIA man grabbed him by the collar, “What have you taken?” he shook him.

Byron’s teeth parted, “Too late, cocksucker.” He shuddered and stiffened and whispered, “See you in hell!” He gasped once, then slumped quietly in his chair.

The doctor came tearing into the room. Hobson stood and walked away, leaning his forehead against the wall. The doctor checked Byron’s pulse.

“He’s dead,” he muttered.

“No shit, Sherlock?” snarled Hobson.

“What happened?” asked Parsons, entering the room.

“He must have had an L-pill concealed under a cap on his teeth.” The CIA man sighed.

Parsons bent down and looked into the dead man’s face. “Why did he wait to use it?”

“He waited until he knew all was lost, that we were about to break him. Also I think he did to piss me off.” Hobson walked over, as if to strike the corpse, but halted.

“Get the other man, Harris, here. We’ll get to work on him. He won’t know as much as Byron, but I’ll be fucked if this is all going to be for nothing!” He turned and looked at the waiting agents. “What the fuck are you waiting for, move!” he screamed.

Left alone in the room, Hobson turned to Parsons.

“This all coming apart.” he muttered.

“At least we still have Harris.”

* * *

Suarez walked down the Washington DC ghetto street, entered a tenement building and climbed the stairs to the roof.

Emerging into morning sunlight, he crossed the gravel-topped roof and reached the parapet. Kneeling, he opened the canvas bag he carried and removed the heavy-barrelled Galil Israeli sniper rifle. He unfolded the compact rifle's butt and snapped on top a 6x telescopic sight. Finally he screwed a bulbous noise and flash suppresser onto the end of the muzzle. Ramming home a 20 round magazine he settled down on the roof, lying prone, the rifle resting on its bipod on the parapet. The rear entrance to the hospital was about 600 metres away. His sight was already zeroed, he would have liked to have checked it, but he couldn't risk exposure. He settled down and peered through the scope.

Suarez relaxed, comfortable under the warm sun, and waited.

Fifteen minutes later, the rear entrance of the hospital swung open. Heavily armed federal agents appeared, deploying themselves around the doors. A van pulled up, escorted by marked cruisers. More armed men spilled from the vehicles. The agent in charge nodded and two armed men appeared through the doors, followed by a wheelchair, pushed by an orderly, but flanked by two more SWAT men. More followed. In the wheelchair sat the heavily bandaged Harris, a scowl on his face, uncomfortable in the flak jacket they had made him wear.

Suarez aimed, steadied his breathing, exhaled and fired.

From 600 metres away, the armed officers didn't hear a thing as the silenced 7.62mm round passed between them and slammed into Harris's head. He bucked once, a gasp

escaping his lips, as the bullet punched through his forehead, then he quietly slumped forward.

“Sniper!” one of the blood-splattered agents cried and the team spread, weapons raised scanning the roofs and surrounding buildings.

Suarez removed the sight and silencer, folded the butt and slid the rifle back into his bag. He slipped off the roof and moved quickly down the stairs. Emerging onto the street below, he turned and calmly walked away.

Chapter 18

Angela Washington watched her Elementary School pupils playing in the summer sun. The young children laughed and shouted, running back and forth. The boys knocked around a soccer ball, while a group of girls stood by the chainlink fence, chattering and giggling. The children were mainly black, the rest Hispanic with only a smattering of white faces, a demographic that reflected the Harlem neighbourhood. The David Dinkins Elementary was a large, rough-brick building dating back to the turn of the century, standing beside a long city street, surrounded by high, crumbling tenement buildings. Sun peered between the tall spires; traffic rumbled distantly, the blur of speeding vehicles visible at the far end of the shadowy street.

The young, black teacher watched her students playing for a few minutes, then retired to a doorstep bathed in sunshine, where she sat, perched on its edge. She crossed her long, elegant legs and opened her book and began reading. The book was a collection of the poetry of Sylvia Plath, but for some reason everyone always assumed she was reading Maya Angelou, but she found her work trite and mawkish, a judgement she felt confirmed by the poet's friendship with the tedious TV presenter, Oprah Winfrey, a woman whose ego grew as her waistline shrank, until her self-adoration was bloated enough to generate its own gravitational pull. Angela had no time for such sentimental pap, she had seen too much of the harsh reality of life, she harboured no romantic illusions, she knew there was no simple, quick fix. Sighing sadly she began to re-read her favourite poem, *Daddy*.

Occasionally she would pause from the bitter sadness of the poetry, glancing up and smiling at the frolicking children. The echoes of their joyous cries echoed down the long city streets.

A dark van with tinted windows sped down the Harlem street, swung around the corner, narrowly avoiding side-swiping a parked car, and slid to a halt, hard against the

sidewalk, the school's chainlink fence only feet away. The playing children reflected in the tinted windows, dark mirror-twins.

The van's engine idled gently, the vehicle an immovable black obelisk, a dark shadow in the crumbling New York neighbourhood.

The back doors of the van flew open and four men jumped out. All dressed in black overalls, combat boots on their feet, their flak jackets strung with magazines and grenades, their faces covered by ski masks. In their gloved hands they held Colt Commando automatic rifles, loaded with curved, 30 round magazines. The men yanked back the charging handles of their weapons. The well-drilled men fanned out, the leader nodded and pointed to two of his men who moved off, taking up position at either end of the street, covering the approaches. They unsafed their weapons, raising them to their shoulders.

The leader and the remaining man trotted up to the school fence. Behind it the children played on, oblivious. The two gunmen paused, checked around them and raised their rifles, shifting their safety/fire selectors to full automatic. They stared through the fence, their eyes unflinching. They stood braced; the other man glanced at his leader. The commander stared ahead, then nodded once. Both men opened up.

Angela Washington relaxed in the warm sun, the book sagging in her hands, her heavy eyelids fluttered. Suddenly an explosion of harsh noise ripped through the air. Her eyes snapped open. She was all too familiar with the sound of gunfire. Panic gripped her, then horror. The children seemed to have frozen, and as the bullets tore across the open schoolyard, they were knocked down like skittles. Many just crumpled where they stood, other were blown clean off their feet and hurled through the air. Bodies lay twitching to the ground. Her head snapped from the dying children to the fence. She struggled to take in the men standing coolly emptying their weapons into the yard. Calmly they fired, reloaded and fired again. Confused and paralysed, her head snapped back and forth between the gunmen and the falling children.

Angela seemed unable to move, her responses were sluggish as she struggled to her feet. She seemed to be moving in slow motion, as if wading through air as thick as treacle. All around her the bullets were ripping the children to shreds, the high-velocity rounds slicing through their slight bodies. A fine pink mist seemed to fill the air, swirling in the sun. The chatter of gunfire filled the air. Deafened and frozen, Angela just watched as child upon child was mown down, the dead and dying piling up on each other.

The two gunmen ejected their empty magazines and rammed home fresh ones, opening up again immediately, hosing down the playground. The children just seemed to stare back at them with wide, glazed eyes. The men just fired, pivoted, fired, moved on, fired again. Brick and asphalt exploded as the bullets tore through the children. Again they reloaded and opened up.

Suddenly time seemed to unwind, snapping and suddenly speeding up. The screams and sobs of the children rose up above the chatter of gunfire. The children, as if unfrozen, came alive with a jerk, running back and forth, speeding in maddening circles, aimlessly rushing like images on speeded up film. Screaming and howling, the panic-stricken children lurched backwards and forwards, careening in circles, colliding with each other, crashing into walls, like toys wound up and released.

Angela watched the swarming children cut down. Suddenly she was moving forward, uncertain what she was doing, where she was going.

“Over here! This way children!” she shouted, waving wildly, gesturing towards the school entrance.

Slowly the children seemed to see or hear her and the survivors swarmed towards her.

“Come on kids!” she almost laughed, moving towards them.

As she rushed onwards she noticed faces peering from the school’s windows, faces of teachers she knew. They just stood staring, mouths agape.

The surviving children came charging toward her; from behind they were dropping, their backs torn open by automatic fire.

She reached them. Bending, she pushed and urged them on.

“You can make it, you’re almost there!” she cried.

As the dwindling ranks surged by her, she noticed children crumpling around her. Without thinking, she positioned herself between the fleeing survivors and the fence. She could see the five or six surviving children nearing the doorsteps. She opened her mouth to cheer them on. A savage blow ripped into her back. Fiery agony sliced into her and she felt herself falling. She crashed face down, but felt no pain, she only seemed aware of how sticky and damp the warm yard was. Looking up she saw the children reach the steps, but now there seemed less of them, but still they had made it. She tried to smile as her vision darkened, a chill creeping over her body. She tried to catch her breath, but quietly shuddered as her heart stilled.

The lead gunmen, having shot down the teacher, shifted his aim to the escaping children. His accomplice took down two. He sighted carefully. Three climbed the doorstep. He opened up, pouring a long blast into them. The glass doors exploded, shattered glass, wood and masonry engulfed in a blossom of blood. Two of the children crumpled. The third fell against the shattered door, pawing forlornly at the handle. The commander watched for a moment, then aimed and fired a three-round burst into the boy’s back, dropping him to the floor of the blood-soaked doorway.

The two gunmen reloaded and scanned the yard for survivors. The bloody scene of carnage was silent, the only movement the occasional twitching of the dead.

“Let’s go!” ordered the leader.

On the street, one of the men keeping guard saw the nearby door of a tenement swing open. A large matronly black woman rushed out onto the stoop. The gunman squeezed off a

short burst, knocking the woman to the ground, her dress ripped open and bloody. That seemed to prevent anyone else taking an interest.

The lead gunman called, "We are leaving! Move!"

The two school shooters jumped into the rear of the van as it slid away from the kerb. The third man hopped aboard as it reached him. The final gunman was trotting towards the creeping vehicle, when a beat-up, old sedan swung around the corner. The middle-aged man driving and his teenage passenger never saw or knew anything. The gunman opened up from the hip, the burst of gunfire shattered the car's windshield, ripping into the two occupants, killing them both dead where they sat. The vehicle slid directionless off the road and ran gently into a parked car.

The blaring horn filled the air as the last gunman leapt aboard the van, slamming the rear doors behind him. The driver slammed his foot down and the van sped away, swinging around the corner and disappearing into traffic.

Nothing stirred on the street, the wail of the horn hanging over it like a pall. In the distance rose the shriek of approaching sirens.

Chapter 19

Larsen came through the front door of the house and walked down the corridor. He passed the living room; inside Riesman and Billy were sitting at the table playing cards. The youth's giggles echoed behind him as he reached Ullrich's study, knocked and entered. Inside the Colonel and Hooker were sitting watching the TV. Ullrich waved Larsen to a chair, his eyes never leaving the screen.

The TV was showing a news broadcast. The pretty anchorwoman was speaking, her voice laden with cod sentiment, her hands clutched earnestly.

“Just to update, a shooting occurred at a Harlem Elementary School in New York earlier today. Eyewitnesses estimate four gunmen, travelling in a dark Ford van, attacked the David Dinkins Elementary at lunchtime today. Apparently firing at random with automatic weapons, the killers ruthlessly gunned down 39 children and their teacher. In addition to these brutal murders, a neighbourhood woman was also shot dead, and two passer-bys, a father and son, who happened on the scene, were killed as they sat in their car. At this time no names have been released.

“The nation has been shocked and stunned by this brutal act. The President has issued a statement expressing his outrage and sadness and pledged to hunt the killers down. The Mayor of New York City and the State Governor have issued similar statements. On behalf of the American people and all us here at Channel 11 News, I would like to express our sadness and grief, and to say that our thoughts and prayers are with you at this time.”

The anchorwoman stifled a contrived snuffle and wiped away a non-existent tear. The shuffling her papers, she continued in a cool, brisk tone.

“Although the Police have not confirmed the identities of any suspects, sources have told Channel 11 News that the military style operation bears all the hallmarks of fugitive, ex-military officer, John Ullrich and his terrorist army, suspected of involvement in a number of

bank robberies, murders and last months bomb blast at FBI Field Office in Washington DC, which resulted in 384 deaths.”

A mug shot of a battered looking Ullrich appeared on screen.

“Ullrich and his men have been associated with many anti-government militias and are suspected of eliminating a rival militia in Montana last week. The school attacked today was in a predominately black area, and many of the victims are believed to be black and Hispanic. A racial motive cannot be ruled out.

“Ullrich escaped from custody two months ago, his jailbreak leading to the deaths of more than thirty US Marshals and FBI Agents, in addition to other prisoners, one of whom was black. Lamar Coleman, 19, the only black prisoner present, was shot, execution-style. Speculation is that Ullrich himself killed the youth before fleeing.

“The FBI has renewed calls for any information from the public regarding the whereabouts of Ullrich, and have issued this number for anyone with any information. A reward is being offered, expected to rise after today’s outrage. Don’t miss our hour-long special tonight profiling Ullrich and his private army. The show will feature pictures of the renegade Colonel’s known associates. So don’t miss, ‘*Killer Elite: John Ullrich and his Killer Disciples*’, tonight at 8.00 eastern.

“We hope to go over live to the scene of this bloody carnage very soon, with latest pictures of this brutal slaughter. Also when we have the names of the victims, we will bring them straight to you, and we hope to bring the first words from their families, in this sad time.

“So stay with us on Channel 11 News, where we bring you all the news, fast and true!”

Ullrich switched off the TV with a stab from his remote control.

“Have you seen this shit?” he snapped to Larsen.

The young Captain shook his head; “We didn’t have anything to do with it, did we?”

Ullrich glared at him, “Of course we fucking didn’t, do you think I go around gunning down kids?”

“I didn’t mean that, maybe one of our units acted independently.” Larsen whispered.

“I’ve checked, if they had I would whack them myself.”

“So who? They obviously tried to make it look like us. Copycats? The militias, the Klan?”

“Those inbred goons haven’t got the brains they were born with. No, this was a professional job.” Ullrich stood and stared out of the window. “This looks bad for us, you heard those idiots on TV, they’re painting us as psycho racists. This is a black op. They new our MO, everything. It can only be Washington”

“You mean it was the government?” asked Larsen aghast. “They would go as far as murdering kids, just to smear us?”

Ullrich turned. “Sometimes you can be so naïve, Michael. Everyone is expendable in the battle for their self-preservation. And these are just black kids. This is the same government that left black men untreated with syphilis, to monitor their deterioration, who infected blacks, the mentally handicapped, and the impoverished with radiation sickness, as part of a case study. Nothing is beyond them. It is no accident that Hitler got the idea for the gas chamber from us, that his scientists fled here after the war. It was this country that refused entry to Jews fleeing from the Holocaust, turning its back and condemning them to death. Our beloved government is capable of anything. What little we know is just the tip of the iceberg, the true horrors lie hidden.”

“Even the President knew of this shooting?” asked Larsen.

“Of course not. He may be an immoral cocksucker, but even this would trouble his fluid conscience. Presidents come and go, they allow these decisions to be made, these acts to be committed, they don’t want to know, they force others to make the difficult decisions,

perform the ugly deed. They want to keep their hands clean and the consciences free. They just profit from the deed.”

“So they’ve fucked us. We are now the scum of the earth,” muttered Larsen.

Ullrich shrugged, “The public will hate us, but they always despise their army, except when we save their asses.”

“Maybe even more then.” Larsen smiled.

“Yeah. They are forcing us into a corner, trying to cut us off. So now we are desperate men, and desperate men commit desperate acts. We’ll show them who they’re fucking with.”

“So we proceed with the mission, with Operation Guillotine?”

“With the utmost haste.”

Outside the door, Riesman listened, his ear to the door, the muffled voices creeping through the heavy panelling. He turned and drew heavily on his cigarette. Through the smoke he saw Sherilyn, standing at the end of the corridor, staring at him.

* * *

Hobson entered Parsons’ office and plumped down in a seat, uninvited. The FBI man laid down his pen and looked at his friend.

“We’ve got trouble,” muttered the CIA man.

“What apart from no progress, and suspects in custody committing suicide or being executed by snipers who vanish. That and a operative on the inside who seems economical with his information.” Parsons muttered.

“Hey, he’s doing his best. Anyway it’s about him I got to see you.”

“What?”

“The real Riesman is dead.”

“I thought his injuries were slight?”

“Complications, apparently. Anyway that is contained, only a couple of people knew of his existence after the switch, and they didn’t know who he was.”

“So the problem is?” sighed Parsons.

“His sister is starting to ask questions. As far as she knows he was in prison, then escaped. We’ve kept his picture out of the press, but she could go public at any time. She’s a risk.”

“Well deal with it!” snapped Parsons.

“It’s in hand.”

“Anything from our operative.”

“Not recently.”

“Maybe he’s dead or incompetent?”

Hobson flushed angrily, “We agreed on him as the best candidate, I believe he’ll come through. If you had ever done any undercover work you might understand the difficulties.”

Parsons held up his hands, “Well, I’m not waiting. Thankfully we have other leads. The Bureau received a tip-off from a man in Texas, from a small town outside Dallas. He’s identified Ullrich and others. They are at a ranch outside the town. Apparently it is some kind of base-camp, men coming and going. Hundreds of acres for training. Ullrich’s got a woman there, a Sherilyn Groves. I’ve got men staking the place out, it looks promising. If we can place Ullrich there, we’re going in.”

“Sounds promising, I’ll bring my men in,” said Hobson.

“Not this time, this is a Bureau operation with my men, I’m in charge. You are welcome along as an observer, but this is my show, all the way.”

“If you’re sure?” Hobson muttered quietly.

“Frankly I’m less than confident in your handling so far. This is the kind of information I expected from our operative.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know about this place.”

“On the contrary, our informant has made an ID on our man, he’s there, running around town with Ullrich’s woman.” Parsons sat forward, his voice raising angrily.

“There must be some explanation.”

“Maybe, but something isn’t right, all he’s provided so far was the Byron tip, an operation that kills two in its execution, one more murdered in custody, and the prime target committing suicide. Something reeks here.”

“Hey!” Hobson’s voice rose angrily, “Our operative is one of your men, you okayed his selection and you’ve been involved all along!”

“He maybe an FBI Agent, but you suggested him, he’s ex-army, he’s only been with the Bureau for months. Wasn’t so long ago the CIA placed spies inside the FBI.”

“Paranoid bullshit!” shouted Hobson.

“You have sole access to the operative, you control all communication. He appears to be your creature.” Parsons said coldly.

“This is fucking bullshit, cut me out of the loop if you believe this!”

“Then there was the shooting at the school in New York today. The media is screaming Ullrich’s name. I know Ullrich, this isn’t his style. Why kill a bunch of kids? And this racial angle is bullshit. Someone is leaking to the media, and god only knows who the shooters really were!”

Hobson stared back silently.

“Someone’s playing a game here, and the stink is growing. Maybe you’re not involved, but I’m not taking that risk. After the operation in Texas goes off, I’m going to look into this, check out our friend, all the rest of this weird shit. If I find any evidence implicating you or anyone else, I won’t hesitate in using it.”

Hobson stood, buttoned his jacket and walked to the door. Turning, he said, “When the operation is confirmed, let me know.” His eyes, cold and unblinking, lingered on Parsons for a moment. The corner of his mouth twitched and he turned and walked out, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Sitting alone in his office, Parsons felt suddenly alive. Fear and excitement commingled. He smiled weakly and shuddered as the evening shadows lengthened.

Chapter 20

By the roadside in Texas at 5.00 am, the sun rising above the horizon, the combined FBI and local Police assault team gathered. Parsons stood by the side of his dark sedan, pulling on his flak jacket and FBI windcheater. Beside him Agent Willis did likewise. In silence the two men pulled out their Smith and Wesson automatics and pulled back the slides, chambering rounds. Reholstering their weapons, the leader of the HRT squad approached. Dressed in dark overalls, body-armour and Kevlar helmet and carrying an HK MP5 sub-machine gun, the hard-faced man of around forty, with a thick, greying moustache halted and nodded at Parsons.

“We’re ready to move, you just give the word,” the HRT chief reported.

“We’re just waiting for someone.” Parsons said.

“I just want to clear something up before we go,” muttered the HRT man, “About the rules of engagement, they’ve been vague. You might want to cover yourself, but I have to know I can protect my men, and I’m not going to carry the can here.”

Parsons looked at Willis. The two men silently exchanged glances, then the senior FBI Agent turned back to the HRT chief.

“Lethal Force.” Parsons stated.

“And that’s an official order?” Parsons nodded. “Then my report will state that, Agent Parsons.”

“State what you like, Agent McTiernan, just do your job, I’ll take the heat.” Parsons snapped.

McTiernan nodded, “Just making everything clear, don’t worry, we’ll cream this cocksucker, good-style!” A crooked grin crossed the HRT chief’s face and he turned and walked away.

“Gung-ho motherfucker, can’t wait to let the lead fly, but still worried about covering his ass!” Willis leant down into the sedan and pulled out a Mossberg M500 Persuader

shotgun, jacking a shell into its chamber. Parsons looked across, "Don't hurt to be prepared!" he grinned.

Standing in the chill morning air, Parsons surveyed the scene around him. Five dark vans, carrying the HRT squad from Quantico, and SWAT teams from the local FBI Field Office and the Dallas County Police. The dark-suited men milled around the vehicles, dressed like soldiers heading out to war, all armed with automatic weapons, sniper rifles and shotguns.

"Where's Vansen?" asked Parsons.

"Right here!" Parsons turned and saw the young female agent walking briskly towards him. Wearing dark overalls, body armour and helmet, and carrying an MP5, she was dressed identically to the HRT and SWAT officers.

"You certainly dress for the occasion!" Willis grinned.

"You go to a war, you dress for a war!" she laughed loudly.

"You're not with the HRT anymore, Agent Vansen." Parsons said curtly.

"You can take the girl out of the HRT, but you can't take the HRT out of the girl!" she grinned, yanking back the cocking handle on her sub-machine gun.

Parsons shook his head, a thin smile crossing his face.

A black sedan pulled up beside the road and Parsons saw Hobson climbed out. A stern-faced young man remained behind the wheel, his eyes coldly taking in the scene. The CIA Deputy-Director nodded to Parsons and the FBI Agent called out to McTiernan, "Let's roll, when you're ready, Chief!"

McTiernan held his hand up to his radio earpiece. "All clear at the homestead, let's saddle up!"

With a rattle of bolts and the odd cheer the officers loaded into their vehicles and peeled away, the convoy streaming down the road over the horizon.

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The front door of the house crashed open and Suarez stumbled into the hallway. Hooker, dozing on the sofa in the living room, rolled onto the floor, coming up on one knee, his Colt automatic cocked and aimed two handed.

“You trying to get yourself killed, you dumb spic!” snarled Hooker.

“Fuck you! We got company!” Suarez gasped breathlessly. The sniper leant back against the wall. Although only just gone five in the morning, he was dressed in full camouflage, wearing a ghillie sniping suit. His face was streaked with camouflaged paint and a floppy bush-hat sat atop his head. Clutched across his chest, he held a M40A1 bolt-action rifle, its fibreglass stock and frame coloured by swirls of different shaded greens.

Hooker stood, lowering his weapon, “Cops?” he asked.

“Maybe, Feds too I reckon!”

“Shit!”

Suddenly Riesman appeared around the corner, his Glock pistol raised. He lowered his weapon, standing barefoot in jeans and open shirt, and asked, “What the fuck’s going on here?”

“Cops, Feds, they’ve got a spotting team out about a thousand yards, I just made them.” Suarez paused, “It gets worse, we’ve got multiple vehicles approaching. We’re shit out of time!”

“I’ll wake the Colonel.” Hooker snapped, starting forward.

Riesman held up his hand, “Suarez, get back out there, dig-in, keep your head down, we may need covering fire if we’re going to get out of here.”

“Who the fuck put you in command, asshole?” Hooker sneered.

“We ain’t got time for this shit now!” Riesman snapped.

“He’s right, Hooker, it’s the only move makes sense!” Suarez said quietly. Hooker nodded and the sniper slipped out.

“Now wake the Colonel, I’ll get Larsen.” Riesman said.

Hooker stared at the other man for an instant, his icy eyes blazing. “One day soon, you and me,” he whispered.

“Whatever.” Riesman turned and headed off.

Hooker fingered his automatic, watching him leave, then headed up the stairs.

When Riesman got upstairs, he was fully dressed and carrying his Colt Commando assault rifle. He reached Ullrich’s open bedroom door. The Colonel was standing in the door, pulling on his clothes while he listened to Hooker make his report. Riesman saw over Ullrich’s shoulder Sherilyn sitting up in bed.

“Captain Larsen is preparing the vehicles, sir.” Riesman reported.

“Good.”

Riesman watched Sherilyn slip out of bed, pulling off the baggy T-shirt she wore. She stood naked by the bed and glanced over her shoulder, staring directly back at the young Sergeant. Riesman gazed at her slim, athletic body, her small, firm breasts, the arch of her back, her long legs. She stood framed in the sunlight spilling through the window; her blonde hair lit up. She seemed to smile, then turned back and began to dress hastily.

“Sergeant?” Riesman heard Ullrich’s voice and turned back to him.

“Sir.”

“You’re ready to move?”

“Yes sir.”

“Have you got Billy?” Sherilyn called.

“I’ll do it now.” Riesman headed down the corridor and entered the boy’s room. A few moments later he reappeared. “He’s not there,” he called, “His bed hasn’t been slept in.”

“Godammit!” cursed Ullrich.

Sherilyn came out of her room, “He’s probably wandered off, he’ll be nearby, he’s just playing, he does it all the time,” she fretted, wringing her hands.

“I’ll find him, you stay with the Colonel.” Riesman smiled reassuringly, reaching out to touch her, but quickly snatching back his hand. He rushed off down the stairs.

Riesman tore through each room in the house, even checked closets, but all to no avail. Heading out onto the porch, he looked around the yard and nearby buildings, but as he made to step off the porch, he heard the squeal of brakes and the rumble of nearby engines. Dust swirled in the near distance. He cursed and ducked back inside.

Hooker, Ullrich and Sherilyn came down the stairs. The Sergeant, fully dressed and carrying his SPAS 12 shotgun, and Ullrich carrying his Colt Commando, didn’t spare Riesman a glance, but Sherilyn stopped, seizing the young Sergeant by the arms.

“Have you found him?” she asked desperately.

Riesman just shook his head, his eyes downcast.

“We got to go,” said Ullrich firmly.

“We can’t leave him!” she wailed, tears filling her eyes.

Ullrich came forward, laying his free hand upon her shoulder, “He’ll be alright, they won’t hurt him, they’ll take care of him, you can come back for him later,” he said.

“Leave me here too, then!”

Ullrich shook his head, “I can’t do that, they’d use you against me. Billy will be alright.”

“I can’t leave without him!” she almost sobbed.

Ullrich nodded to Hooker. The massive Sergeant grabbed a hold of Sherilyn, wrapping his thick arms around her, lifting her clear of the ground and dragging her away. She began to scream and shout, kicking and clawing at Hooker.

Riesman stepped forward, “I’ll keep looking for him, as long as I can, I’ll find him!”

The other three paused and looked at him.

“Okay.” Ullrich nodded.

Sherilyn nodded weakly and Hooker dragged her off.

Riesman followed them into the kitchen. The Colonel opened the pantry door, knelt and opened the concealed hatch in the floor. Hooker forced Sherilyn down through the hatch and followed her down. Ullrich turned to the young Sergeant, fixing him with a steely gaze and whispered, “You’ve got less than five minutes. You and I know you won’t find him in this house and you can’t move around outside. We’ll wait by the vehicles, if you’re not their, you’re on your own!” He climbed down into the hatch, pausing halfway down and turned, “Be there, Sergeant.” He said curtly and slipped down out of sight.

Riesman stood alone in the kitchen. He knew Ullrich was right. Billy wasn’t in the house, and unless he returned, there was no way for him to find him.

Without much hope, he rechecked each room. As the time ticked away, he approached the front of the house. Squatting, he peered through the window. Dark figures moved through the long grass edging the ranch buildings. Sunlight flashed off slowly approaching vehicles and automatic weapons. They were sealing them in before the assault began.

Time was up. Riesman stood and headed into the kitchen. He waited, the seconds ticking by. He didn’t want to go, but he felt the jaws of the trap closing around him. He climbed down through the hatch, closing it behind him, slipping away into the dark.

He hurried through the dimly lit tunnel, his feet moving silently over the dirt floor, his rifle held across his chest. He didn’t look back, moving swiftly forwards.

He clambered out of the exit of the tunnel, emerging in an outbuilding.

Larsen stood grinning by his Grand Cherokee, “Didn’t think you’d make it, thought you were going to miss all the fun!”

Sherilyn jumped from the rear seat of the Jeep.

“Did you find him?” she cried hopelessly.

“I’m sorry.” Riesman shook his head.

Sobbing, she collapsed against the edge of the car. Hooker helped her inside, shutting the door after her.

“You will go with Larsen in the lead car. Sherilyn will be with you. Take care of her. Get her clear, whatever happens.” Ullrich said quietly, his cold eyes not leaving Riesman’s face.

The young Sergeant nodded, drawing to attention.

“Good luck,” the Colonel said dryly and climbed into the second vehicle, a Jeep 4x4. He took the wheel; Hooker climbed into the rear. The big Sergeant carried a M249 SAW machine gun fitted with a two hundred round box magazine. Settling in the rear of the Jeep, Hooker pushed open the window in the rear door and braced himself, the muzzle of the weapon jutting out the tail. Ullrich set aside his Commando and lifted a Mini-SAF sub-machine gun. Cocking the weapon, he laid it on the dashboard.

Riesman climbed into the rear of the Grand Cherokee, and sat beside the sobbing Sherilyn. Behind the steering wheel, Larsen pulled on his dark glasses. He patted the Colt Commando next to him, and then unholstered his M23 automatic, pulled back the slide, chambering a round. Smiling, he laid the cocked pistol on the dashboard.

“Hold on folks, we’re going hard and fast. You’re in for the ride of your life!” Larsen called out excitedly.

Riesman turned to Sherilyn, “You’d best get down on the floor, you’d be safer there.” he said softly.

She stared back at him through reddened eyes. Reaching inside her jacket she pulled out a spurless, snub-nosed revolver, levelling it on Riesman. He hesitated for a moment, then reached out and laid his hand on the weapon, lowering it.

“It would be for the best,” he whispered.

She nodded and slipped down into the foot-well and stretched out. Lying at Riesman's feet, she stared up at him, the pistol clutched to her chest. He reached down and touched her hand. She took his hand and caressed it. They stared into each other's eyes. He slipped his hand free, pausing to brush her cheek. She leant into the caress as he drew his hand across her soft skin.

Ullrich nodded across at Larsen.

"Let's do it!" whispered Larsen turning the ignition key.

* * *

Parsons heard a crackle of static through his radio earpiece.

"Assault teams in position." McTiernan's voice rasped.

Parsons pulled out his pistol and nodded across to Willis. The black agent shifted the car into gear and they pulled away, followed by a van filled with SWAT officers and two cruisers.

The small convoy swept into the ranch yard. They halted in a swarm of dust and heavily armed officers spilled from the vehicles.

Parsons squatted behind his open car door. He took the bullhorn in his hand and looked across at Willis, crouching on the other side, his pump-action shotgun gripped tightly.

Parsons stood gingerly. The armed law enforcement officers trained their weapons on the lifeless house.

Parsons pressed the button on the bullhorn and his amplified voice leapt out across the yard, the harsh electronic sound shattering the morning quiet.

"This is the FBI, we have the house completely surrounded. Come out with your hands up and no-one will be hurt."

An eerie silence fell over the ranch, the officers waited, eyeing each other, weapons clamped in sweaty hands.

The roar of an engine rose from the silence and the double doors of a nearby outbuilding crashed open. A dark Cherokee Jeep leapt out of the building, its engine roaring, wheels spinning. The vehicle fishtailed wildly, the driving gunning the engine, the wheels ripping up the ground. The Jeep surged forward.

“Take him!” McTiernan’s voice shouted over the radio.

Automatic weapons opened up, the chatter of gunfire renting the air. Dirt exploded around the fleeing vehicle, bullets zinged off the metal chassis. As the Jeep sped away, the gunfire pursued it, rattling harmlessly.

“Pursue, pursue!” McTiernan shouted.

Suddenly a second Jeep shot out the barn, spun around and sped after the Cherokee. The law enforcement officers scattered across the compound, firing from the hip. From the surrounding fields more gunfire followed the fleeing vehicles.

“Don’t expose yourself to the house. Keep the house buttoned up. The house is not secure, I repeat, the house is not secure!” McTiernan bellowed.

Dark suited agents ducked back into cover, training their weapons on the house.

Two dark FBI GMC 4x4s and a dark van loaded with SWAT officers bypassed the house and headed off in pursuit of the two vehicles.

Parsons grabbed his radio, punching the intercom button, “Get that chopper here now, I want it to pick up the pursuit!” He shouted.

“The vehicles have him.” McTiernan broke in.

“I want that chopper, now!” Parsons snarled.

Another voice broke in, “Chopper inbound, should be with you in a few minutes.”

“Roger, over and out.” Parsons tossed the handset back into the car, cursing under his breath.

Billy Groves watched the two Jeeps speed away, giggling excitedly as he watched the dark-dressed men scampering around, shooting wildly. From his hiding place in the stables he watched the other vehicles set out in pursuit.

Just like TV, he thought, as he jumped down out of the loft and slipped open the stable door. Peering out he saw the men with guns hiding behind their vehicles. He giggled and slid out of the door.

“Movement!” a SWAT officer yelled, bringing up his weapon, but the fast moving figure quickly reached the house, slipping inside a side-door.

“He’s inside,” the man reported.

“Was he armed, could you make an ID?” McTiernan asked over the radio.

“Negative on the ID.”

“Was he armed?” McTiernan pursued.

The Swat officer paused, looking across at a fellow agent. The other man shrugged.

“Uh, probable on that,” he muttered.

“Probable?” McTiernan snapped angrily.

“He appeared to be armed,” he said blankly.

“Received.” The HRT chief signed off.

Inside the house, Billy scampered around, giggling excitedly. Running from room to room he called out, “Sherilyn? Paul?” When he received no answer he just shrugged.

Suddenly with the house to himself and the strangers outside, it was all like a big adventure.

The youth crept to the front of the house and peered through the corner of one of the windows. He saw the dark-dressed men ducking and weaving behind their cover. He laughed and moved on to the next window. He peaked out quickly. He giggled as he noticed that each time he appeared, the men would respond, ducking, rising and moving toward him, slipping from cover to cover. It was like a game. He bobbed up and down, dashing from window to window, giggling as the people outside responded.

“We have movement inside!” A voice called over the radio.

“Hold steady. Sniping teams, do you have a clear shot?” McTiernan muttered.

“Negative.” Came the reply.

“Movement at the door!” someone called out.

Inside, Billy crouched in the doorway. He swung back the front door and peered around the corner through the screen door.

Parsons grabbed his bullhorn; “The house is completely surrounded. Come out with your hands up, you will not be hurt!” his voice echoed across the yard.

“Yeah right!” a nearby SWAT man whispered, shifting his MP5 to full automatic.

Billy jumped to his feet and burst through the screen door, waving his hand wildly, “Hello!” he yelled, laughing, flapping his hands as leapt onto the porch.

“Gun!” someone shouted and opened up. The gunfire panicked the other officers and they all opened fire.

Bullets ripped through the porch from all angles, wood and glass exploding. Round after round slammed into Billy’s frail body, and he shuddered under the torrent of blows. He stumbled about the disintegrating porch in a spastic, twitchy dance. Bullets ripped into him, tearing open his clothes and flesh, blood spurting, splattering the walls around him. Billy sobbed and cried as he shuddered from blow after blow.

Parsons dropped down behind his car, screaming into his radio mike, “Cease fire, cease fire!”

The roar was deafening as hundreds of rounds tore into the front porch. Even Willis crouching by Parsons, rose and began discharging his shotgun, blasting out round after round, pumping fresh shells into the chamber.

Finally Billy’s tattered body crumpled and the gunfire ceased.

“Teams one and two, take the house, three check the body.” McTiernan ordered calmly.

Two groups of dark-dressed HRT offers moved out, one rounded the house, the first took up position at the front. On a pre-arranged signal the heavily armed men moved in.

A third team scuttled across the yard, weapons raised and covering every angle, the group moved like a crab, or with the weapons bristling like spines, maybe a porcupine.

The team reached the body; the leader rolled the corpse over with the tip of his boot.

“He’s dead!” the leader reported over the radio.

“No shit!” snarled McTiernan, “Give me an ID.”

“Uh, it looks like the boy, the brother, Billy Groves, I think? He’s kind of a mess.”

“Shit!”

The two teams emerged from the house.

“It’s clear!” a voice reported over the radio.

“Move in.”

* * *

The pursuing federal officers were closing on the two fleeing vehicles. The lead 4x4 closed on the tail Jeep.

Hooker braced himself in the rear of the Jeep, jamming his feet up against the inside of the tailgate. He trained the muzzle of the SAW on the closing vehicle. A grin spread across his face.

“Come and get it!” he muttered.

He squeezed the trigger. Flame leapt two foot from the end of the muzzle as Hooker fought the rising weapon. Rounds poured out at almost 1000 per minute, the 5.56mm bullets ripping into the trailing vehicle. The 4x4 bucked and shuddered, the gunfire ripped open its radiator, blew off its hood and shattered its windshield, the incoming rounds cutting the

occupants to pieces. The front tires exploded and the engine billowed smoke and steam as the shattered vehicle ground to a halt.

That'll make 'em think twice, Hooker thought as he ceased fire.

Suddenly a police Bronco leapt out of the trees on the side of the dirt road. Ullrich wrestled with the wheel, struggling to avoid a collision, but the vehicle slammed into the side of the Jeep, flipping the truck over. It crashed down onto its roof, the glass shattering and roof collapsing, then slowly rolled again until it came up back onto its wheels. As the wreck came to rest in silence, the crumpled police Bronco rolled to a dead halt only yards away.

The following federal agents slowed and halted a short distance away. SWAT officers spilled from the van, fanning out, weapons ready. SA Rachel Vansen jumped out of the GMC truck, unsafed her MP5 and moved out.

Two police officers staggered from the Bronco, dirt-covered and bloody. Coughing, they slumped against the wrecked vehicle, one cradling his arm, the other rubbing his head.

A sudden pounding came from the crumpled Jeep, and before the officers could respond, the rear passenger door was kicked open. Sagging on its hinges briefly, the door then fell to the ground.

The two dazed cops groped for their pistols, but a bloody apparition leapt from the wreck. The huge, muscular, blood and dirt-smearred figure stood and glared at them. The cops froze. Hooker brought up a Colt Commando automatic rifle loaded with a curved 30 round magazine. A grin or snarl crossed his face, white teeth exposed through his grimy mask. He opened up, squeezing off a long burst on full automatic. The blast of 5.56mm rounds ripped into the two men, slamming them into each other and back against the Bronco. They slid to the ground, blood smearing the vehicle.

The approaching FBI officers scattered and hit the dirt, training their weapons on the two vehicles.

Behind the cover of the Jeep, Hooker pulled a semi-conscious Ullrich from the wreck. Gripping him by the collar of his jacket, he began to drag him clear. Walking backwards, he kept his rifle up, aimed one-handed from the hip, the weapon on automatic.

The SWAT team rose to their feet and closed in.

Moving slowly, the officers rounded the Jeep, weapons raised to their shoulders. Moving into the open, gunfire ripped into them. Two went down, the rest dived for cover.

Hooker kept moving steadily backward, squeezing off bursts from his rifle. He hit one agent as he raised his head, dropping dead, another he stitched across the chest, the impact upon his vest hurling him backward.

Keeping their heads down, the SWAT team squeezed off ill-aimed shots, while Hooker moved steadily further away.

The big Sergeant's rifle clattered empty. He dropped Ullrich, fell to one knee, ramming in his last magazine. Yanking back the cocking handle, he opened up at the stirring officers. He kicked up dirt and he hosed down the line of concealed pursuers. Someone cried out and fell silent. Hooker emptied the rifle and tossed it aside. He jerked out his Colt .45 automatic, unsafed the pistol, grabbed Ullrich and dragged him with his free hand. Backing off, he kept his pistol raised.

Vansen crawled up to the shattered SWAT team.

“On your feet cocksuckers!” she snarled.

“Are you fucking joking, we ain't going out there to get wasted!” one of the men whined.

Vansen jammed the muzzle of her MP5 under his chin and whispered, “Stay here and die, get out there, you might live!” She grinned, a murderous glint in her eye.

Slowly the SWAT team mustered themselves, rising from the dirt, with mumbled curses. Slowly they moved forward at the crouch. Incoming pistol rounds cracked sporadically, but Vansen forced them on from the front.

Hooker fell to the ground, reloading his pistol. Ullrich had come to enough to draw his pistol. The two men huddled together in a small hollow, waiting, weapons raised.

“Looks like this is it, sir.” Hooker muttered through clenched teeth.

Ullrich grinned, “Like old times.”

The two men fired over the lip of the hollow. Ducking back down, a fusillade of automatic ripping up the ground around them.

They could hear the soft pad of approaching footsteps and waited.

Suddenly the roar of an approaching engine rose from the distance. As it drew nearer, gunfire opened up from the approaching vehicle and a fierce firefight broke out above Hooker and Ullrich’s head.

Larsen raced towards the SWAT team. As fire hit around him, Riesman hung out of the passenger side of the Cherokee, squeezing off bursts from his Commando assault rifle. As they drew in closer, a couple of the officers were cut down and some of the others wavered. Finally only one stood standing, firing again and again, MP5 punching into his Jeep. Closing, Larsen raised his M23 automatic and began firing through the windshield at the solitary figure. At the last minute, almost on top of the SWAT officer, the agent dived for cover.

Larsen swung the Jeep around and slammed on the brakes. Riesman jumped clear of the vehicle, keeping his rifle raised, squeezing off bursts of suppressing fire.

“In the car.” Riesman shouted.

Hooker dragged Ullrich to his feet and threw the Colonel into the rear of the Cherokee.

Vansen, lying prone, aimed her MP5 and squeezed off a single shot.

Hooker gasped as the bullet ripped through his left arm. Gripping the wound to stem the flow of blood, he dived into the Jeep.

“Riesman, let’s go!” Larsen shouted.

Vansen raised her head and looked into Riesman’s face and smiled.

He leapt into the Cherokee and Larsen spun it around and sped away.

* * *

The FBI agents and local police searched the house and surrounding buildings.

Parsons stared down at the bloody body of Billy Groves as a chopper roared by overhead.

Hobson approached.

“Well this is certainly a fuck-up of monumental proportions. You lose Ullrich, but do manage to whack an unarmed mentally retarded youth, innocent of any crime, subject of no investigations. This better is than Ruby Ridge or Waco. And the best thing is, this time you can’t blame me for your fuck-ups.” The CIA man sneered.

Parsons looked up at him; “I’m onto you, Hobson!”

“You’re finished.” Hobson curled his lip, turned and walked away. He climbed into his car without looking back and drove away.

* * *

The Jetranger helicopter sped low above the dusty ground, closing on its target.

Behind the FBI pilot, two HRT sharpshooters, armed with M4s, fitted with powerful scopes, leant out of the doors on each side of the chopper. They trained their weapons on the ground and the warm air washed over them.

“What’s the deal?” asked one.

“We waste these cocksuckers?”

“Absolutely, goddamn right!”

They both chuckled, unsafing their weapons.

“Got them!” the pilot called.

He swung the chopper round to get a better view.

The Cherokee had stopped in a wide-open field; the occupants were spilling out.

“What the fuck are they doing?” asked one of the shooters.

“Must be engine trouble. All the better for us!”

“Like shooting fish in a barrel!”

The chopper closed, the shooters readied themselves.

One of the men on the ground opened up on them, bullets zinging of the choppers thin metal skin.

“Cocksuckers!” one of the shooters opened up on full auto, scattering the figures below. His fellow HRT officer scrambled across the inside of the chopper, settling behind him and taking aim and opening up.

As the chopper hovered, the two shooters shredded the parked car, chewing up the surrounding ground.

“Holy Shit!” The Jetranger pilot screamed.

A black Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter gunship rose from behind a small nearby hill. The chopper shuddered as it fired a stinger missile, the rocket covering the short distance in seconds, crashing into the smaller helicopter. The FBI chopper erupted in a fireball, tattered debris falling to ground as the flames died. A black pall of smoke hung above the ground.

The Black Hawk settled down on the field and Ullrich and the rest bundled aboard and the chopper lifted off, the two General Electric turboshafts roaring, the rotors throbbing deeply as it sped away at low altitude across the Texan plains.

Inside, Hooker sat by the open door, staring out. The co-pilot had come back and was binding his arm wound.

“How bad?” asked Ullrich.

“Flesh wound.”

“Good I need him.” The Colonel looked across at Riesman, sitting beside Sherilyn.
“Don’t worry, Sergeant, this baby is so stuffed with electrical jamming equipment, they will never be able to track us. Soon we’ll be across the stateline, then we’ll go to ground. They’ll never find us, we’re home free.” He laughed.

Larsen, sitting beside Ullrich, said sadly, “I’ll really miss that Jeep, I had her fixed up just right.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll buy you a new one!” said the Colonel, slapping Larsen on the shoulder.

“Gee thanks, dad!” Both men laughed.

Riesman reached out and squeezed Sherilyn’s hand.

Chapter 21

The Black Hawk carried them almost 1200 miles using its external fuel tanks. They landed in the Arizona Desert, a vehicle transporting them to a base hidden around 100 miles from the Grand Canyon.

The base, maintained by a staff of around ten, was a collection of wooden buildings, portacabins and tents. Hidden beneath camouflaged tarpaulins were two Huey helicopters, three Humvees and a collection of military trucks. The arrival of Ullrich's party seemed to draw little attention; the men at the base seemed preoccupied, busily packing and checking equipment, as if preparing for something big.

As Hooker had his wounds treated, the rest got cleaned up and ate, but Sherilyn, still silent and fretful refused to settle. While the others sat and ate, she found a TV, switched it on and settled in front of it, perched on the edge of her seat, wringing her hands.

The burble of voices from the TV drifted into the room where the rest ate, mostly in silence.

Riesman picked at his food, while the rest, especially Hooker seemed to have developed a hearty appetite. When finished, Hooker disappeared and the other three sat smoking in silence.

Finally Riesman spoke, "Will Suarez make it out alright?"

"Sure, that little bastard is as slippery as an eel, you could drop him a thousand miles behind enemy lines with just a compass and he'd walk right back, turn up on your doorstep as if nothing had happened. I think he can really make himself invisible," said Ullrich.

"Well he believes he can!" laughed Larsen.

"Same thing. He'll show up soon enough, he knows the prearranged rendezvous."

Suddenly a shriek came from the next room. The three men jumped to their feet and rushed in.

Sherilyn was slumped on the badly stuffed sofa, face hidden, sobbing hysterically. The men turned to the TV, showing a news broadcast.

“Just to recap, we have more details about the FBI assault on the Texas hideout of John Ullrich earlier today. While it appears Ullrich himself and several of his men escaped, killing eleven law enforcement officers and injuring seven more, destroying vehicles and even downing a helicopter, FBI marksmen did manage to kill one suspect. However, this was not, as reported earlier, one of Ullrich’s soldiers, but in fact a nineteen year old, mentally handicapped youth, Billy Groves, believed to be the brother of Ullrich’s lover, 28 year old Sherilyn Groves. FBI sources have not disclosed if Groves was armed or in any way a threat, but the Bureau Director and Attorney General are due to give a joint statement in a little over an hour.”

Sherilyn’s crumpled body shook with sobs. Ullrich sat beside her, trying to comfort her, Riesman turned off the TV. Sherilyn sat up, shaking off Ullrich’s hands, her reddened face contorted with hatred and anguish.

“This is your fault, Jack, you fucking bastard, you made me leave him, you never cared about Billy, you couldn’t wait to get rid of him. You might as well killed him yourself!” she spat into Ullrich’s stunned face.

“Please, you know...” he whispered softly.

“Get away from me, you fucking snake, you’re just as guilty as the FBI. If I didn’t hate them as much as you, I’d turn you in myself!” she screamed, knocking away his hands.

“Don’t say that.” He said sternly, his face menacing.

“You fucker!” she slapped him hard across the face, but he didn’t flinch. “Don’t worry, you won’t have to kill me, I won’t rat on you, but I wouldn’t turn your back on me, I’m liable to put a bullet in it!”

Sherilyn stood unsteadily and walked towards the door. She stopped and turned, “Keep away from me.” She turned to Riesman, “Paul, show me to my room.”

The young Sergeant glanced across at Ullrich, who nodded and he followed Sherilyn out. They stopped outside a single room and Sherilyn turned and looked into Riesman's eyes. She reached out and embraced him. He tentatively put his arms around her. They stood like that for what seemed an age. Finally they broke. She reached up and brushed her fingertips across his cheek. She smiled sadly and kissed him softly on the lips. Slowly they separated.

"Goodnight, Paul." she whispered and slipped into the room, closing the door behind her. Riesman heard the bolt slide across with a final click.

He turned and walked away.

* * *

The next morning, Ullrich sent word for Riesman to see him in his office. The Sergeant paused, steeling himself, expecting the worst. He knocked and entered.

"Have a seat, Paul." Ullrich said from behind the desk.

He sat and the two eyed each other in silence.

"I've got a little job for you." The Colonel said.

"Sir?"

"I think it would be a good idea to get Sherilyn out of the way."

Riesman tried to hide his shock and horror, but evidently failed.

"Don't worry, I don't want you to kill her!" Ullrich laughed, "Things are going to get hot around here real soon and she'd be safer out of the way. Besides, a while apart might help her cool down, soothe things between us."

"Yes, sir."

"I want to get her down to Tijuana. I own some tame cops down there, they can keep an eye on her, and make sure she's safe. I think it would be best if you drove her down, she seems more comfortable with you. Shouldn't take more than a couple of days each way."

“Yes, sir.”

“You should be okay, the few pictures of you and Sherilyn shown on TV are pretty poor, but in case the law have anything better, I suggest you have your hair cut, one of the troopers has some electric clippers, he’s our ad hoc barber. Sherilyn will dye her hair. I’ll sort out fake ID for the pair of you. You shouldn’t have any problems at the border, they aren’t bothered about a whites crossing.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ullrich sat forward, speaking softly, but firmly, “I don’t need to tell you how important this is. Nothing can happen to Sherilyn, I’m relying on you, but I think I can trust you.”

“Yes, sir, of course.”

“Also, Paul, I have some bad news for you. Your sister was killed in a hit-and-run accident, a couple of days ago in LA.” Ullrich said gently.

Riesman stared back at him blankly, his grey eyes unblinking, “My sister?”

“Yes, they say it was an accident, but I’m afraid it could have been the authorities sending you a message, making a point.”

The Sergeant nodded.

“Don’t worry, Paul, we’ll make them pay for everything, soon.” Ullrich looked at the impassive man across the desk from him. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, sir. Just my sister and I weren’t that close.”

“I understand.”

“Is that all, sir?”

“Yes.” The Colonel frowned, sitting back in his chair.

Riesman stood, turned and left the room.

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The next day Riesman and Sherilyn left, driving a Jeep Cherokee. The Sergeant's hair was clipped short against his scalp. She had her hair tinted a reddish tone.

The two of them began the long drive, speeding through the desert, sitting mostly in silence, both hiding behind dark glasses. Riesman, driving, switched on the radio, tuning to a music-only station, the songs playing softly in the background.

Occasionally Sherilyn would stifle a sob, reaching out and squeezing Riesman's hand. For a while they sat hand in hand, she caressing his knuckles.

As they reached the Californian border, night was falling, so they pulled up stopping at a neon-lit motel. They got separate rooms, but as they settled in, they discovered they had adjoining rooms. Sherilyn pushed open the connecting door and stepped into Riesman's room.

"Well I never!" she laughed softly.

"Don't worry, I'll behave!" he smiled.

"Always the gentleman, Paul." She could have sworn he blushed, and smiling she swept out.

They ate together at a nearby restaurant, exchanging small talk as they dined.

Returning to their rooms, she kissed him softly on the cheek and bade him goodnight.

In his room, Riesman undressed, and wearing his shorts he slid into bed and turned off the light. Lying in the dark he listened to the sound of the passing traffic and watched their headlight beams sweep across his ceiling and slowly he dozed off.

A click awakened him and he reached for his pistol, but in the glow of the outside lights he saw Sherilyn, wearing only a slip, enter through the connecting door and glide silently across the carpeted floor. Without a word, she lifted the bed-covers and slipped into the bed. Nestling up to him, she wrapped her arms around him, resting her head on his chest.

He felt tears damp on her face and drew her closer. Together they lay wrapped in each other's arms, safe in the darkness as they slipped into a peaceful sleep.

* * *

The following morning, they rose, Sherilyn returned to her room, and when dressed and packed, they ate breakfast and got back on the road.

They chatted lightly, skirting the issue, but from time to time she would take his hand or caress his face as they drove.

By early afternoon they reached the Mexican border and crossed without problems. Soon they reached Tijuana. Although cleaned up in recent years, the town was still a sleazy nest of drugs, drink, gambling and prostitution, where the cops were for sale, corruption still endemic and murder commonplace.

Riesman bypassed the town and reached a white villa on the outskirts. Parked outside was a Police cruiser. Approaching the car, two thickset, dark men climbed out.

“You the hosts?” asked Riesman, his hand not far from his pistol.

“Yeah, you Riesman?” one cop asked.

He nodded, “Any problems?”

“Nothing, we’ll sit on the place, 24 hours, us and our partners, she wants to go out, we escort her. She’s safe.” The other cop said proudly.

Riesman nodded, smiling thinly, “She better be, for your sakes!”

The cops shifted uneasily, then returned to their car.

Riesman helped Sherilyn with her bags and followed her into the cool villa.

“In the bedroom.” She said and he followed her up the stairs and laid the cases on the bed.

They stood and faced each other; eyes locked together in silence.

“I have to go,” he said softly.

“You can’t stay, even a while?” she asked sadly.

He shook his head, “You’ll be safe here, I have to get back.”

She came across the room and took his hands.

“You know things are going to get bad?” she whispered, he nodded. “Be careful!” she breathed as she reached up and touched his cheek.

She kissed him full on the mouth and they stayed locked together in each other’s arms as the sun fell behind them. They slid apart and Riesman turned and walked quietly out.

Outside, he climbed into the Cherokee, shifted into gear and sped away into the evening gloom.

Chapter 22

Parsons sat in his darkened office, the dim glow of his desk-lamp spilling a pool of light across his scattered papers. It was a few days since the debacle in Texas and he was due up in front of a FBI Panel of Inquiry the day after tomorrow. He knew he was in deep shit and he could feel it rising fast. He knew there was something amiss, some shadowy plan at work, and he was sure Hobson was involved somehow.

He opened the manila folder in front of him and began to read.

The picture atop the typewritten sheets showed a young man with dark, wavy hair, his long, pale face slightly crooked, a smile twisting across his lips, his grey eyes sunk in dark hollows.

Saul Isaac Steiner, he read, born February 4th 1969 in Baltimore, Maryland. The only child of Julia Steiner (nee Dreyfuss) and Joseph Steiner. The mother was a nurse, the father a salesman and an alcoholic. From an early age it appears the father beat both mother and son. Eventually he walked out when his son was seven, dying three years later, choking on his own vomit while sleeping in a dingy one-room apartment.

Saul excelled in school, but reports at the time commented on his apparent aloofness from the other children. While outwardly friendly, he remained quiet and slightly withdrawn. Also, the precocious youth was occasionally awkward, even insubordinate with staff members.

At the age of 14 he passed an early entrance exam for Harvard, and he began his studies there in the autumn of 1984, when he was only fifteen. He received a full scholarship and studied for a double major in Psychology and History.

On January 1st 1987, Julia Steiner committed suicide at home in Baltimore, taking an overdose of prescription sedative she was receiving as part of her treatment for long-standing depression. Saul returned briefly to Baltimore for the funeral, before heading back to college. About this time he joined the ROTC at Harvard.

1988, graduated with honours, but then surprised everyone, especially his teachers, and enlisted in the army.

After basic training was sent to OCS (Officer Cadet School) for a year. Upon receiving his commission as Second Lieutenant, he volunteered for Infantry and was accepted into the 101st Airborne (Air Assault) at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

Late 1990, promoted to First Lieutenant and sent to the Persian Gulf as part of Desert Shield. When war broke out in 1991 and Desert Storm went operational, the 101st were at the vanguard. A few days into the war, Steiner was a Platoon commander in a Company strength heliborne detachment that struck behind Iraqi lines. They hit a Battalion of Republican Guards from the rear, and after a brief, but fierce firefight, the American force of less than 200 killed or captured the entire Iraqi Battalion of almost 1000, suffering only light casualties. For his part, Steiner received a commendation and was recommended for a Bronze Star.

Two days later, Steiner was leading his platoon on a patrol over southern Iraq. The Two Black Hawk helicopters came under attack from heavy ground fire. One chopper was hit and crash-landed in the desert. Steiner, in the other chopper, circled round to give covering fire to the downed Black Hawk. In the process his helicopter was hit and damaged and they were forced to set down. All 14 troops and the three crewmembers of Steiner's chopper were unhurt. The Lieutenant rounded them up and under enemy fire led them to the downed helicopter. The survivors were in disarray when he arrived. The pilot and crew chief were dead, the co-pilot badly injured. Of the 14 troops aboard, one was dead, eight others were badly wounded, the rest were shaken up and lightly injured. Steiner took control of the situation, quickly marshalling his force and setting up a fortified position to await evacuation.

An estimated force of between 150 and 200 Iraqi Republican Guards, equipped with light armour attacked and for more than an hour Steiner's force fought them off, inflicting

heavy enemy losses, while losing only one more man. When the flight of gunships and rescue choppers arrived, the Iraqis were in retreat.

Lieutenant Steiner had received a light flesh wound in his left arm, for which he was awarded a Purple Heart, but more importantly he was recommended for, and eventually received the Distinguished Service Cross.

With the completion of the war, Steiner's company was rotated back to the states. In the autumn of 1991, while awaiting his promotion to Captain, he applied for transfer to Special Forces. However, before he got a reply he was involved in a serious accident. During exercises near Fort Campbell, his Black Hawk helicopter suffered some kind of mechanical failure and crashed. Of the seventeen men aboard, fourteen were killed instantly; two others died soon after in hospital. The only remaining survivor was Steiner, but he wasn't expected to make it. In addition to a badly broken left leg, he had fractured his right ankle, broken his left arm, had a fractured collarbone and had three broken ribs, one of which had punctured a lung. Facial injuries included a fractured cheekbone and eye socket, broken nose, torn lip and several lost teeth, a couple initially lodged in his throat. Most seriously he had suffered severe head injuries, a skull fracture leading to a clot on his brain. He had lapsed into a coma and the doctors did not hold out much hope.

He awoke from his coma ten days later and amazed doctors with his progress. However, his recovery was slow and laborious. He spent more than six months in hospital, and when he was discharged he remained on base receiving daily physiotherapy. Slowly he re-learned how to walk and began to regain strength and mobility. During the subsequent 18 months of treatment, Steiner filled his time by completing his thesis to complete his post-graduate studies in Psychology, eventually receiving his Masters.

Almost two years after the accident and nearing an almost full recovery, he shocked his superiors by applying to be discharged from the army on medical grounds. He explained that he would never be fit enough again for a combat command, all he ever wanted.

Reluctantly the doctors and his superior officers agreed and he was granted his medical discharge.

During 1993 he had begun studying for a law degree, and was making speedy progress. While still receiving outpatient treatment, doctors noted a new zealous attitude manifested in Steiner's self-imposed regime of physical exercise. Gradually his months of running and weight training began to shape and harden his body until he was at his zenith of his physical fitness.

In 1995 he applied to join the FBI, and the same year he completed his law degree in only two years. He was accepted into the Bureau. After his 15 weeks intensive training at the FBI Academy at Quantico, Virginia, Steiner volunteered for Special Weapons and Tactical Training. After a brief spell with the New York Field Office SWAT team, Steiner was transferred to the elite HRT at Quantico and was soon a team leader.

In spring 1997, at Richard Hobson's suggestion, SA Jeff Parsons approached Steiner with a proposition. The HRT Agent was assigned to Parsons indefinitely, his duties classified.

So the undercover operation began, only Hobson and Parsons privy to all the details. Saul Steiner became Paul Riesman.

Although both former members of the 101st, Steiner and Riesman had never served together or even met. But Steiner's knowledge of the military gave him an edge. Also there was a superficial resemblance between the two men, both in age, height and build, and facial appearance. Riesman was an inch or so shorter, slightly heavier, his hair lighter. Steiner had his hair lightened and began studying.

Riesman had been captured in LA after a shoot-out outside a bank, he was isolated in a hospital, and his sister kept from him, disinformation on his condition leaked to the press.

Meanwhile, Hobson had the military records of both men switched and doctored.

Steiner became Riesman, and was sent to Walker Federal Penitentiary. The object was to get close to Ullrich and learn any information about his plans and the whereabouts of his men, who still posed a threat with their leader in prison.

Contact was made between the two men, but then the breakout occurred and everything started to come apart. Steiner/Riesman seemed to be with Ullrich, hopefully still undercover and not going over to the other side. So they had a man inside, but Hobson controlled all access and communication with Steiner, Parsons was out of the loop.

Parsons leant back in his chair. Something stank, Hobson was playing a game, and Steiner seemed not only to be part of it, he seemed to be in on it from the very start. But what was going on?

The real Riesman was dead, as was his sister in a mysterious accident, and acts of violence were being attributed to Ullrich, when they clearly weren't his work. His operation in the Bureau was leaking and he was being compromised at each turn.

He couldn't take his suspicions to the Disciplinary Panel, he had no proof. But something was going down, and Hobson and Steiner couldn't be the only ones involved. How this thing went was anyone's guess. One thing Parsons knew, Ullrich was being played, just like he was, he wasn't in on this, his private war was an expedient smokescreen. He was dirty work, as he had done his whole career.

He looked down at the dossier in front of him. He had been checking out Steiner for a couple of days, asking around, but he was getting nowhere. But Steiner was the way into this. He knew Steiner was Riesman, but who the hell was Steiner.

Parsons sat alone in his office, the darkness surrounding him.

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In Maddock, Texas, Bud Riley shouted goodnight to his two friends, Scooter and Chuck, as they drove off in their truck. After a hard night's drinking in town, Bud was heading home.

He walked across the litter-covered front lawn of his tumbledown house and tossed back the last drops from his beer can, sighed, crushed it and tossed it onto the weed-infested grass.

The old house was inherited from his family, passing to him when his mother ran off to Galveston with a truck driver. It was set outside of town, perched on the outskirts, swallowed in the gloom and silence of the open country.

The drunken Bud stumbled up the front steps, pulled open the screen door and tumbled through the front door. Staggering around in the dark, he groped blindly for the light switch.

Bud suddenly felt a flash of movement in the dark, he turned and a black shape fell across him. A blow crashed into his head, and in a whirl of light and noise he collapsed unconscious.

When Bud finally came to, his head was pounding. A roaring still filled his ears, and as his vision spun, coloured lights swirled before his eyes. As he steadied himself he realised he was sitting in his own front room, but he couldn't move his arms or legs. The room was still in semi-darkness, lit only by a couple of tatty lamps. In the background the radio played softly.

A burning pain covered his left eye, and he couldn't seem to open it properly. His face felt wet. He looked down, and struggled to make sense of why his hands and ankles were tied to the chair's arms and legs with thin, sharp wire. He winced as the razor-sharp wire sliced into his fleshy wrists. In his confusion he struggled to stifle a sob.

"Remember me, Bubba?" a voice spoke out of the darkness and a tall, slim figure stepped out of the darkness. Bud tilted his head and peered at the pale-faced man, his grey-

eyes sunken in hollows, dark hair shorn short. The man, dressed entirely in black seemed to swim in and out of the shadows, only his ghostly, almost disembodied head staying visible.

“Name’s Bud, asshole, Mr. Riley to you!” he sneered.

The dark-dressed man moved quickly across the floor and slammed the heel of his automatic pistol into Bud’s already swollen left eye. The fat youth howled and sobbed as the man stepped back.

“Okay, okay, you’re the dude with Sherilyn, knocked me down, Paul something. What the fuck do you want?” Bud struggled to sound tough through his sobs.

“You’re awful rude for a man tied to a chair, facing a man with a gun.” Steiner smiled.

“If I weren’t tied to this chair, I’d kick your faggot ass!” Bud sneered.

“You didn’t do such a good job last time we met. You were lucky to get away so lightly.”

“Fuck you!” Bud screamed.

Steiner stepped forward and slammed the pistol butt into Bud’s eye again. He howled in misery.

“You can scream as much as you like, tough-man, no one will hear you out here, and if they did, I think most folks would be glad to hear you get your comeuppance.” Steiner smiled, speaking softly.

“What do you want?” Bud wept uncontrollably.

Steiner looked down at the fat figure in front of him. His left eye was swollen grotesquely, blood seeping from an open cut. His fleshy wrists bled profusely as the wire cut deeper.

“You were pissed about Sherilyn and me showing you up, weren’t you big-man, wanted to get your own back!” Steiner whispered.

“I don’t know what you mean!” he sobbed.

Steiner brought the heel of his pistol down on Bud's left hand, tied palm down to the chair's arm. It ground into the hand, the crunch of bone and gristle clearly audible.

Stepping back, he asked again, "You wanted to get your own back, what did you do?"

"I don't fucking know what you are talking about!" Bud wailed.

Steiner laid his pistol aside and pulled something from his pocket. With a click, he opened the switchblade knife. He held it up so the light caught its five-inch stiletto blade.

"Please!" Bud sobbed, wriggling in his seat, the wires cutting deeper into his flesh, the blood trickling down the chair.

Steiner stood over Bud and looked down into his eyes. Bud squirmed, squealing. Steiner raised the knife and drove it down through Bud's right hand, through bone and flesh and deep into the wood of the armrest, pinning his hand there. Steiner stepped back, leaving the knife in place and lifted his silenced Glock automatic.

The blood gathered in a pool around Bud's feet, the stench of urine filled the small room.

"What did you do, Bud?" Steiner asked softly.

"I told the fucking Feds alright, is that what you want to hear, I told the FBI about you, Sherilyn's boyfriend, all of you down there on her ranch!" he screamed. "I fucking sold your asses!" He stated to laugh hysterically.

"How much did you get?" Steiner asked.

"Ain't got nothing yet, their being difficult!" he smiled through his pain.

"That's the Federal Government for you." Steiner raised his silenced pistol and fired once, the shot a mere cough. The bullet ripped into Bud's crotch, blood splattering across his lap. He reared back in horror, eyes wide, staring down at the pumping wound. He opened his mouth and screamed, his piercing shrieks filling the house as he bucked and writhed.

Steiner watched, then raised his pistol and fired again. The shot ripped through Bud's forehead, the back of his head exploding in a red mist. He slumped forward.

The sudden silence was deafening. Steiner stepped closer, standing over the slumped body. He jammed the muzzle of the pistol against the top of Bud's sagging head and fired two quick shots, the head collapsing, blood and gore splattering Bud's front and lap.

Steiner stood and studied the scene for a moment, unscrewing the silencer from his Glock and holstered the weapon.

The radio played softly in the background, the stench of cordite and blood and vented bowels filled the air.

The killer turned and walked out, slipping away into the night, swallowed up by the darkness.

Chapter 23

Parsons and his wife, Sarah, sat at the dining table in their apartment, eating supper, flickering candles lighting the gloom.

As they ate in silence, Sarah looked across at her husband. Head down, he picked at his food.

“Is everything all right?” she asked.

He looked up and smiled wanly, “Sure, sorry I’m not the best company.”

“Is it the hearing tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I’m really screwed.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

Parsons laid down his knife and fork, “Well considering I have nothing to show except for a dead mentally handicapped youth and dozens of dead and injured law enforcement personnel, they’re going to can my ass.”

“They’ll take you off the case?”

Parsons nodded.

“Is that so bad, we might actually be able to spend some time together. Since we’ve been married, we’ve seemed to see less and less of each other, and now with this Ullrich case when you are here, it’s like you’re somewhere else.” Sarah said sadly.

Parsons reached across the table and took her hand. “I know it’s been rough, I’m sorry. You’re right, I’ve got a bunch of back leave, we could go away together.”

“We can actually have our honeymoon at last. They owe me plenty of leave at the hospital.” She smiled.

“God knows I need to get away, I’ve missed you!” he reached across and brushed his fingertips against her cheek. She closed her eyes and kissed his hand. They sat touching in silence.

Sitting hand in hand, Sarah caressing his hands. “But you aren’t happy, are you?”

Parsons smiled, "I just wish it hadn't ended like this, everything so fucked up."

"It isn't your fault!" she whispered.

"Someone's got to carry the can and it was my show. Heads have got to roll, the public wants blood. Thing is, if I had screwed up I could accept it, but something else is going on."

"What do you mean?"

"Someone inside is working against me, I think I've been played."

"Ullrich?" she asked.

"No, that's the thing. I think Ullrich's being used just like me, someone's playing a bigger game, manoeuvring us."

"Who then?"

"I have my suspicions, but that's all I have. All I know is it could go all the way to the top and they're not afraid to get dirty. Those schoolchildren who were shot, that wasn't Ullrich, it's not his style."

"You think our own government, or at least people in it would kill innocent children, to do what, to make Ullrich look bad?" She frowned.

"I know it sounds crazy, paranoid. But if they are using Ullrich for something, maybe they want to paint him so bad, evil, beyond redemption, make him a better patsy. We all know how killing kids plays with the media; they're buying for blood. Also, by blaming Ullrich, it pushes him into a corner, ups the ante and forces him to show his hand."

"But you can't prove any of this?"

"No, they're too smart for that. If I could, I'd take it to the hearing tomorrow, take it to the press. But right now they are only suspicions and if I spoke up I'd look like a nut."

"Good job you're not speaking out, if what you say about them is true, do you think they'd let you talk, surely they would stop you, anyway they could!" she said nervously.

“Kill me? In a heartbeat. No, they’ve done something even better, they smeared me, ruined my name and career. I look like an incompetent and anything I say will look like I’m trying to shift the blame.” He smiled and chuckled grimly.

“So what’ll you do?” she gripped his hands tighter.

“Nothing, I’ll take my medicine like a good boy. They’ll slap my wrists, send me off on leave, then shuffle me into some dull, safe, out of the way post.”

“I’m sorry,” she murmured softly.

“It isn’t so bad, finally I get to spend some time with my beautiful young wife!” he lifted her hand and kissed her fingers, she giggled. “Anyway, I’ve finally had it with all this bullshit, the Bureau, everything!”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I’m going to quit, take a reduced pension and get out while I’m still young enough, still sane enough. They can go fuck themselves, they can go play their little games, fuck each other over, I just don’t care anymore!” he grinned.

Sarah sat forward eagerly, “You really mean it?” he nodded and she laughed, “But what will you do?”

“Who knows, some kind of consultant, maybe, who cares, right now I just want out.”

They both laughed, clinging onto each other’s hands.

“We could move to the country, I could set up in General Practice. We could get away from all this,” she chattered, her eyes a gleam.

“Whatever you want,” he grinned.

“I love you, Jeff Parsons!” she laughed, tears filling her eyes.

“I love you, Sarah Parsons!”

She stood and walked to the bedroom door.

“You know, I’ve got more than an hour before I have to be at the hospital!” she pushed open the door and leant seductively against the frame.

Parsons stood and walked across to her, “Why Mrs. Parsons, I do believe you are trying to lead me astray?”

“You bet your ass!” she grinned.

Parsons reached out and touched her face. She grabbed his hand and pulled him to her, drawing him into her arms. She reached up and kissed him full on the mouth and drew him into the darkened bedroom.

* * *

Hobson had a hot date. He left his apartment, dressed in a tuxedo, cheeks freshly shaved, reeking of cologne. He climbed into the elevator and punched the button for the basement garage. As he descended, he whistled cheerfully, looking forward to the evening ahead and the pleasures promised. The young analyst he had bagged was ripe for the picking.

He stepped out of the elevator and strode across the dimly lit garage, deactivated his alarm and slid into his dark sedan. He sighed as the soft leather seats met his behind and suitably relaxed, he slipped his key into the ignition.

“Evening, Dicky, you’re looking mighty fine!”

Hobson leapt at the sound of the soft voice from behind his seat. Sitting bolt upright, he gripped the steering wheel, fighting his rising panic.

“Hot date tonight, you sure took your time getting ready,” the voice whispered.

Hobson felt the muzzle of a pistol pressing through the back of his seat. He licked his dry lips and glanced into the rear-view mirror.

“Jesus!” he gasped as he saw the reflection of a thin, pale face, eyes sunk in deep hollows, crooked face twisted into a grin.

“Nice to see you too!”

“Steiner, what the fuck are you doing here?” Hobson gasped.

“Just passing, you should try to relax more, big guy like you, going to give yourself a heart attack.” Steiner grinned.

“Fuck you!” the CIA chief snarled. “Is there some problem with Ullrich?”

“No, everything’s perfect, he trusts me so much I just escorted his lady friend safely out of the way.”

“King Arthur and Lancelot, hope you didn’t violate the fair Guinevere?” Hobson laughed.

Steiner stared coldly back at him in the mirror and he felt the muzzle drill into his back through the seat.

“Hey, I was only kidding. Where’d you take Miss Groves?”

“What the fuck does that matter?” Steiner snarled.

“I decide what matters, you don’t pick and choose what you report!” Hobson snapped.

“Wrong, big man, I make all the decisions.”

“Listen, you little fuck, I was the one visited you in that military hospital, recruited you, got you inside the Bureau, got you selected for this operation, I fucking own you!”

Hobson growled, twisting around in his seat.

Steiner jammed the barrel of his silenced automatic in the driver’s neck. “Eyes straight ahead, hands on the wheel, where I can see them.” Hobson turned back around, hands tight upon steering wheel. “You may direct me, but you need me more than I need you. It’s my ass on the line. I call the shots. You get what you want, what you need, when I say so. I’m in control here.”

“Whatever you say. Just don’t forget, you’re just a killer, in the pay of your government.” Hobson said.

“Which government would that be? No, Ullrich is just a killer, I’m a Dark Angel, that’s why you chose me for this job.” Steiner whispered.

“Okay, okay, forget the girl, I’ll find her if I want to.” Hobson laughed.

“You do that.”

“How is Ullrich progressing?”

“As expected, I have to get back, I think he’s about to go operational,” said Steiner.

“The big one?”

“Looks like it, I haven’t got any details, but I’d say he’s going to make the play, just like we thought.”

“How long?” asked Hobson.

“Two weeks, max, probably less, could be within the week.”

“Perfect, what’s he calling it?”

“Operation Guillotine.”

“Typical, Ullrich always had a flair for the melodramatic. I always knew he couldn’t miss going for the big one, the top dog.” Hobson chuckled.

“Everything is in place?”

“You do your job, I’ll do mine.” Hobson snapped, “Just keep me informed.”

“Could be difficult, time is short, I might not be able to get free for a chat. Next time you hear anything, we may have gone to war, you’ll hear about it on the news, I expect.”

Steiner muttered.

“Whatever, smartass, just get it done!”

Steiner shuffled forward in his seat; “Right I’m out of here, before you’re cologne suffocates me. Have a nice time tonight, don’t do anything I wouldn’t!” he chuckled.

“One last thing, I was going to contact you.” Steiner paused and Hobson continued, “We’ve got a problem, a leak that’s got to be plugged. Immediately.”

“It’ll have to be tonight.” Steiner whispered.

“Perfect, the target is in place, I want immediate termination.”

“Any preferred method?” asked Steiner.

“Not like that snitch down in Texas!”

“You heard about that?” Steiner smiled.

“Your work I presume. Sometimes I think you enjoy your work a little too much!”

“No harm in taking pleasure in your work,” said Steiner.

“By butchering someone?”

“Hey, I wasn’t the one who murdered school kids.”

“Sticks and stones.” Hobson chuckled.

“How do you want the target killed?” asked Steiner.

“Quick and clean.”

*

*

*

Parsons came awake with a start. He blinked his eyes as he sat up on the sofa. The TV flickered in front of him, the volume down low. Yawning, his mouth felt dry, he picked up the half-empty can of lukewarm beer from the coffee table and took a swig. He debated whether he should go and get some water, but decided to wait a minute and get some on the way to bed. He slid forward onto the edge of the sofa, rubbing his hands across his face.

He looked at his watch, past midnight; Sarah wouldn’t be back until he’d left for the hearing in the morning. As if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders, suddenly he didn’t care what happened tomorrow, he’d tell them all to go screw themselves, then go back to his wife and start living.

Parsons suddenly became aware of flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned and stared into the shadows. He shook his head, thinking he must have imagined it. Yawning, he climbed to his feet.

A figure in black slipped out of the darkness.

“Hello, Agent Parsons.”

Parsons froze, struggling to focus on the intruder. The tall figure seemed to stare back pensively, a wry smile on his lips, his pale face hovering in the dark.

“Steiner?” Parsons whispered and the man nodded. “What are you doing here, has something happened with Ullrich?”

“I was in town and I heard you were casting doubts on my abilities, my loyalties.” Steiner spoke softly, still smiling thinly.

“No, well yes. My problem was more with Hobson, I couldn’t speak to you, I was frustrated, you know, nothing against you.” Parsons, flustered, spoke nervously.

Steiner tilted his head sideways, “Come on, Agent Parsons, you think we’re up to something. Dark governmental conspiracies.”

Parsons stood perfectly still, his mind racing, trying to remember where his gun was.

“You been asking too many questions.” Steiner whispered.

Parsons knew it was coming down.

“All right then, Steiner, you tell me, what are you up to, what’s the plan, there is a plan isn’t there?” Parsons went on the offensive.

“More a plot, I suppose,” he smiled widely.

“What are you using Ullrich for, who are you going to kill?”

“I think you know that, but that is only a tiny part of the puzzle.”

“Then you tell me it all.” Parsons eyed the draw containing his back-up weapon.

Steiner shook his head, raising his right arm. Held steadily in his hand was a silenced HK P7 automatic pistol. He straightened his arm and aimed carefully, squeezing the grip safety in the butt of the pistol.

Parsons couldn’t believe it was going to end like this. Visions of Sarah flashing through his mind.

“Who the fuck are you?” Parsons screamed.

“Dark Angel.” Steiner whispered, squeezing the trigger twice.

The two shots sounded as one, both rounds ripping into Parsons chest, throwing him back over the coffee table, sending him crashing down onto the floor.

Steiner moved across the room, stepping over the sprawling body. Parsons' face, lit by the flickering TV, stared up at him, dark eyes swimming in and out of focus. Steiner looked down into his eyes, trying to read them as they clung onto life. Sightless, Parsons eyes flickered, searching the assassin's face. The two men stared into each other.

Steiner raised his pistol and fired a single round into Parsons' forehead.

Chapter 24

On the morning of August 3rd, a flight of attack helicopters took off from the 101st Airborne base at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Comprising of two AH-64D Longbow Apaches gunships, each carrying a two man crew and armed with a single 30mm M230 Chain Gun, Hellfire AT missiles and Stinger AAMs, and two UH-60 Black Hawks, each carrying three crew members and 14 troops, and armed with 7.62mm and 12.7mm miniguns. The Air Assault force was heading out on a standard live fire exercise, the troops aboard all wore full BDU, body-armour and were heavily armed, their faces smeared with camouflaged paint.

As the choppers peeled away from the pad, they picked up speed and skimmed away over the dusty, flat ground. Inside, the troops sat in grim silence, eyes staring ahead, weapons gripped in their hands. The pounding of the chopper's rotors reverberated through the cabins, the yawing of the aircraft rocking the impassive soldiers.

Thirty minutes later, as the flight raced along the edge of the Appalachian Mountains, they seemed to lose altitude and suddenly vanished from military radar screens. When no radio contact could be made, rescue choppers and search teams were dispatched, but no trace was found of the missing helicopters.

At about the same time, a Sikorsky CH-53E Super Stallion heavy lift transport helicopter took off from the Army Ranger base at Fort Benning, Georgia. Aboard was a heavy load of weapons and ammunition, due to be transported the short distance to 1/75 base at Hunter. As they readied the aircraft for take-off one of the ground crew asked his chief why the chopper was being fitted with long-distance drop-tanks for the short flight. The grizzled Sergeant just winked and said knowingly, "In the army, son, you don't ask why, you just hurry up and wait!" He slapped the young PFC on the shoulder and ambled off. The two pilots and the crew chief climbed aboard and after pre-flight checks, began to crank up the engines. The young mechanic watched in surprise as twelve heavily armed Rangers appeared, all in full battle dress, jumped aboard the chopper and squeezed among the crates. The

engines pounded, and as the chopper seemed about to clear the ground, the ground crew chief appeared, carrying a pack and his personal weapon. The thickset Sergeant leapt aboard the helicopter, the waiting soldiers laughing and slapping him on the back. The crew chief slammed the door shut, and with an almighty blast of dust, the chopper cleared the ground, banked steeply and sped away. The young PFC just shook his head and walked away.

Meanwhile, at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, an Army Special Forces MH-60 Pave Hawk, a special operations version of the Black Hawk, armed with 7.62mm and 12.7mm miniguns and Stinger and Hellfire missiles, took off, flying away at high speed, hugging the contours of the ground. Loaded with high-tech electronic jamming and communication equipment, the chopper also carried, in addition to her three crew, a twelve-man SF A-Team, all armed to the teeth, carrying heavy packs, loaded down with weapons and ordnance, in full BDU, all indistinguishable behind their dark painted faces, cold, hard and impassive.

At almost exactly the same time as the 101st flight disappeared, both military helicopters vanished from radar, the radios silent, all trace gone.

* * *

High in the Appalachians, later that afternoon, Ullrich raced along a bumpy mountain road behind the wheel of a military Humvee. The vehicle shuddered and reeled as it careened around corners, crashing over the bumpy ground at more than 60 mph. Hooker sat impassive in the passenger seat, like Ullrich in full battle dress, his SPAS 12 semi-automatic shotgun across his knees.

The vehicle reached the mountaintop clearing. Amidst the tents and makeshift buildings stood two Apache gunships and three Black Hawk helicopters. Technicians bustled around the black painted aircraft, tinkering and refuelling, while the new troops, lounged about, eating, sleeping, and chatting with the veterans of Ullrich's force.

The Humvee screeched to a halt and Ullrich leapt out, closely followed by Hooker. The Captain in charge of the 101st force approached, and the two officers shook hands, chatting animatedly. The young officer had been a former pupil of Ullrich, and once recruited he had set about hand-picking the men to come with him. Ullrich slapped him on the shoulder and strode over to the Pave Hawk. The Special Forces troops and their crew lounged around the outside of their chopper, remaining separate from the others.

“Chuck!” Ullrich called, and a wiry man wearing a Major’s oak leaves on his BDU jumped to his feet. Although around 5’9”, the lean, dark-haired officer appeared slight compared with the towering, powerfully built SF soldiers around him. The Major grinned and held out his hand.

“Colonel, good to see you!” Major Chuck Meadows laughed happily.

“What’s the matter, Major, you and your men too good to mix with the rest of us?” Ullrich frowned.

Meadows hung his head and kicked at the ground with toe of his boot, “Gee, it ain’t that, I guess we’re just kind of shy!”

Both men laughed.

“Seriously, Chuck, every man earned his right to be here, we can’t afford any of this prima donna shit!” Ullrich said quietly.

“We’ll leave that to the SEALs, eh?” Meadows grinned, “It’s alright, I’ll have a word with these uncivilised motherfuckers!” he waved his hand towards the sprawling SF Captains and Sergeants, who grunted and mugged, before quickly dissolving into laughter.

The pounding throb of helicopter rotors approached, growing louder until the air itself vibrated.

The large Super Stallion helicopter came over the horizon, sweeping down over the clearing, hovering above, its three General Electric T64-GE-416 turboshafts howling fiendishly.

A soldier on the ground waved the chopper down and it settled in the centre of the clearing, its rotors winding down. The side door slid open and the heavily armed Rangers jumped to the ground, weapons held ready, as if making a combat landing. The waiting soldiers laughed and cheered, and the Rangers flinched, startled, like soldiers caught in the glare of a TV camera. Grins cracked their dark-painted faces and they lowered their weapons and hunkered over to the waiting bivouacs.

Ullrich strode over to the Ranger's commanding officer, Major Nick Jacobs, a tall, square shouldered man in his early thirties, his short hair prematurely grey, his slim, paint-covered face grinning broadly. He snapped to attention and saluted, the grin never leaving his face.

"Knock it off!" Ullrich laughed. He had known Jacobs for more than ten years, since he took the young officer through Ranger School. While the harsh ordeal broke many men, Jacobs had flourished, and since then the young officer had become one of his protégés, growing under his watchful gaze.

The Colonel embraced the Ranger and both men headed back towards the camp.

"How was your flight?" asked Ullrich.

"Uneventful. We still go the day after tomorrow?" he replied eagerly.

"If all goes as planned, what else you got on that monster chopper, apart from your rabble?"

"Enough weapons and ammo to start a small war." Jacobs laughed.

"Just a small war? I was hoping to start and finish the mother of all wars!" The Colonel grinned.

"Like Saddam?" the Ranger chuckled.

"Or Bush?" Ullrich slapped the younger officer on the shoulder. "No, we've got enough firepower to raze Washington DC to the ground!"

"It's a start."

The two men separated and the Colonel vaulted onto the hood of his Humvee, and stood, feet apart, hands resting on his hips.

“Gentleman!” he cried out and an immediate hush fell across the assembled soldiers. “All going well, the day after tomorrow, August 5th, we will be going to war!” There was a cheer. “Many of us will not be coming back, and those that do, will in all likelihood be branded traitors and will never be able to set foot on American soil again!” A hush fell over the crowd. “It is an awesome burden of responsibility we bear, but as soldiers it is one we choose to carry. When our nation needs us we answer the call,” he paused.

“This time we face a different enemy, an enemy within, an enemy unrecognised by the American people. This enemy is the very government of these United States. As our forefathers knew, power has the hazard of corruption and gave us, as free citizens, the right to rise up and strike down these tyrants. But as these corrupt rulers whittle away at the very right given to protect us from them, the people remain blind.

“Our founding fathers came to this country to live as free men, free from the yolk of tyranny and slavery. Now we have become what we fled.

“We will rise up to remind our rulers of our rights, enshrined in law, rights they would strip us of. We, the military, despised and atrophied by these dictators, will remind them of words they know nothing of. Words like honour and duty. And Sacrifice.

“We are prepared to lay down our lives in this quest, to risk becoming outcasts in our beloved land. Maybe it is a hopeless quest, but it is our duty to act.

“So we will lay down our lives to free our people, even an ungrateful and undeserving people. But such is our way. We serve an unworthy, ungrateful master and fight a hopeless crusade. But this is the soldier’s true destiny. We fight and die for each other, the man beside us. Our deaths and those of our enemies will serve as an object lesson.

“We will fight, and if need be die, for such is our way. We would want no other.

“As Thomas Jefferson said, ‘The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants’, and we will do this, if for no one else, then for each other.”

A roar rose up from the soldiers, weapons upraised to the heavens, the olive clad throng rising to their feet, faces agleam. Ullrich leapt down from the hood of his vehicle and climbed inside, behind the wheel. The V8 air-cooled roared to life. Hooker swung into the passenger seat and the Colonel swung the vehicle around and sped off.

Sitting at the back of the crowd, Steiner watched the vehicle drive away. Ullrich’s words had inevitably stirred the passions of the ex-soldier, the promise of a hopeless quest guaranteed to evoke the romantic in any soldier, especially an elite warrior. Ullrich had promised them death and glory.

For a moment Steiner was almost won over, the naïve idealist who had joined the army as a youth awoken, but now the cool-headed professional reasserted himself. Steiner may have been a soldier, but he was no longer a romantic, at least that’s what he told himself.

Sitting alone, his MSG90 sniping rifle across his knees, he watched the laughing, smiling soldiers milling around him. He slammed home a magazine into the rifle and worked the charging handle. Staring off into the falling sun he smiled.

Death long ago ceased to have any meaning to Steiner. As far back as childhood he had dreamt of death as release from the torment of life. As he had progressed as a soldier and assassin, his nihilism had refined. Death, his own or anyone’s had become an incidental happenstance.

Steiner hated the banality and squalor of everyday life. Only with the proximity of death did he feel truly alive.

Chapter 25

It was just after breakfast, 8.30am, and Colonel Pete Dexter was at his desk unusually early. Word came to his executive officer, Major Neil Morrow, that the base commander wanted to see him.

The Major walked across the sleepy base, Fort Webb, near Arlington, Virginia. The base was just a glorified supply depot, not somewhere Morrow had envisioned ending out his career. The former Special Forces officer had washed up here two years ago, after a parachute jump accident had shattered both his legs and fractured his skull. After a year in hospital he was deemed fit for duty, but not as an infantry officer, let alone in Special Forces. It was a desk job for him, or quit and receive a partial pension. With only three years to serve to complete his twenty years, he swallowed his pride and took the job. So here he was, surrounded by clerks and grocers in uniform. This was not the army he knew and loved, just a bunch of faceless, spineless drones. So he just sat and marked time and festered.

He was surprised Dexter was in his office this early. Usually, when the Colonel finally dragged his lard ass out of bed, the fat fuck spent hours stuffing his face and jawing mindlessly with his fatuous colleagues.

Morrow despised Dexter, and all he represented. He was a feeble, shiftless functionary. He was the face of the new US Army.

Morrow limped into the Colonel's office and smiled wanly at the secretary and knocked on the door.

"Enter," a voice growled.

Morrow stepped into the room, shutting the door behind him. Stepping before the base commander's desk, he snapped to attention and saluted.

The slightly flabby, bland-faced man behind the desk returned the salute half-heartedly.

"At ease, Major." He squinted up at the lean man before him.

Morrow knew the Colonel wore glasses, but he was too vain to wear them in front of anyone.

“Perhaps you could tell me the meaning of this?” he slid a flimsy piece of paper across the desk. Morrow lifted it and quickly read it, before laying it back on the desk.

“It’s a request from the Washington DC PD for confirmation from this office about orders for a military convoy to move through the centre of the city.” The Major said.

“I know what it is. What I want to know is how a convoy, stopped this morning by the DC police, purportedly from this base, had orders signed by me, to be in the city?”

“I assume you signed the orders.” Morrow said, eyes fixed ahead.

“I may not be on top of everything that goes on here, you might be the one really running the show, but I think I would remember something like this!” Dexter’s voice rose, his face reddening as he jabbed a porky finger down at the paper.

Morrow did not reply.

“So I did a little checking. There are no vehicles unaccounted for and according to the Sergeant Major in the motor pool we have no convoys out this morning. We have nothing in DC or anywhere else. So what’s your explanation for that, smart-guy?” he blustered.

“Did you have the convoy stopped?” asked Morrow.

“That’s none of your business, but no, I haven’t just yet, I didn’t want to look a fool in front of civilians, least of all cops. I verified the orders, but that was before I spoke to the motor pool. Now you will give me an explanation, or I will have that convoy stopped, and I’ll have the MPs toss you in a cell.” The Colonel paused, breathing heavily and wiped the back of his hand across his sweaty brow. “So, Major Morrow, did you sign those orders?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You forged my name?” Dexter leant forward, incredulous.

“Yes, sir.”

“Why you smug bastard, you’ve gone too far this time. You’re finished. I’m going to stop those trucks and find out exactly what’s going on here!”

Dexter reached out, his fingers brushing the telephone.

Morrow reached inside his jacket and pulled out a silenced Ruger .22 pistol. He levelled the weapon on the base commander.

“Colonel,” he whispered.

Dexter looked up, aghast. His fingers still resting on the phone, his eyes fixed in horror on the pistol pointed at his head.

“What...” his lips parted.

Morrow fired once, the pistol’s integrated noise suppresser rendering the shot almost silent.

The small round punched through Dexter’s forehead, throwing him back in his chair, a fine red spray covering the wall behind him.

Morrow put another round into his chest and lowered the weapon.

No one broke in, there was no sound of disturbance, life carried on outside.

He laid the pistol on the desk, moved around it, shoved back the Colonel’s chair and grabbed his flabby corpse, tossing him onto the floor. Grabbing him by the collar, he dragged the body into the Colonel’s bathroom, dumped him, and after checking his reflection, shut the door after him.

Sitting back at the desk, he pressed the intercom button and spoke to the secretary, “Jean, this is Major Morrow, the Colonel and I will be in conference for the next half an hour, we don’t want to be disturbed.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And if the DC police ring again about the convoy, tell them everything is in order. Any problems, put them through to me, here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you, Jean.”

Morrow pulled out his Beretta M9 service pistol and laid it on the desk beside the Ruger and leant back in his chair and waited.

* * *

At the Pentagon in Virginia, JSOC, Joint Special Operations Command, were holding a meeting to discuss possible reactions to the Ullrich situation, and any ramifications from his and his men’s special forces background.

JSOC had been set up in the eighties in the wake of Operation Eagle Claw, and special operations failures. It was decided, albeit belatedly, that the command structure for special ops was too cumbersome (much as Charlie Beckwith maintained at the time of Eagle Claw), so the system was streamlined, with JSOC founded as a branch of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, responsible for the planning and execution of all US special operations, at home and abroad. The three star General in command reported directly to the President.

The assembled officers represented all branches of the services, Army, Marines, Navy and Air Force. This group was the operating mind behind all the US special forces, Green Berets, Delta Force, Rangers, Marine Recon, SEALs and USAF Special Forces.

Chatting amiably and sipping coffee, the officers began to take their seats, while aides set up projectors and distributed paperwork.

Colonel Charles Watson stood and excused himself, saying he had to quickly visit the bathroom. The tall, lean figure in Army Special Forces uniform, bedecked with decorations, strode from the room. Left beneath his seat was his briefcase.

He headed down the corridor, but turned right instead of left at the end. Less than five minutes later, he climbed into his POV in the parking lot and drove away.

The bomb left inside his briefcase detonated and the blast tore the room apart as the meeting came to order. Sirens wailed and flame engulfed one whole wing of the Pentagon.

Everyone inside the room was dead. All special forces command had been cut off.

* * *

The convoy of olive painted military vehicles swept down the wide, open boulevards of Washington DC. On point was a Humvee, mounted atop it a M2HB Browning .50 calibre heavy machine gun, behind was a M35 6x6 canvas-covered truck, then another Humvee carrying a Mk19 40mm grenade launcher. The Mk19 is designated as a machine gun, but is in fact an automatic belt-fed grenade launcher, firing up to 375rpm, and with a range of 1600m. Behind the Humvee were two more canvas-covered trucks, then a four-wheeled APC, armed with a 20mm cannon and two 7.62mm machine guns. Finally taking up the rear was another Humvee carrying a mounted Mk19 automatic grenade launcher.

The convoy raced along in the clear, sun-lit morning air, soldiers standing mounted behind their weapons. Travelling at more than fifty on the hard paved roads, they raced by the early morning traffic.

Captain Max Paulus sat up front in the lead Humvee, Sergeant Riley behind the wheel, a Corporal Wiltse standing behind the Browning .50 calibre machine gun in the rear.

Dressed in full combat gear, Paulus twiddled the knob on the radio, picking up the morning news.

“Theses are this mornings headlines: The President and his Cabinet are meeting in emergency session this morning to discuss the escalating violence perpetrated by renegade Special Forces officer, Colonel John Ullrich, and his private army.

“The meeting itself has just now gone into session, present not only all Cabinet members, but high ranking members of the military and the intelligence services. Subjects

believed to be under discussion include a nationwide mobilisation of all National Guard units.

“We will keep you informed of further developments.

“And now to the rest of the morning’s news...”

Paulus switched off the radio.

“Brrr, the National Guard, now I’m scared!” he shivered in mock terror and cracked up laughing.

He checked his watch and glanced down at the plastic-sheathed map on his lap, then up at the road ahead. He snatched up the radio handset and pressed send.

“All Bravo units, this is Bravo 1, approaching separation point, stand by.” He paused, “Good luck, and have a fucking lovely war!” he grinned and replaced the handset. He lifted his Colt Commando assault rifle, ramming back the charging handle, chambering a round.

“Let’s do it!” he snapped.

The convoy separated, Paulus in the lead Humvee carrying straight on, followed by the first truck, and the APC. The remaining two Humvees and two trucks peeled off to the right, sweeping off down a side junction.

Inside the vehicles, weapons were charged, the soldiers not wearing camouflage paint on their faces, tugging down olive ski masks and donning Kevlar helmets.

* * *

Inside the FBI Building on Pennsylvania Avenue, Special Agents Frank Willis and Rachel Vansen left the office of the Deputy-Director.

“So that’s that, you and me are to wrap up Parsons’ work, gather all the paper work and deliver it to that worm Newman?” Vansen snarled angrily as the agents walked towards the elevators.

“He’s the Director’s creature, I wouldn’t piss him off if I were you.” Willis smiled grimly.

“But why shut down Parsons operation, he’s been dead less than a week, and Ullrich wouldn’t have had him killed if he wasn’t close!”

“Maybe.” He sighed.

“They owe us the chance to check out his work, find where it leads us, shit, they owe Parsons that, did he get wasted all for nothing?” she muttered angrily.

“He was my friend, I’m pissed too, but when the word comes from on high, you don’t ask questions, you just jump. You’ll learn that when you’re as old as me.” He said sadly.

“It fucking stinks! So we just pack it up in boxes, hand it over to those mealy mouthed worms and trundle back to our old jobs.”

“Welcome to the world, you just been fucked DC style!” the two halted at the elevator and pressed the button and waited.

There was a screech of tyres from the street outside. Then suddenly there was a crash, raised voices and the unmistakable rattle of gunfire.

“What the fuck?” Willis, turned, gaping, but Vansen was already moving, her SIG P228 automatic unholstered. Reaching the windows she looked down.

Four storeys down, Jeep Cherokees blocked off the street at each end. In front of the main entrance, two more Jeeps and a dark van were parked askance. Spilling out of the vehicles were dark-dressed men, wearing body-armour and ski masks. All carried automatic weapons, raised to their shoulders, firing as they moved.

Men around the vehicles provided suppressing fire, the ones at the ends of the street, covered the approaches. The attackers swarmed in small groups, firing as they moved, approaching the main entrance. Bullets ricocheted off the stonework around the main steps; agents and guards armed only with handguns were cut down by the withering fire.

Vansen noticed a figure separating from the vehicles; something raised to his shoulder. She squinted and suddenly recognised the weapon he held as a M2 Carl-Gustav 84mm recoilless anti-tank gun. The man raised the rocket-launcher, seemingly pointing the weapon directly at Rachel. She watched in horror as he sighted down the x2 telescope sight.

She whirled around, sprinting away from the window, waving her weapon in the air. “Everyone down!” she screamed.

The crowd in the hall seemed frozen.

She dived through the air, knocking Willis to the floor.

The HE warhead blasted from the recoilless rifle, arcing upwards at 310 metres per second. The soldier vanished in the exhaust smoke discharged from the rear of the weapon as it jerked violently on his shoulder.

The High Explosive round slammed into the building, just along from the window Vansen had just been standing. The massive explosion seemed to shake the whole building and shattered glass and metal tore through the air above Vansen and Willis. The shrapnel ripped through the frozen agents and office workers filling the corridor and screams echoed above the noise of the blast. The dead and the dying lay broken and bloody on the floor around the two sheltering agents.

The black figures of the attackers zigzagged across the steps, firing through the reinforced glass doors, their plastic-coated titanium slap rounds punching through and cutting the defenders apart.

Two soldiers approached the base of the steps, knelt and raised their M4s, each fitted with M203 40mm grenade launchers. The commander, ducked behind a pillar, raised his arm then dropped it and both men fired. The fragmentation rounds tore through the shattered glass and detonated inside the foyer. Shrapnel ripped through defenders, scything them down.

As the smoke cleared, two soldiers leant around the doorway and tossed in two fragmentation grenades, both exploding on top of the other, as the wounded staggered blindly

trying to recover from the first blast. All those not well under cover were ripped apart, the savaged wreckage of their bodies slipping to the bloody floor.

The attackers swarmed through the entrance, firing on the move, knocking down the defenders as each desperately rose from behind cover. The foyer pacified, the attackers went among the dead and dying, putting a single round into each.

Rearmed FBI agents mounted a counter-attack. The officers moved from cover to cover, firing their shotguns, MP5s and AR15s. With no visible targets, they lay down a desperate suppressing fire as they advanced.

The attackers snapped up from cover, opening up on full automatic, the heavy fusillade cutting down the agents. Two soldiers fired smoke from their M203, the thick grey haze engulfing the corridor. The FBI agents desperately tried to flee through the smoke, but the attackers continued to fire blindly, mercilessly, killing them all.

As the assault team in the foyer dug in, the soldiers out in the street opened up on the building with repeated blasts from the Carl-Gustav recoilless rifle, M203 grenade launchers, and the deafening rattle of automatic fire.

* * *

The US State Department Building, in the south-west corner of Foggy Bottom, was an impressive, long, white, unblemished structure, covering two entire city blocks. With the morning just beginning, latecomers hustled through the entrance, while others got to work at their desks.

A dark van and three Jeep Cherokees sped up outside the building screeching to a halt. Black-dressed troops armed with automatic weapons spilled from the vehicles, scattering across the front of the dazzling white building, squeezing off bursts of fire as they moved. The hopelessly outgunned security guards were cut down in an instant; dozens of

bystanders were hit, caught in the crossfire. The bullets bit into the white walls, shattering windows. Inside, bewildered workers were cut to pieces.

The back of one of the Jeeps was popped open. Mounted inside was a MK19 automatic grenade launcher. The soldier behind it opened up; the deafening barrage of automatic fire was immediately dwarfed as the grenades hit home. Slamming into the main entrance, the HE rounds detonated, the fiery blasts shattering the stonework, glass and metal. Inside, defenders, trying desperately to fight off the assault were torn apart. The gunner kept pounding the entrance, flames lapping at the walls, the paint blistered and blackened.

Ceasing fire, the Mk19 gunner pivoted his weapon and began pounding the length of the building's facade.

Black-suited troops raced up the steps, breaking in through the shattered entrance, vanishing into the smoke. From deep within the burning building came the rattle of gunfire and sound of strangled screams.

Chapter 26

The Huey skimmed low over the Potomac, banking steeply to the right at the Arlington Memorial Bridge. Speeding low above the glittering white monuments and bustling early morning traffic, the chopper swooped over the Lincoln Memorial.

“If old Abe could see us now!” the pilot whooped.

Lucius Cobb, at fifty, still struck an imposing figure. The big, rough-hewn, black pilot had began his career in the military when snatched from his Detroit neighbourhood home, aged eighteen, by the draft. Enlisting in the Marines he had been sent to Vietnam, where after six months as a foot-slogger, he had been transferred and on completing his pilot training, he had completed his first tour flying Huey Gunships. At the end of his term, instead of returning home, he re-enlisted, signing on as a lifer. Cobb had found his niche, his home. Soon he was flying operations up around the Delta with Marine Recon as a newly promoted Sergeant. As part of Project Delta, he met up with a young Special Forces officer, Charlie Beckwith. When Delta was shut down, Cobb began working in the CIA run operation, Project Phoenix, a ruthless and covert operation, involving assassination and torture. The cabal of military officers and CIA agents used Vietcong tactics to fight the Vietcong and NVA. Cobb was repeatedly ordered to desist any further involvement with Phoenix by his senior officers, but he continued, barely escaping arrest and discharge from the service. He stayed in Nam until '73, occasionally returning in the following two years. During the fall of Saigon he met John Ullrich.

In 1979, he was a senior Marine chopper pilot during Operation Eagle Claw. Disgusted by his fellow Marine pilots behaviour during the disastrous evacuation after the abort, and the subsequent political fall-out, he quit the Marines, fled the US to France and joined the French Foreign Legion for five years, serving as a Sergeant in the Parachute regiment. After his discharge he worked as a mercenary, serving in Africa and South and

Central America. During this period he often worked closely with the CIA and hooked up with Ullrich once again.

In 1996, his doctors had diagnosed Cobb as suffering from cancer of the liver, and despite treatment, he had recently learnt he had at most six months to live. Although dying, Cobb remained his outwardly robust, vigorous self. He wasn't bitter, he knew he was lucky to have made it this far, he had seen better men than him cut down beside him, most while still young.

He adjusted the pitch and torque of the chopper, skimming low above the ground at almost 120mph, grinning happily to himself. In the back of the helicopter, the high-powered electronic jamming equipment lashed to the deck, squawked and hummed.

The co-pilot, Bill Mayhew, a sallow, slim-built man, around forty, was a pilot with the 160th SOAR, the air support wing of Delta Force. He had gone AWOL six weeks ago. His wife had left him a year ago, running off with a real estate salesman. She had demanded and received a divorce from her heartbroken husband. His only son, a sullen teenager, had disowned him, despising him and the military, regarding him as a fascist relic. Alone in his service bungalow at Bragg, he had begun to drink at night when he couldn't sleep, and although always sober on duty, his superiors became aware of his problems and suspended him from duty, ordering him to seek help. While languishing in his misery, John Ullrich, an old friend from Delta and SF days, approached him with a proposition. He quit drinking, returned to duty, once again his old self. Then he vanished.

The two men sat in the cockpit, hidden behind dark glasses and flight helmets, the sun gleaming off the perspex canopy, Constitution Gardens a green blur beneath them.

Both men had volunteered for this one-way mission, eager for one last glimpse of glory as their lives petered out.

Once again the radio crackled, "Unidentified aircraft, we repeat, you are inside restricted airspace, turn back or face immediate consequences!"

Mayhew twiddled the knobs on the jamming equipment and the voice disappeared in a blast of static and feedback.

The co-pilot grinned across at Cobb. He beamed back.

“Ready weapons systems!” the pilot bellowed.

Mayhew flicked some switches on the controls, lighting up the fire control panel.

“Missiles armed and ready, machine guns cocked and ready to rip!” he laughed gleefully.

“The let’s kick some ass!” Cobb roared with laughter, cranking up the collective, the chopper roared in on its final approach.

In the electronic surveillance centre, perched on the top floor of the White House, the controller turned to her supervisor.

“Lost him again, sir!”

“Alert the missile batteries, fire on sight!” the senior Secret Service Agent snapped.

* * *

Secret Service Agent Charlie Stoner stood in the guard post on the main gate to the White House. As the senior agent on duty it was his duty to vet all visitors and maintain cast-iron security. At 31, Stoner was young for his post within the Secret Service, as a senior agent on the elite presidential detail, but he had been marked out as a fast riser, both tough and smart. A Harvard graduate, a crack shot and expert in unarmed combat, he was also a charming and smart political operator. He had been on the presidential detail for three years, and already it was predicted he would be in overall command before he was 35.

The handsome, dark-haired agent was universally liked and respected by his superiors and fellow agents, and was very popular with the female staff of the White House, and the wives and girlfriends of the male workers, even some senior government figures.

However, this did not seem to turn the jealous husbands and boyfriends against him, he was too charming for that. Anyway he only flirted with his admirers; he never took advantage of the situation, at least as far as they knew. Stoner was always discreet about his conquests, but the President, himself a notorious womaniser, who was also sleeping his way around the White House, became aware of the young agent. Instead of feeling threatened, the President took a shine to Stoner, charmed by him, as everyone was, taking the agent beneath his wing.

Having admitted the cabinet members and the other high-ranking officials early, Stoner now relaxed in the bulletproof booth, awaiting the end of the meeting.

Outside, messengers and junior officials from various government departments came and went, journalists drifted around, all wearing official passes around their necks, all being watched and tracked by Secret Service sharpshooters, concealed about the estate, on rooftops and concealed in the undergrowth.

While flicking through the report in front of him, Stoner always kept one eye on the activity outside, and monitored the radio traffic coming over his earpiece.

“All units, this is Control 1, we have possible bogey inbound, likely chopper, electronic jamming in use. Go to alert grade two, lock down and stand by!” a voice crackled through thick static on the radio frequency.

Stoner jumped to his feet, unholstered his SIG P228 automatic, yanking back the slide and chambering a round.

“Get that goddamn gate shut. Now!” he shouted.

An agent hit the button and the heavy metal gate slid slowly across, slamming shut, sealing off the entrance.

Outside, agents pulled Uzis and compact MP5 sub-machine guns from beneath their jackets, moving briskly, shouting and hustling guests and civilian workers inside under cover.

Inside the guardhouse, agents snatched assault rifles and shotguns from the weapons rack, the small room filled with metallic clatters as they loaded and cocked their guns. Stoner watched silently, not needing to give orders to the well-drilled men.

He glanced out of the window, seeing agents moving about the roof of the White House, weapons in hand.

Whoever was coming, Stoner thought, was flying straight into the jaws of hell.

“Sir, we have a military convoy approaching, three vehicles!” his radio crackled.

“Repeat,” he snapped.

“Three military vehicles approaching gate, sir. A Humvee, a truck and an APC. Request orders.” The voice seemed to quaver through the static.

“Keep calm, who is this?”

“Swift, sir.”

“Keep cool, Swift, we have no clearance for military vehicles, but there could be a simple explanation. Halt the vehicles, seek identification. Understood?” he said calmly.

“Yes, sir,” came a broken up reply.

Stoner muted his mike, turning to the assembled agents, his soothing tone shattered by urgency.

“Notify control and break out the anti-tank weapons.”

* * *

Secret Service Agent Jason Swift stepped out into the road and raised his left hand, palm outward. With only his SIG automatic pistol hanging by his side in his right hand, he felt pitifully exposed. He glanced back at the three agents with him, hanging back against the heavy, metal gate. Two carried Colt Commando assault rifles, the third a MP5. One of them smiled wanly at Swift, who tried, but failed to return the gesture.

The military vehicles, the Humvee on point, slowed and halted before the lonely agent. The front passenger door popped open and an army Captain stepped out, dressed in full battle fatigues, his cap sporting the Airborne and Ranger patches, his sidearm hanging in its holster on his hip.

Swift took in the man's pale, narrow face, high cheekbones, long, aquiline nose and thin, smiling lips. A shiver ran down his back.

"State your business!" he croaked.

"Captain Paulus, Rangers, we've been sent here via Fort Webb, we have received word of an imminent assault on the White House, we are an advanced party, we're to reinforce you until further help arrives."

"I don't know anything about this, you will have to stand fast until I check you're story. You have orders?"

"Sure," Paulus moved in close until Swift's body was between him and the gate. With his left hand he proffered the papers and as the agent reached for them he drew his M23 automatic from its holster and fired once straight into his belly. The agent fell forward into his arms, Paulus catching him, backing off, using the body as a shield.

The three stunned agents raised their weapons, trying to get a clear shot.

Corporal Wiltse popped up out of the top hatch of the Humvee. Gripping the two handles of the M2HB heavy machine gun. He jerked it around and opened up on the agents. The heavy .50 cal. bullets sliced through the men and carved into the walls and gate. Blood and body matter splattering the gateway, the eviscerated, disarticulated remains strewn across the sidewalk.

Paulus put two quick rounds into the body locked in his arms. He let it fall and dived for cover beside the Humvee.

They came under gunfire from the White House rooftop. Wiltse spun around, elevating the machine gun and opening up, a torrent of spent cartridges spiralling away through the air. The rounds ripped into the parapet, sending the agents diving for cover.

Soldiers jumped out of the truck, spreading out, sealing off the street with M60 machine gun emplacements and grenadiers. Troops opened up on the roof with their SAWs and M4s and someone tossed Paulus his Colt Commando as he climbed to his feet.

He waved to the APC and it manoeuvred round the parked vehicles, drawing up to the gate.

“Take out that fucking gate!” Paulus shouted at the vehicle’s commander, pouring down a suppressing fire from behind his M60. He nodded and dropped down inside the vehicle.

The turret rotated and halted, its 20mm cannon trained on the gate.

“Fire in the hole!” Paulus shouted and he and his men ducked for cover.

The cannon spat, its HE round slamming into the gate with a ferocious roar. Shattered metal and stonework showered down, but as the smoke cleared, the twisted and battered gates were still up. The APC fired again, the gates left hanging from their hinges. The vehicle's engine roared to life and it fired once more, the blast ripping the gate from its moorings, sending the shattered wreckage crashing back inside the compound. The vehicle leapt forward, speeding through the open gate way, its two 7.62mm machine guns spitting fiery death, its cannon blasting out again and again.

The commander swung back and forth behind his M60, slicing down the scattering agents and guards. The 20mm canon blasted vehicles and fortified guard-posts, shredding everything. Rolling over all opposition, it sped forward, firing, towards the White House.

Agent Charlie Stoner, smoke blackened and bloody, crawled over his dead fellow agents and snatched up the M2 84mm recoilless anti-tank rifle. He hefted the bloody weapon atop his shoulder and aimed at the passing APC, locking onto its rear and firing. The HEAT

round ripped through the thinly armoured rear of the vehicle, detonating inside. The blast lifted the ten-ton vehicle clear of the ground, dropping it back down a shattered burning hulk.

Stoner was blown backwards by the blast, but as he climbed back to his feet, dazed, he saw the burning wreck, the blackened corpse of the commander hanging from the turret.

Joining back up with the surviving agents, Stoner cocked the Colt Commando he was handed and hunkered down and waited.

Figures moved about in the smoke, approaching. The defenders fired blindly, desperately trying to pin down the attackers.

“Control, we need urgent reinforcements!” Stoner shouted into his radio, but received no reply.

Outside, Paulus jumped into the Humvee.

“Move!” he shouted.

The vehicle sped through the gate, machine gun blazing.

* * *

Minutes earlier, the police officers and Secret Service agents guarding the road running along the foot of the White House garden saw a second military convoy approaching. Radioing for orders, all they received was a blast of static.

The senior agent, hand on his weapon stepped forward to flag down the approaching vehicles.

On point was a Humvee, trailed by two trucks and a second similarly armed Humvee.

The agent raised his hand and the vehicles appeared to slow for a second, but then suddenly they accelerated, leaping forward. Frozen in place, the agent raised his pistol, but was mown down by the speeding Humvee, swept beneath its wheels. The passenger of the vehicle leant out of the vehicle and opened up with his assault rifle, while the gunner popped

up behind the Mk19 automatic grenade launcher mounted on the top. Both opened up, cutting down the law enforcement officers before they could fire more than a handful of shots. The MK19 blasted out grenades at 375rpm, six a second, obliterating parked vehicles, shredding men and ripping up the asphalt. The Humvee crashed through the barriers, the trucks following; M60s mounted atop them extinguishing any resistance.

The vehicles screeched to a halt, troops spilling from the trucks, spreading out, mopping up any opposition and securing the site, setting up gun emplacements. Meanwhile, the Humvees positioned themselves, facing the White House, and opened up with the Mk19s, pounding the building, blasting great lumps from the white porticoes, blowing in windows and walls. There was return fire from the rooftop and from the tree lines, snipers picking off some of the soldiers, but fierce suppressing fire kept them pinned down.

The trucks were manoeuvred to block the approaches, the rears facing the White House. Heavy Browning .50 calibre machine guns mounted in their tail gates opened up, raking the trees and the front of the building.

Two sappers affixed charges to the iron railings, backed off and detonated them, blasting a wide entrance to the estate.

With the Humvees and trucks providing covering fire, camouflaged troops poured into the White House grounds, firing as they moved, mowing down every target.

A Huey gunship roared overhead.

“Do it!” Cobb cried, squeezing the trigger on his joystick. The machine gun pods on either side of the chopper opened up, the rounds ripping into the building's walls.

“Hellfires away!” Mayhew shouted, the twin air-to-surface missiles streaking away.

At the same instant, the two mortar teams dug into the White House rear garden opened up, their M224s quickly dropping four HE shells directly onto the rooftop Stinger SAM batteries.

As the mortar rounds detonated, the two Hellfires slammed into the roof, their 8kg warheads detonating, shearing off the roof and engulfing the top two floors in fire and shrapnel.

“Stinger, incoming!” Mayhew shouted.

Cobb grunted, wrestling with the controls, desperately trying to throw the missile as he bore down on them.

The engine howled in protest, the shriek filling the cabin. Cobb yanked the stick sideways.

Mayhew laid a hand on the pilot’s shoulder. He looked up and saw the missile’s ugly nose fill the cockpit. They both always knew this was how it would end.

“Fuck!” muttered Cobb.

The Huey erupted in a fireball, burning fuel and shredded metal showering the ground. The burning wreck seemed to hover in the air for a second, then just dropped, slamming into the trees, the secondary explosion setting the woodland ablaze.

Moving through the smoke, the assault force met opposition from heavily armed Secret Service agents. Firefights erupted among the trees, the battles brutally short, the defenders taken out before they could inflict much damage.

Relentlessly they advanced.

As flame engulfed the roof of the White House, Ranger Lieutenant Moorer and his men manning the mortars fired over the roof, their smoke shells exploding, laying down a thick shroud of cover.

Coming under fire, Moorer and Sergeant Tucker abandoned their mortar, returning fire with their automatic weapons. The non-com raked the building with his SAW, blasting shooters from the windows. Agents swarmed across the patio. Moving forward, Moorer squeezed off bursts from his M4 and pumped explosive rounds from the M203 grenade launcher, the blasts tossing the defenders into the air.

A sudden blast from above slammed into the second mortar position manned by Rangers Grant and Jarvis. Tucker pivoted, spotted the shooter with a M203 fitted to his rifle. He squeezed off a long burst from his SAW, the 5.56mm rounds ripping into the man's position on a balcony, shattered stonework mixing with his blood as he was torn apart.

Moorer glanced back. A smoking crater stood where the mortar had been. Little remained of Jarvis, and Grant, blown clear, lay sprawling, staring down, glassy-eyed at the bloody stump below his left knee, trying to fathom where his foot had gone.

The Lieutenant started heading back to the wounded man, but gunfire pinned him down.

Grant's eyes seemed to clear. He snatched up the M4 lying nearby, and yanked back the charging handle.

"No!" he screamed to the officer, waving his arm, "Go, I'll cover you!" He opened up, hosing down the rear of the building.

Moorer turned and moved up, slapping Tucker on the shoulder as he passed. The two men advanced, gunning down agents dug in on the patio as they moved. Constantly moving, they cut down anyone who reared into view. They swept inside the burning house.

Lying back on the lawn, Grant emptied his 30 round magazine, flipped it over and inserted the fresh one taped end to end with it. Rolling over to get a better aim, he caught a glint of sunlight off gunmetal from an upper balcony. He yanked round his rifle, but a blast of automatic fire ripped up the ground around him, cutting him in two.

* * *

On the other side of the building, Secret Service Agent Dave Stahl waved frantically to the guard in his bulletproof booth.

"Open the gate!"

The man nodded, hitting the button, the west gate sliding back. Stahl had decided, cut off from control that he had to mount an evacuation. With the east gate cut off, it was up to him. He was determined to get as many personnel out and keep an exit open for the presidential party.

The gate slammed back and Stahl moved forward, Mini-Uzi in one hand, waving the gathered vehicles forward. They began moving and Stahl and two other agents moved into the open gateway to check the street. All armed with automatic weapons, the men craned their necks and moved out. The street was empty.

The two other men took up position and Stahl ducked back inside, waving the first car up.

Suddenly there was a shout and a screech of tyres from the street. Stahl halted the car and turned as he heard the rattle of automatic fire from outside.

Rushing into the gateway, he saw a heavy truck bearing down on them, the two agents emptying their weapons into it. He saw the driver duck down as the windshield exploded, but the truck roared onward. Stahl opened up with his Uzi, the three men pouring fire into the speeding vehicle, rounds shredding the radiator grill and front tyres.

“Jesus!” Stahl realised nothing would stop the speeding juggernaut. He shouted warnings to his men and they backed away firing from the hip. As the truck bore down on top of them, Stahl dived for cover.

The six-ton truck slammed into the gateway, the collision sending one gatepost crashing to the ground, the vehicle buckling and collapsing on its broken front axle.

A moment of quiet stillness fell, and Stahl sat up, looking back at the wreckage lodged in the gateway.

The truck, packed with C4 plastic explosive and canisters of white phosphorous, exploded, triggered by remote, the fireball engulfing the waiting vehicles, setting off a string

of secondary explosions. Flames lapped at the grass and the asphalt melted as the kill-zone expanded to a 50 metre radius.

A black pall hung above the gate, the exit blocked by the burning wreck.

* * *

The pounding of choppers' rotors filled the air as two Apache gunships swept over the White House grounds. The two attack helicopters zoomed in on the front of the burning building, each launching two Hellfire missiles, the four AAMs streaking down and slamming into the already shattered upper stories. Hovering low, both choppers opened up with their 30mm M230 Chain Guns, the explosive rounds slamming into the front of the building, shredding its facade, then raking the balconies and patios, slicing apart the exposed defenders.

Ceasing fire, they climbed and took up station overhead, providing cover. The ground-based force advanced through the carnage on the ground, breaking into the building.

Three Black Hawks came in low, their 12.7mm and 7.62mm miniguns slicing into the building as they approached.

Inside the lead chopper, the SF Pave Hawk variant of the Black Hawk, Ullrich leant across and tapped Steiner on the knee, the Sergeant looking up from behind his camouflaged ski mask.

"You know, Paul, when it comes down to it, all those noble reasons why I'm doing this is just bullshit rationalising. I do this because I love it!" he shouted above the roar of the engines, grinning, waving his hand towards the open door, the gunner pouring in fire from his M60.

"Why?" asked Steiner blankly.

"Because," the Colonel grinned and climbed to his feet, swinging into the doorway.

The choppers descended their miniguns and door guns laying down suppressing fire.

Steiner looked at the soldiers gathered around him, all dressed in BDU, body-armor, grenades hanging from their webbing, armed with automatic weapons. Camouflaged paint or lightweight ski masks covered each face. Hooker, his face smeared with paint, a bush hat on his head, SAW in his hands, SPAS 12 shotgun across his back, stared back at Steiner, a fire burning behind his flat eyes.

“Liberty or death!” Ullrich shouted from the doorway, tugging down his ski mask and jumping from the door.

Hitting the ground, the Colonel rolled once, coming up on one knee, Colt Commando raised to his shoulder. Spotting movement in the treeline, he squeezed off two short bursts, putting down two heavily armed agents. Behind him, soldiers poured from the chopper, fanning out, setting up a perimeter.

Alongside, the two other Black Hawks landed their load of 14 troops each, and as the choppers lifted off, the three teams, one under Ullrich, the other Larsen, the third under Meadows, the SF Major, moved out.

The LZ was only yards short of the house, and the teams swept up the shattered steps at the front of the building, easily mopping up the few surviving defenders.

Reaching the main entrance, they met up with the ground force. Bypassing the main doors, two grenadiers fired tear gas canisters through the ground-floor windows. A four-man team, armed with silenced MP5s and wearing respirators, entered through the shattered windows.

Inside, a Secret Service SWAT team had set up an ambush, establishing a killing-zone in the main foyer. With heavily armed agents on each side, tucked into cover, they watched the double doors, rigged with C-4 plastic explosives, and waited.

Outside they heard movement, the agent with the M57 electrical firing trigger flicked off the safety, and the black-dressed men unsafed their weapons.

The assault team, led by Larsen, came out of the swirling gas, each pair moving together. They entered the foyer, weapons bristling, duck-walking back-to-back. They opened up, squeezing off three round bursts. The stutter of silenced gunfire was eerily accompanied by shrieks as the SWAT team were taken apart. The firefight was short and savage. The attackers moved through the bodies, putting a round into each. Larsen stripped the booby trap trigger from a dead man's hand.

With the explosives neutralised, they door was yanked open and the attackers spilled in.

* * *

At the rear of the house, Moorer and Tucker swept through, room by room, quickly wasting any defenders, moving swiftly over the dead and the shattered ruin around them, heading deep into the west wing.

Moving silently down a thickly carpeted corridor, the men signalled silently to each other, sliding along the walls, checking each room.

Reaching the end, Moorer nodded and keeping his back to the wall, he reached around and tried the door handle.

A volley of automatic fire shredded the wood. Moorer leapt away as if scalded, but Tucker wheeled around and opened up with his SAW, pouring 5.56mm rounds through the closed door. Howling with rage, splinters cutting his face, he obliterated the door, the bullets punching through, ripping through the room's interior.

Tucker paused and the Lieutenant lunged into the room, putting a burst into a bloody agent as he dived for cover. Spinning around, he nailed another scrabbling along the floor. Debris floated in the air and Moorer paused, scanning around him.

Suddenly a man popped up from cover, squeezing off a burst from his Uzi, before Moorer cut him down. The 9mm rounds tore into the Lieutenant's neck and he crumpled to the floor, gasping as blood flooded his lungs.

Tucker rushed forward, dropping his weapon and crouching beside the mortally wounded Moorer, taking him in his arms. The young officer looked up at the broad black face looking down at him and tried to smile as the blood frothed around his lips. He coughed and choked out more blood, then he bucked once and lay still.

Tucker lay the Lieutenant gently upon the ground and stood, reaching for his weapon.

"Don't fucking move!" a voice rasped behind him and he felt the cold muzzle of a pistol pressing against his neck.

Agent Charlie Stoner, smoke blackened and bloody, his jacket gone, his white shirt torn, pushed his SIG P228 hard against the man's neck. Slowly the prisoner raised his hands.

"All right, down on your knees, hands behind your head!" Stoner ordered and the big man obliged. Keeping his weapon against the base of his skull, the agent snarled. "You got five seconds to tell me what's going on here, or I'll put a bullet in your thick skull!"

The man remained silent.

"Your choice," he dug the muzzle of his pistol into the man's skin.

"Fuck you!" he muttered.

"Hey!" a uniformed figure leapt through the doorway, firing a burst from his Commando assault rifle as he flew through the air, crashing into cover behind a tattered desk.

Stoner turned and fired blindly and Tucker took his chance, reaching around, grabbing the agent around the waist, and throwing him to the floor. Falling on top of Stoner, the soldier yanked his knife from its sheath, bringing it around in a slashing motion. The agent raised his arm, blocking the blow, seizing hold of the wrist, twisting it sharply around, the bones shattering with a sickening crunch. He kicked the howling soldier off him, both

men jumping to their feet. The wounded soldier lunged at him one handed; Stoner jabbed out his fist, hitting the man hard in the throat. He reeled back, gasping for breath, and Stoner slammed the heel of his palm into the soldier's nose, the bone and cartilage collapsing with a crunch.

From the corner of his eye, Stoner saw the other man rise from behind the desk, rifle raised to his shoulder. He lunged, seizing hold of the stunned black soldier, spinning him around between them. The other soldier fired, the short burst ripping into the back of his comrade. The soldier cried out and fell into Stoner's arms, his weight almost toppling him over.

"Shit!" the pale, thin-faced soldier groaned, but quickly resighted.

Stoner grabbed the gravely wounded man, backing off, using the body as a shield.

Paulus, smiling thinly, aimed and fired directly into the human shield, pouring burst after burst into him.

Stoner staggered as the body shuddered and bucked beneath the hits. The vest absorbed some of the shots, but quickly it was overwhelmed, the Sergeant's back ripped open, his life pouring out onto the carpet.

The agent grabbed the dead man's sidearm, yanking it out of its holster. Aiming around his shield, he opened up with the Beretta.

Paulus emptied his 30 round magazine, ducked down and reloaded. Straightening up, the agent's bullets slammed into the wall around him. He laughed and opened up.

The slap rounds sliced through Tucker's eviscerated corpse and slammed into Stoner's chest, tossing him back through the far doorway.

Paulus, keeping his weapon raised, edged forward, stepping through the scattered bodies and debris.

Stoner wriggled from beneath the heavy body of Tucker and dragged himself across the floor. His Kevlar vest had saved him, but the velocity of the rounds had probably broken

a couple of ribs. Dragging himself to his feet, the unarmed agent tucked himself inside the doorway.

Paulus edged into the room, weapon muzzle down, he craned his neck. Stoner grabbed the muzzle, yanking it down and back, tugging the soldier into the room. Paulus released the rifle, quickly drawing his pistol. The agent smashed it from his hand with a downward blow as a single shot was discharged, but the soldier grabbed his arm, jerking his attacker around, wrenching the arm up behind his back, dislocating his shoulder with a crunch. As he locked the agent in a neck hold, the man used his last ounce of strength and the soldier's forward momentum to toss him over his shoulder. Paulus crashed to the floor, but was quickly scrambling to his feet. Stoner kicked him hard in the face, knocking him back down, but the Ranger swung his foot around, sweeping the agent's feet from beneath him.

Stoner struggled back up, rising to see Paulus closing in. The soldier hit him hard in the face, snapping his head back and throwing him across the room. Dazed, he looked up and saw the Colt Commando lying close at hand. He lunged for the rifle, Paulus spotted him and he dived for his pistol lying against the wall.

The Captain rolled across the floor, grabbed the automatic and rose to one knee, aiming one handed.

Stoner squeezed off a burst from the automatic rifle, ripping into the wall beside Paulus as he lunged sideways. The Ranger fired twice, the first round absorbed by Stoner's vest, but the second tore into his good shoulder. The rifle spun away and he crashed back against the wall.

Paulus struggled to his feet and crossed the room, pistol hand extended. He stood over the gasping Secret Service Agent, immobilised by his two shattered shoulders. He gazed up, dark eyes defiant.

Paulus looked down, his thin lips twisting into a smile. He shook his head.

He fired once, the round punching through Stoner's forehead, slamming his head back, blood spraying the wall.

He stared down and slowly lowered his weapon.

A bloody Ranger rushed into the room, weapon ready.

"Captain, are you alright?" he gasped, looking around at the ruin.

"Where were you five minutes ago, Corporal?"

"Uh, I was..." the soldier muttered.

"Forget it." Paulus lifted his rifle and walked away.

* * *

The remaining Secret Service agents had fallen back, ringing the presidential offices, fighting a desperate rearguard action. Meadows, the SF Major established an outer perimeter, stopping anybody getting in or out, while Ullrich and Larsen's men battled their way through each room, driving into the inner sanctum.

Office by office, they fought, never allowing the dug-in agents to slow their advance, keeping up their momentum, steam rolling over the opposition. While one team laid down a barrage of covering fire, an assault team would toss in stun grenades, even frags, then blast in, mowing down everyone in sight. For each man the attackers lost, the defending agents lost ten, twenty, overwhelmed by the speed and superior firepower.

With bloody carnage in their wake, they finally reached the heart of the beast.

The Cabinet office, its occupants trapped inside, was ringed by more than thirty heavily armed agents, most carrying automatic weapons and wearing heavy body-armor. Backed up against the office's doors, tucked behind barricades, they waited, praying for reinforcements.

Ullrich and Larsen hunkered down together, talking in hushed tones, just out of earshot; Steiner knelt and waited with the other men. The two officers seemed to reach agreement and they separated. The Colonel talked in hushed tones.

“Lieutenant Larsen’s men will hit the other side of the office, we will strike here. Speed is of the essence. The authorities may be paralysed at the moment, but they will respond soon, it is imperative we secure the target immediately.”

Larsen’s men got into position, while Ullrich set up fire-support teams at the two doors leading to the barricade at the Cabinet room’s doors. With everyone in position, Ullrich raised his radio and clicked the intercom twice.

The assault teams tossed in smoke grenades, the thick, billowing smoke, filling the outer room. The fire-support teams opened up, pouring in automatic fire and explosives rounds from their M203s, the coughs of the defenders turning to anguished screams.

Ullrich slapped Hooker on the shoulder, and the big Sergeant, carrying a M249 SAW, jumped through the doorway, Steiner close behind him. Plunging through the smoke, both men opened up, laying down fire as they reached the barricade. Behind them, two more men came from the second door, running through the haze, flames leaping from the muzzles of their weapons.

Hooker and Steiner leapt onto the barricade, firing down into the huddled defenders below, raking them over as they writhed, sliced apart where they lay. The younger Sergeant paused and reloaded, but Hooker kept ripping into the bodies with his SAW, the 200 round box magazine quickly emptying, vomiting forth fiery death. The barrel glowed, red hot, as spent brass cases spewed into the air. Steiner looked across, a huge grin fixed on Hooker’s face, his eyes glazed. He grabbed the big Sergeant by the shoulder, jerking him around.

“They’re dead, you stupid fucker!” he bawled.

Still grinning maniacally, Hooker jabbed the hot muzzle of his machine gun in the other man’s belly and pulled the trigger.

There was a dull, metallic click, then another, Hooker's grinning face showing no response. Steiner knocked the barrel of the weapon away and rammed the butt of his rifle into Hooker's stomach, and as the other man doubled over, he brought it back up, cracking him under the chin, flipping him back over the barricade.

Steiner stepped over and levelled his rifle at the sprawling, bewildered Hooker. He smiled and pulled the trigger.

Ullrich kicked the barrel away, the round discharged into the floor.

"Stow this shit, right now, we haven't got time to fuck about. You both cool down, or I waste the pair of you right now!" the Colonel snapped, swinging his rifle from Hooker to Steiner.

"Yes, sir." the younger man muttered, backing off.

Hooker scrambled to his feet, glaring at the other man.

"Don't fuck with me, Hooker." Ullrich muttered, leaning his face in close to the Sergeant.

The hulking man lowered his head like a chastened child.

Ullrich turned, "Blow that fucking door!" he jabbed his finger toward the entrance to the Cabinet office.

Two sappers quickly rigged some C-4 and the men backed off.

"Alpha 2, give me a Sit-rep." Ullrich muttered into his radio.

"Area secured, prepared for forced entry." Larsen replied.

"Negative. Rig the door, but stand fast and secure the area." The Colonel ordered.

"Received."

Ullrich nodded to the chief sapper, who cried out, "Fire in the hole!" and pumped the detonator trigger.

There was a loud thump, and before the sound had died or the smoke cleared, Ullrich was on his feet and moving, Steiner at his shoulder.

Lunging through the splintered doorway, two dark-suited Secret Service agents reared into view. Both attackers opened up with their Commandos, cutting them down, their MP5s firing as they fell, bullets riddling the ceiling.

The two soldiers separated as they entered the room. Armed agents swarmed around the figures huddled about the table. Ullrich, standing tall, fired a long burst from the shoulder, felling two agents, turning and putting down another. Steiner, down on one knee fired off three short bursts, bullets thudding into the wall above his head, methodically mowing down three more armed men. More attackers spilled through the door, one was hit square in the forehead as he raced in, dropping, while another's left arm was ripped open by a burst from an Uzi.

Desperately shielding their charges, the agents fought desperately to the end. One by one they went down and it was quickly over.

Masked soldiers fanned out against the wall, weapons raised. The room became still; debris silently floated in the air, from outside came the thud of helicopter's rotors and the chatter of distant gunfire. Only two agents were left alive, both slightly wounded, but it appeared all the Cabinet members were alive. They were crumpled and dirty, their faces glazed or simply frozen in terror. Soldiers moved among them, searching them, stripping them of any weapons.

Ullrich handed his rifle to a nearby soldier and strolled up to the long table, tugging the ski mask from his head. He smiled warmly and pulled his SOCOM automatic pistol from his holster and levelled the weapon on the thickset, grey-haired man sitting at the head of the table.

“Good morning, Mr. President.”

Chapter 27

The police convoy streaked down Constitution Avenue, two cruisers at its head, followed by two vans and another three squad cars at the rear. In the lead car, Lieutenant Steve Marber jammed shells into his Mossberg 12-gauge pump-action shotgun. Jacking the slide and chambering a round, he laid the weapon aside and snatched up the radio handset.

“Attention all units, this is Marber, we’re nearing the target, stand by. On arrival the SWAT team will lead us in, all other units will provide cover. Remember it’s all down to us. The Feds are pinned down on Pennsylvania Avenue and the Secret Service are in disarray, most of their officers cut off. At present a military response is impossible, the command system for special operations response is paralysed following the blast at the Pentagon and various bases are unreachable. We have to hold and secure the situation until help arrives. It’s our ass hanging out here, lets show them we can handle it. We’re heading into a real shit-storm, but keep your heads and we’ll be okay.”

Marber hung up and reached for his shotgun.

“Holy shit!” his driver cried.

The police lieutenant ducked his head down and squinted out of the windshield.

A small, dark shape came swooping down out of the brilliant, azure sky, the sun washing over its black shell.

“Oh, fuck!” Marber grabbed the radio handset, punching the button, screaming, “All units, evasive action, evasive action, get off the road.”

The eight-car convoy swerved, but was pinned in on both sides by high metal railings.

The Apache gunship swept down, its two General Electric turboshafts screaming. Beneath its belly, the 30mm M230 Chain Gun pivoted and craned with a low electronic groan. Coming in low and fast, racing headlong towards the approaching vehicles, the pilot

steadied the chopper, while the gunner in the front seat carefully sighted on the lead car, his finger drawing in the joystick trigger.

The Chain Gun opened up, spewing out its explosive rounds. Asphalt erupted before the cannon fire ripped through the first car, then sliced down the length of the police cavalcade. The lead cruiser was shredded, disappearing in a shower of glass and metal, wreckage strewn across the road. The second and third vehicles erupted in fireballs, while the rest of the column was torn to shreds.

The Apache passed over the shattered convoy; they wheeled around and went in for a second pass. Swooping low through the smoke, the M230 Chain Gun rattled mercilessly, shattered asphalt, vehicles and men scattered by the pounding onslaught.

The chopper slowly banked around and hovered. The survivors staggered blindly from the wreckage. A burning figure leapt from a fiery wreck, writhing on the ground, flailing wildly. Eventually he grew still and the fire enveloped him. A single blackened, bloody police officer stumbled away from the carnage, waving with his remaining arm. The Chain Gun pivoted, tracking him. It opened up.

The explosive rounds ripped the man in half, bisecting him just above the waist, his torso flung over the railings into the park, the arm still waving, the legs crumpled to the ground.

The chopper raked the convoy, scything down the survivors, chewing up the wreckage, grinding everything down until fire enveloped all that remained.

The pilot cranked up the collective, dropped his nose and banked, peeling away. Picking up speed, the chopper vanished into the clear, sunlit sky.

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At the White House, gunfire still crackled, but with the LZ secure, the three Black Hawks settled down, the remaining Apache gunship still circling overhead.

Masked soldiers swept through the grounds, picking off survivors, checking the dead and finishing off the wounded. Strong-points had been set up at key points, manned by machine-gunners and grenadiers. A Humvee armed with a Mk19 grenade launcher or a M2 heavy machine gun reinforced each point. Vehicles barricaded the entrances. The assault force now dug in as the new defenders.

Inside the White House a few isolated pockets were holding out, trying valiantly, but vainly, to break through to their presidential charge.

Secret Service agents edged their way through the bullet-scarred ruins, room by room, but each time they got near to their target, they were cut down by Meadow's heavily armed perimeter.

Inside the Cabinet office, Ullrich strolled up and down in front of the long table, left arm behind his back, left fist in the small of his back, HK automatic hanging by his side in his right hand.

"Well, Mr. President, it seems your Executive Order issued on me has singularly failed." The Colonel smiled, while the Chief Executive remained frozen in his seat, opening and closing his mouth wordlessly, like an enormous beached fish.

"Surely you knew you could not avoid your reckoning. Judgement is always wrought, and I appreciate the irony that yours comes at the hand of your own soldiers. Like Caligula, struck down by the praetorians. How that must offend your much vaunted humanitarianism. I won't use the term 'liberal' because you are in no way a liberal. Just ask the poor retarded black boy you had executed in Arkansas, just to get elected to this vaunted office." He waved his hand to indicate their surroundings. "Ask the welfare dependants, our poor and huddled masses, cast into abject poverty and homelessness, so you can save money and look tough. Ask those in our crumbling public schools, in our ghettos, ask the sick unable to get medical

care. Ask the inmates of our over-crowded prisons, inside for non-payment of debts, or the cons in for life after their third strike, after stealing a pizza. This is your bold, humanitarian new America?

“They call you a ‘liberal’ because you close army bases, lay off service men. That’s not liberalism, just penny-pinching. They call you a ‘liberal’ for your stance on gun control,” he paused and smiled.

“Maybe you just have some feeble, moral disquietude about firearms, maybe that’s why you dodged the draft, but somehow you don’t flinch from sending others to their imminent death to further your political ambitions. Same reason you condemn Hollywood for its ‘violent’ output, but don’t mind hob-knobbing with movie stars. Like most hypocrites, you just jump on the bandwagon, having no beliefs or moral code of your own, just sanctimonious piety. Maybe you do want to strip the people of their weapons, to render them impotent and defenceless against corrupt government. What’s the Constitution and the Bill of Rights to a great man like you, you know better than them, you know what’s good for us” Ullrich sneered and wheeled around.

“Well our founding fathers gave us that right to strike down tyrants and incompetents like you. You can’t strip that and our other rights just because you think them impolitic!”

“They might say you are running the economy brilliantly, and I’m no expert, but if you constantly cut Welfare, Defence and Health expenditure, not forgetting to cut taxes for the better off, you’re going to save a shit-load of money. But at what cost? The rich flourish, the poor suffer, service becomes a dirty word, business and the bottom line is everything. That’s your beliefs Liberal? I don’t think so. Penny-pinching, morally sanctimonious hypocrisy, whatever it takes to keep you in power and the big-shots happy.

“You can ridicule us, steal from and forget the poor, but there will come a reckoning. And it is at hand!” Ullrich moved in close to the large man at the head of the table.

The President cleared his throat and croaked, “Have you finished with your sermon!” His thickly Arkansas accented words, dripped with sarcasm, but his damp, putty-like face and quivering hands betrayed him.

“Oh, good come back!” Ullrich straightened, turning to smile at his men, stationed around the room. He chuckled, then whirled round, slamming his pistol across the President’s right cheek, opening it up. His head snapped around and he crumpled in his seat.

“Who told you to speak, fuck-wit!” The Colonel barked.

A tall, barrel-chested man, his steely-grey hair cropped short, hawk-like face contorted with rage, bolted to his feet in rage. Ullrich didn’t turn, but muttered to the man, dressed in full-military uniform, bedecked with ribbons and bearing the ‘Airborne’ and ‘Ranger’ flashes.

“Sit down, General!” Ullrich said softly, his eyes never leaving the President’s face.

The four-star General remained standing, opening and closing his fists.

Steiner edged in, Commando assault rifle raised to his shoulder. He levelled the muzzle less than an inch from the officer’s shaved neck. The man didn’t flinch.

“Sit down, General Harker, this is your last warning. It is only out of my respect for you that you are still breathing. One word and Riesman here will redecorate this room with your brains!” Ullrich sighed with exasperation, slowly turning to face the General.

Harker’s eyes flicked sideways, fixing on the masked face of Steiner. The Sergeant nodded, tapping the General’s chair with the toe of his boot. The General eased himself into his seat, watching Steiner as he backed away.

“That’s better.” Ullrich resumed his pacing.

“One last thing, Mr. President, you would do well to remember who our friends are in the world. You might like playing world statesman and angle for a Nobel Prize and get yourself down in history as this great humanitarian by having tea with scum like Yasser Arafat, but don’t forget what a friend we have in Israel. You might have to deal with your

PLO friend, but do you have to be so chummy, while all the while leaning on the Israelis, even condemning them. A spineless, amoral creep like you is not even fit to speak the name Israel, let alone condemn them.” Ullrich paused, calming himself down. He smiled and said cheerfully, “Just stick to fucking interns, it’s all you do well, that and laying on the conviviality for the cameras.”

The President stared up from the handkerchief held to his face, trying to staunch the flow of blood from his cheek.

“Phone.” Ullrich snapped his fingers, becoming all business. Hooker handed him a cellular phone. The Colonel punched in the number and waited.

“DC police, this is Colonel John Ullrich. I am contacting you, as every one else seems to be busy right now, so convey my message to the appropriate authorities. Listen closely. I am in control of the White House and have as my prisoners, The President and his entire Cabinet. You will break off all attacks on this building immediately and withdraw. You have five minutes to comply. Failure to do so will result in the execution of a hostage, and one more every five minutes. In addition, I have units engaged in action against the FBI HQ and the State Department Building. These units will return to their vehicles forthwith. You will cease fire, halting all attacks on these units. You will grant them clear passage from their present sites to the White House, clearing all routes, allowing them unfettered access. Failure to comply will result in the execution of a hostage and one more every five minutes until there is complete compliance. You have five minutes. When I am assured of complete compliance, I will contact you with my substantive demands.” Ullrich hung up and handed the phone to Hooker.

“Radio.” The RTO handed the Colonel the radio handset. He keyed the mike.

“Charlie 2, Charlie 3 come in, this is Alpha 1.”

There was a burst of static, then one voice and then another, reported in, the crackle of gunfire in the background.

“Alpha 1 reporting, ‘Clubhouse’ secure. Return to vehicles, prepare to move out.”

Ullrich called into the handset.

“Uh, Roger, Alpha 1, we’re still taking heavy fire here, evac will be difficult.” A voice cried out above the gunfire.

“Charlie 3 here, this site is also hot!” came the second voice.

“Understood, mount fighting fall-back to your transport, prepare for transit. Situation is in hand, three minutes until complete cessation.” Ullrich ordered.

“Charlie 2 here, how can you be sure they will comply?”

“Oh, they will comply. Continue as ordered. Alpha 1 out!” he handed the handset back to the RTO.

Ullrich sat and smoked a cigarette in silence. Finally he stubbed out the cigarette and stood and indicated for the radio, then nodded to Hooker. The big Sergeant grabbed one of the wounded Secret Service men, dragging him across the room, tossing him down onto his knees. He unholstered his Colt .45 automatic and jammed it in the man’s ear.

“Come in Charlie 2 and 3. This is Alpha 1, give me a sit-rep,” he said, keying the radio mike.

“Charlie 2 reporting,” the FBI Building assault team reported in. “Incoming fire ceased, preparing to move out. We have taken heavy casualties.”

“Report.”

“Half the men dead, only nine remaining, serious casualties, aboard two vehicles. We met stiff resistance.”

“Understood, Charlie 3?” Ullrich answered.

“We have three vehicles loaded up, 25% losses, some badly wounded with us.”

“Hold in there, we’ll take care of you when you get here. Move out when ready, out!”

Ullrich paused then called, “All Bravo units, report.”

One by one the teams defending the perimeter and ground of the White House reported in. Incoming fire had ceased; the cops were pulling back.

Ullrich swapped the radio for the cellular phone, dialled and nodded at Hooker. The Sergeant looked disappointed, but grabbed the kneeling hostage, pulled him to his feet and tossed him back with the rest of the prisoners.

“This is Ullrich,” he snapped into the phone, “I’m glad you saw fit to comply with my initial instructions and avoided unnecessary loss of life.”

“We cannot be answerable for the actions of any Secret Service Agents in situ, we have lost radio contact, they are on their own!” the voice on the other end replied.

“I understand. We will deal with the internal threat, you just keep clear.”

The Colonel paused, smiling wryly to himself, then continued.

“Here are more demands, they are non-negotiable, you half thirty minutes to confirm acceptance. One, you will grant me and my men, along with the entire Cabinet as hostages, safe passage from the White House to Andrews Airforce Base. The base will be sealed off, all military personnel withdrawn. Two Lockheed C-5B Galaxy transport planes will be fuelled and prepped for immediate take-off. Men under my command will arrive by chopper, secure the base and check the aircraft. I will provide engineers and flight crews; no personnel are needed or permitted on site. I will control access to the base. No tracking devices will be planted on the aircraft, if any are found, I will remove them and kill two hostages for each device. Two, I want five hundred million dollars, one hundred million in gold bullion within an hour of my arrival at Andrews. The remaining balance will be transferred to offshore accounts, the numbers to be provided. Three, you will grant us clear passage, via the two transport aircraft, from Andrews to a destination of my choice. You will not attempt to track us or in any way interfere with us en route. The first Galaxy will take off within ninety minutes of my arrival at Andrews. The plane will carry roughly half my force, and myself and the President and Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff as hostages. The remaining

prisoners will remain at the base with the rest of my men. On arrival at my destination, I will contact my people at Andrews, confirm my safe arrival. They will then depart Andrews in the remaining plane, leaving their prisoners behind. When this plane is clear of US airspace, I will dispatch the President and General Harker, in a light aircraft, crewed by hired, uninvolved personnel. By the time the second Galaxy reaches me, the President's plane should be within US airspace. When he arrives, don't bother interrogating the crew, they will no nothing of use, my men and I having departed from our location.

“This will conclude our business.

“If you do not agree to total compliance in thirty minutes, I will kill a hostage, then one more every five minutes until you comply. You are also advised, I have in my possession a nuclear device with an approximate 1.5 kiloton yield, a so-called ‘Suitcase Bomb’, purchased from sources within the former Soviet Union. If compliance is not forthcoming, and upon execution of all hostages, I will detonate this device, vaporising everything within a one mile radius, the secondary effects killing and destroying everything within five miles, and eradicating most of Washington DC and ensuring its citizens have pretty fucking unpleasant day, and thereafter a short and all too agonising life.”

There was an audible gasp from the other end of the phone.

“If you try to rescue the hostages, or in any way interfere with or harm my men, or the successful completion of this mission, I will kill all the hostages and detonate the bomb. Said bomb will be aboard one of the aircraft; you will not know which. Any interference or obstruction, the bomb will be triggered. Do you understand?”

“Yes, but I don't have the authority...” the flustered voice replied.

“Find someone who does. You have thirty minutes before people start dying. I want Andrews sealed off within the hour, I want my two strike teams from Pennsylvania Avenue and Foggy Bottom safely back here, and I want to be airborne and en route to Andrews

within the hour. Non compliance will result in the execution of hostages and a mushroom cloud over our fair capital. You have thirty minutes.”

“But the money, it will take time to...”

“You have the thirty minutes to comply and proceed on the set timetable. Any delay during the operation will result in the severest penalties. Contact me on the White House line within thirty minutes. If I receive no call, I will contact you; any equivocation and hostages start dying. Understand?”

“I understand.” The voice at the other end sighed.

“Thirty minutes!” Ullrich hung up and handed the phone to Hooker.

“Are you fucking insane!” General Harker cried, gripping the arms of his chair. The rest of the Cabinet stared at him in horror.

Ullrich smiled, “Maybe I am, General. Either way, your lives are on the line, you better hope they value you and your colleagues.”

“You haven’t given them enough time!” Harker barked.

“Both you and I know they have more than adequate time, and as for the money, the slush funds for covert ops will more than cover it.” Ullrich beamed, rocking on his heels.

“You and I know all that they are capable of: response times, emergency plans, available funds. They trained us well.”

“You won’t get away with it.” Harker sneered.

“We already have, if nothing else, we have sent a message to those who are running this country. No one is untouchable.” Ullrich turned to the cowering figure, hunched in his seat; blood soaked handkerchief held to his cheek. “What do you think, Mr. President?”

The President stared back, eyes wide in abject terror.

Ullrich laughed and resumed pacing up and down the length of the table.

“We’ve got some time to kill, so how about a little stocktaking.” he swaggered, pistol hanging in his right hand. He paused behind CIA Director, Allen Maxwell. The small, wiry man shifted uneasily in his chair, sweat gathering on his pallid forehead.

“Looks like you let your President down, Director, you and your buddy from the Bureau pushed for the Executive Order, then failed to come through, you fucked up didn’t you?” Ullrich glanced up at the FBI Director, sitting across from Maxwell.

“If you’re going to play the game, at least play it well, one thing I can’t stand is fuck-ups, especially the mealy-mouthed variety!”

Ullrich raised his gun hand, jammed the muzzle in the back of Maxwell’s neck and fired. The flat sound of the discharge reverberated within the small room, slapping all the hostages hard. Maxwell fell forward, his head slamming onto the tabletop, blood pooling across his scattered papers. Ullrich raised his pistol, arm straightened, levelling it on the FBI Director’s face.

“No!” the man cried, throwing up his arms in horror.

Ullrich fired twice, both rounds slamming into the man’s head, throwing him backwards, chair and man tumbling over, blood and brain matter showering the white wall behind him.

The Colonel lowered his weapon. The RTO broke in, “Colonel, Charlie 2 and 3 reported in, they are en route, no problems, everything clear, ETA ten minutes.”

“Good.” He replied, resuming his pacing.

“Jesus Christ, Ullrich, you’re getting what you want, why did you kill those men?” Harker cried.

“Those weren’t hostages, they were dead weight.” Ullrich replied. And moved on up the table to its head. His cold blue eyes fixed on the President of the United States of America

“Has the package been located, Sergeant Hooker?” Ullrich called without looking away from the President.

“Yes, sir. Captain Paulus is bringing it down.

“Good.” The Colonel rocked on his heels, smiling.

The double-doors burst open and Paulus stumbled in, dragging with him small, slightly pudgy blond woman. Screaming and kicking, the bare-foot, tattered woman struggled, writhing in the Ranger Captain’s grasp. Raw claw marks burned on his left cheek.

“Ah, the First Lady, oh I forgot, you declined that title, not really appropriate in your case on several grounds. Give you much trouble, Captain?”

“Fuck no!” he grinned crookedly, jerking the struggling woman round.

“You, you fucking cunt!” she screamed, glaring at Ullrich, spittle covering her lips.

“Such unladylike language!” he laughed, nodding to Hooker.

The big Sergeant grabbed the woman, tearing her from Paulus’s grasp.

“Take care there, Sergeant, she’s got claws and she bites!” the Captain laughed.

“Don’t worry, Hooker knows how to treat such a lady.” said Ullrich.

Hooker threw the struggling woman down on her knees, but as she started to bolt up, he swung his heavy automatic around, slamming her across the side of the head. She sagged back down onto her knees. The Sergeant grabbed a handful of her hair in his left hand and jerked her head up, jamming the muzzle of his pistol in her ear. Blood streamed down through her hair, covering her face.

“This is the source of much of your problems, this thing!” Ullrich looked at the President, pointing back to his whimpering wife. “When you’re not buckling to the latest trend, your listening to her latest half-baked ideas, such as they are. Gun control, Israel, you name it, she’s got some dogmatic PC opinion. She fucking makes my skin crawl!” he sneered. He looked back at her, lips twisted in disgust; “She’s the cancer that’s eating up this country!” He looked back at the President, “And you listen to this shit!”

Turning to Hooker, he nodded once.

The Sergeant drew her head up, the woman crying out as her neck twisted. A broad smile crossed Hooker's lips, peeling back over his teeth, eyes afire. Digging the muzzle of his pistol into the side of her head, he squeezed the trigger. The big .45 roared, ripping open the woman's head, her skull exploding like over-ripe fruit. Hooker released her hair and the force of the blast threw her sideways, her deflated head hitting the floor with a squelch. The blood-splattered Hooker shuddered with pleasure. The grin twisted spastically on his glazed face.

The President vomited into his lap noisily, his flabby body shuddering as he wretched. Ullrich looked at the man with naked disgust.

"And Sergeant Hooker is a fellow Arkansan, to think two such different men could come from the same state!" The Colonel shook his head. "I'd like to think with this cancer removed, there might be hope for you, but my faith in humanity has so often been misplaced."

Ullrich raised his pistol and aimed.

The President shrieked, the sudden stench of voided bowels and bladder filling the air.

Ullrich's lips twisted, in disgust, or maybe into a smile. He fired twice, the two rounds thudding into the President's thick torso, driving the man deep into his seat. Pistol levelled, Ullrich stepped in close, rotating the chair and toppling the body to the floor. He fired twice more into the President's head as he lay on the floor, blood splattering his boots.

The room was silent. Soldiers grabbed the bodies of the former first couple by the heels and dragged them from the room, leaving behind them smeared blood trails.

With his hand on the back of the now empty chair at the head of the table, Ullrich looked up at the dark-haired Vice President and smiled warmly.

"Please, take your place, Mr. President."

Chapter 28

The phone in the Cabinet Office rang, the hostages flinching violently, the armed guards remaining impassive. Ullrich, slouched in a chair, his legs crossed, put out his cigarette and looked at his watch. He climbed to his feet and walked to the phone and lifted the receiver.

“Ullrich,” he said.

“This is the Deputy National Security Advisor speaking.” The voice at the other end replied.

“Well you and your boss here certainly took your eye off the ball didn’t you!” Ullrich snorted.

“I have with me the Democrat and Republican leaders in the house, the Mayor, the Police Chief and the Deputy Directors of the FBI and CIA.” The voice continued, ignoring the Colonel’s response.

“Your time is almost up, what is your response?” Ullrich snapped.

“We are willing to deal, but we need more time...”

“Unacceptable!” snapped the Colonel, nodding to Hooker and pointing at the older of the two injured Secret Service Agents. The big Sergeant lunged across the room, grabbed the man, dragging him to the centre of the office, hurling him down onto his knees. He stabbed the muzzle of his Colt .45 into the man’s head.

“What’s your name?” Ullrich barked, holding up the receiver.

“Agent Tim Spicer,” the pale faced man croaked.

“Louder!” he snapped.

“Secret Service Agent Tim Spicer,” he cried in desperation.

“You hear that?” Ullrich said into the phone, then held the receiver out again, nodding to Hooker.

The Sergeant fired once, the gun blast causing the hostages to jump and cry out. The agent toppled sideways, blood spurting from his head.

“Now perhaps you will take me seriously!” Ullrich growled darkly, “No more stalling.”

“All right, goddamnit!” the voice groaned.

“My men will arrive at Andrews within the next half an hour, make sure your people are clear. We will begin shuttling the hostages and my troops in thirty minutes. I will tolerate no interference. Understood?”

“All right, the money is being arranged, the gold will be at Andrews within the hour, the rest will be transferred to your accounts immediately.” The Deputy National Security Advisor paused. “Perhaps as a sign of goodwill, you could release some of the hostages now.”

“I’ve had enough of this fucking shit, evidently you do not worry about a single agents life, perhaps I could find someone you do care about!” Ullrich screamed.

“Ullrich, no!” the voice at the other end screamed shrilly.

The Colonel jabbed his finger towards the Secretary of Defence. Hooker stepped over the body at his feet, waded through the protesting hostages, tearing the frozen man from his seat, hauling him across the room, kicking his feet from beneath him and dropping him down onto his knees, putting his pistol to his head.

“Say goodbye to the Secretary of Defence!” he snapped into the phone, nodding to the Sergeant.

A look of indefatigable pleasure swept over Hooker’s face and he fired once, blood spraying back onto his grinning face. The dead man crumpled to the floor.

The phone chattered in Ullrich’s hand, he lifted the receiver to his ear.

“Shut the fuck up!” he barked, “Now proceed exactly as ordered, no more counter-demands or equivocations. Begin the transfer of the money into the following accounts.” He reeled off a list of numbered accounts set up under dummy names in various offshore banks.

“I will check receipt of the funds before proceeding. Oh, by the way, we had a little trouble here earlier resulting in four deaths.” Ullrich smiled.

“Who? You promised not to harm the hostages if we complied, our grace period!” the voice rose in pitch, cracking up.

“Unavoidable. Both Directors of the CIA and FBI are dead, and you need a new Vice President!”

“You killed the Vice President?” the voice gasped in horror.

Ullrich grinned over at the dark-haired man sitting impassive in the bloodstained chair at the head of the table. “Fuck no, he’s been promoted. Your former President and his much loved wife are no longer with us, I’m afraid.”

“Christ!” the voice at the other end shrieked, “But our agreement, the President was to be returned when you had safely reached your destination!”

“Get a grip, fuck-wit, I promised to return the President, I didn’t specify which President. The torch has been passed, yada, yada!”

“But, but...” the voice stuttered.

“You have a new President now. Understand? Now move on, unless you want more people to die. Proceed as ordered.” He slammed down the phone.

Turning, he nodded to a soldier entering the room.

“Charlie 2 and 3 are safely within the compound.” he reported.

“Good, make sure they receive medical treatment.” Ullrich dismissed the man.

The two bodies were dragged from the room, blood trails criss-crossing the carpets.

Slumping in a chair, Ullrich lit a cigarette and smiled at the new President of the United States of America, sitting stiffly at the head of the table.

“How does it feel, Mr. President?” he asked.

The tall, broad-shouldered man did not reply, just glared back.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t dreamed of this day, hoping one day something like this would happen, clearing the way for you? Well you better make a better job of it than your predecessor.” Ullrich paused, drawing on his cigarette. “You were a Navy pilot during Vietnam, weren’t you. I think you’ll do all right. I am worried about your wife though, that campaign she ran, getting parental warning stickers on records with ‘offensive language’ on them, smacks of censorship, don’t you think? I don’t mind warnings, as such, just the moral indignation and self-righteousness, could be the thin edge of the wedge, you know. Does she really think kids learn to swear from music, movies, TV, that their behaviour is shaped by the media. Do you think kids are that dumb? Anyway, walk down any street, you’ll hear more profanity in five minutes than you’ll hear from a lifetime of rock music, TV and movies. Christ, nobody even says ‘Fuck’ on TV.” he smiled pleasantly. “Just remember who’s President, and don’t fuck up, I don’t want to come a calling again.”

“You leave my wife out of this, Ullrich!” the President snapped angrily.

“Gladly, you keep her out of politics and meddling in people’s shit,” he stubbed out his cigarette. “Sorry for any offence, I believe you actually love your wife, unlike your priapic predecessor. Mind you, if I was married to that thing, I would have played around, that or my dick would have shrivelled up and dropped off.” he laughed.

“You won’t get away with this you know, you won’t live to enjoy that money!” the President snapped.

Ullrich shrugged, “Maybe not, but you don’t think I’m doing this for the money, do you? That is just compensation for me and my men, we know we will not be able to set foot on American soil again after this. The money is only to restart our lives afresh and to compensate the families of our dead. More than the Government ever did for us. The money is immaterial; we did this because we believe. Secession and rebellion are our constitutional right. We believe in those rights, the same rights you would strip from the American people.”

“Don’t try to dignify what you have done here today, you are a thief and a killer. You will be punished for your crimes,” the President said darkly.

“We took only what we are entitled to. And yes, we are killers. We feel no shame. Indeed ours was a talent you felt no disquiet about utilising before. You made us, and we have wrought vengeance on you. We did what we had to do. My men died with honour, those we killed were deserving, the rest are the casualties of war, collateral damage, like those killed by your less than ‘Smart Bombs’. You will happily send us to war, now you see it for real, in all its horrible beauty. It looks different from ten thousand feet, don’t it? Dropping your bombs, so clean and simple. It looks even better from ten thousand miles away, when you send us poor bastards to our death. And all for what, to prop up some corrupt little dictatorship, to save a nickel on a gallon of gas, or just to look good on TV? Anything to distract the public from any embarrassing problems at home. Like the Romans, it seems all Americans want is ‘Bread and Circuses’, as they sit in front of their televisions watching ‘Surgical Strikes’ on CNN while gobbling their TV dinners.”

Ullrich leant forward, jabbing his finger downward, “This is real, this is war. Reality is never clean and simple; it’s ugly, brutal and cruel. It’s about time everyone woke up. We know this. Do you think we are afraid of dying? You can threaten us, we’ve lived with death our entire adult lives, he’s proved a better friend to us than you and all the governments of this country, truer than the ungrateful people of this country. We don’t fight and die for you and them, we do it for each other. We have nothing else. We are this country, not you, we represent what’s best about it, and we will defend it from your corruption.”

The President’s lips curled in distaste, opening his mouth to speak.

Ullrich cut him off.

“You, sir, have not earned the right to judge me.”

* * *

Twenty minutes later, as the last of the military personnel evacuated the base, a camouflaged-painted Sikorsky Super Stallion helicopter settled down at Andrews. As the door-gunners swept the ground, more than fifty heavily armed troops jumped from the chopper, scattering, securing the LZ. Major Nick Jacobs strode from the helicopter, ducking to avoid the downdraft of the pounding rotors, Commando assault rifle slung across his shoulders.

As the Super Stallion's rotors wound down, the Major consulted with his junior officers and ordered the men to proceed. Moving out in teams, the force, largely composed of Rangers, swept through the outlying buildings and grounds. While engineers checked the two waiting Galaxy transport aircraft and their aircrew settled into the cockpits, the assault force secured the base, setting up in the guard-posts at the main gates, sentries walking the perimeter. The bulk of the troops dug in around the main runway and the buildings and hangers surrounding the waiting transport planes.

The base security cameras were disabled and soldiers armed with electronic sweeping equipment went to work checking the two planes and the surrounding area.

With the base swept and secured, Jacobs called for a radio and immediately contacted Ullrich.

“Alpha 1, this is Delta 1, site secured. Awaiting arrival.”

“Received, Delta 1, Team A will be airborne and inbound in five minutes. Good work. Alpha 1 out.” Ullrich signed off.

Jacobs handed back the handset, as his intercom earpiece crackled.

“This is Delta perimeter, Gate 2, we have our first arrival.”

“Identify!” Jacobs ordered.

“Colonel Watson, sir.”

“Admittance granted,” the Major grunted, smiling to his RTO.

At the gate, the Sergeant on duty saluted the Special Forces Colonel, dressed in full dress uniform. Watson smartly returned the salute, shifting his sedan into gear and sweeping into the base.

* * *

At the White House, the first hostages were hustled out of the building, black hoods over their heads. Surrounded by armed guards, the group was rushed to the waiting helicopters. They were quickly bundled aboard two of the Black Hawks, their engines already turning over.

The chopper pilots cranked up the collective, and as the door gunners swept the ground with their 7.62mm M60s, the two helicopters cleared the ground, quickly picking up speed, keeping low as they sped away.

As they cleared the White House grounds, the two choppers gained altitude and met up with one of the Apache gunships, the heavily armed attack helicopter taking point in a delta formation.

On the ground, the remaining troops watched the choppers vanish into the azure sky, the pounding of their rotors fading into the distance.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, the three choppers settled down at Andrews. While the Apache was hastily refuelled, the passengers disembarked. Ullrich, the warm wind tousling his sweat-dampened grey hair, grinned and shook hands with the waiting Jacobs.

“How goes it, Major?” the Colonel asked.

“Smooth as, sir. We’ve got the site sealed off; the planes are clear and prepped for take off. Watson’s here, Morrow’s expected anytime.”

“Excellent. By the way,” Ullrich grabbed the nearest hostage, pulling off his hood, “Meet our new President!”

“Pleasure to meet you, sir!” the Ranger laughed as the President, blinking in the sudden sunshine, scowled angrily, rage mixing with confusion on his blandly handsome face.

“Of course you know General Harker!” Ullrich grinned like a schoolboy, indicating the nearby hooded figure wearing an army uniform, four stars on its epaulettes.

“General!” Jacobs laughed entering into the spirit of the occasion.

“They’ll be my guests on the first flight. Have the plane ready for take-off within the half hour.”

“Sir,” the Major replied, holding up his hand for a second, his other hand touching his radio earpiece. “Morrow has just arrived at Gate 1,”

“Good. Head out there, the gold should be there some time soon.”

Jacobs saluted and jumped into his Humvee.

A couple of minutes after reaching the gate two heavy military trucks arrived, both vehicles riding low on their axles.

Jacobs ordered the drivers out.

“Now walk back the way you came!” he barked and the two men took off at speed.

From the sandbagged guard-post two troops covered the vehicles with an M60 machine gun. Two other men took up post, one at the head and tail of the trucks, armed with SAWs. Other troops covered the vehicles, as two teams swept both trucks.

“Clear!” the Sergeants in charge reported, jumping clear.

Jacobs nodded, slinging his rifle. He clambered up into the tail of the first truck, and levered open one of the crates. Heavily packed inside was bar upon bar of gold bullion, gleaming in the dim light. He jumped down, then checked the second truck.

When finished, he walked back to the gate, grinning like a fool. “Let them through, Sergeant.”

An excited ripple swept through the guards as the trucks were driven into the base.

* * *

As the Apache gunship patrolled overhead, the gold was loaded aboard the two transport planes. Ullrich inspected the first plane, while a Black Hawk, its rotors folded was also loaded aboard, then a Humvee with a mounted .50 heavy machine gun.

The Super Stallion, its engines cranking up to a deafening roar, cleared the ground, dipping its nose and racing away.

“Team B, this is Alpha 1, Evac Chopper en route. On arrival, proceed with final phase clearance.” Ullrich contacted his remaining forces at the White House.

“Received, Alpha 1, clearance under way, out.”

* * *

The teams guarding the gates and all access points to the White House ground pulled back, having rigged their positions with booby-traps, claymores and C4 charges triggered by motion-detector detonators.

As the remaining Apache circled overhead, a tight perimeter was set up. The hostages were escorted from the building, hooded and hurried along by armed guards. The first group was herded aboard the Black Hawk. When the Super Stallion transport helicopter landed, the rest of the hostages were driven on board, soldiers spilling on after them.

Falling back in a phased withdrawal, team by team, the soldiers marched onto the chopper. As the engine cranked up, the last team backed aboard weapons raised.

The Black Hawk and Super Stallion took off, the fierce downdraft tearing at the surrounding foliage and the clothes of the dead bodies scattered nearby. Their engines shrieking as they peeled away, skimming low across the ground, slowly rising to meet the Apache gunship.

Leaning from the open door of the Black Hawk, Michael Larsen watched the blackened, bullet-scarred White House slowly shrinking into the distance, the surrounding forces swarming like ants. An explosion ripped apart the men as they clambered over the booby-trapped barricades. Larsen watched through his binoculars smiling.

“Slowly, slowly catchee monkey!”

The choppers swooped above the burning city, the air shimmering as they climbed steeply into the sun.

* * *

Within minutes of the three choppers landing at Andrews, the Apache was refuelled and airborne, patrolling the sky above with its partner. One of the Black Hawks was loaded aboard the second Galaxy, along with a Humvee. Meanwhile troops filed onto the first Galaxy, the aircrew making the last minute pre-flight checks.

Ullrich, with Hooker by his side, watched the President and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, both still hooded, being bundled onto the plane.

“Morrow and Watson along with Major Meadows and his men will be coming with me on the first plane,” Ullrich said, “Sergeant Riesman, you remain with Captain Larsen, who is in charge here, I think he’d value your support. When I contact you, clear out of here post haste, rig the entrances and secure the hostages, understood?” the group of men gathered before him nodded.

Ullrich turned to the two senior Ranger officers, Major Jacobs and Captain Paulus.

“I’m relying on you men to secure this site. These assholes could try to pull anything; they’re stupid enough. Keep this place wrapped up tight!” the Colonel smiled, slapping Paulus on the shoulder.

“You’ve all done magnificently, we’re almost home free, just keep your asses covered!”

Ullrich smiled, looking around him as the transport aircraft’s four GE turbofans roared behind him. He raised his head and seemed to sniff the air, his eyes gazing into the distance. He sighed, and smiled.

“Well, gentlemen, the next time I see you we will be in sunny South America!” Ullrich snapped his heels together, drawing up straight, and saluted.

The gathered officers and NCO snapped to attention and returned the salute.

The Colonel turned on his heel and marched up the tailgate of the Galaxy, Hooker at his heel. Ullrich turned looked at his men until the tailgate slammed shut swallowing him in the belly of the beast.

As the plane taxied to the runway and began to gather speed the remaining half of Ullrich’s army dug turned and watched from their dugouts. The Galaxy’s engines howled as it cleared the ground. It banked and climbed, exhaust trails streaking the sky. The soldiers sat and watched as the plane vanished into the distance.

* * *

Wandering amongst the buildings, Larsen and Steiner paused briefly to check on the hostages, huddled together in a hangar, surrounded by armed guards.

The flight crew from one of the Black Hawks wandered by; the pilot paused, a frown furrowing his brow. He turned and squinted at Steiner, a grin replacing his frown. He hurried across.

“Hey, Lieutenant, I thought it was you, how are you?” the man called cheerfully, approaching the two men.

Steiner froze, seeing the 101st Airborne Bald Eagle patch on his sleeve. The pilot halted in front of him, smiling expectantly.

Larsen frowned, glancing at the Sergeant.

“Hey, Lieutenant, don’t you remember me, I was with you in the Gulf, you sure saved our asses when we went down in Indian Country. Heard you got a medal!” the man grinned stupidly.

Steiner did indeed remember him as the pilot of the second Black Hawk flying with his patrol when they came under fire in the Gulf. Their chopper was downed; Steiner landed his aircraft, joined up with the downed crew and fought off an Iraqi attack.

The pilot looked down and saw the chevrons on Steiner’s sleeve.

“A Sergeant! Hell, you been demoted or something!” he laughed, a little confused.

“You must have got me confused with someone else, I was with the 101st, but I was a Sergeant.” Steiner said quickly, his eyes shifting from the pilot to Larsen and back again.

Still frowning, Larsen spoke, “Yeah, soldier, I think you got Sergeant Riesman confused with a whole different person.”

The pilot shook his head vigorously, his smile fading a little, perplexed, but still good humoured.

“Fuck no! Oh, excuse me, sir. I’d recognise Lieutenant Steiner anywhere, he saved my worthless ass!”

Steiner glanced quickly at Larsen. The Captain froze, seemingly bewildered. Confusion flashed across his face as his mind raced, realisation slowly dawning. His eyes shifted into sharp focus and he looked across at ‘Riesman’ standing beside him.

Steiner stared back, both men’s eyes locking for an instant.

“Shit!” he whispered, whirling around and sprinting for the door.

Shaken from his reverie, Larsen snatched at his holstered sidearm.

“Stop that man!” he shouted, drawing his pistol.

“What the fuck?” the pilot muttered, his mouth hanging agape.

The soldiers guarding the hostages stared dumbly at Larsen, weapons hanging in their hands.

“Shoot him, you assholes!” Larsen screamed, firing his SOCOM automatic.

Steiner weaved, bullets thudding into the wall in front of him. Nearing the door, a single .45 round slammed into his back. His body armour saved him, but the impact of the round drove in headfirst through the door, slamming it open on its hinges.

Shaken from their inertia by their officer’s firing, the guards opened up with their automatic rifles, shredding the doorway and the metal walls.

Steiner rolled, coming up on his feet, winded and gasping for breath. A soldier, his rifle slung, sauntering towards him froze.

“Hey, what the fuck?” he muttered, grinning foolishly.

Steiner swung his rifle round, slamming the butt into the man’s jaw, dropping him to his knees, bringing the weapon down again on the back of his head, knocking him flat.

Taking off, he sprinted towards the edge of the runway.

“Stay with the prisoners!” Larsen barked at the guards in the hanger. “You,” he jabbed his finger at the dumbfounded pilot come with me!” he strode to the door.

“Attention all units, this is Delta 2, we have a rat in the wire, repeat, we have a rat in the wire. Sergeant Riesman is an impostor, a plant. I want him. Seal off all exits, proceed sweeping the area. Shoot on sight.”

Soldiers across the base looked at each other incredulously, but quickly snapped into action, all unassigned personnel quickly marshalled by NCOs and officers and dispatched.

Racing along the edge of the runway, Steiner gripped his rifle across his chest, heading towards the long grass and scattered outbuildings near the tip of the airstrip. Behind him, he heard an approaching engine.

“Alpha 2, I have target in sight, confirm orders.” Jacobs shouted into his radio from the front passenger seat of the speeding Humvee.

“Alpha 2 here, waste the fucker, now!” Larsen barked.

“Understood.” the Major turned, slapping the rear gunner on the leg. “Do it!” he shouted.

The soldier, standing behind the .50 heavy machine gun, upper body sticking out of the top hatch, gripped the handles of the weapon and opened up. As the machine gun shuddered, flame leapt from the end of the muzzle, brass shell cases flying through the air; the vehicle closed on the running man.

The tarmac exploded around Steiner’s feet, the pounding gunfire ringing in his ears. Diving sideways, he crashed into the grass, rolling across the sun-baked earth. Scrabbling on his knees, he rose to a half crouch and ducked and weaved, lunging between two wooden huts.

The Humvee screeched to a halt, the machine gunner pivoting around, squeezing off a long burst, ripping into the buildings.

Hugging the wall, gasping for breath, Steiner hit the dirt, as the buildings disintegrated around him, a storm of splintered wood swallowing, debris lacerating his face. The gunfire drowned out his screams. Flat on his belly he crawled away from the ruined huts as they began to burn, ignited by tracer rounds.

As the flames caught hold, smoke billowed, filling the air. The gunner ceased fire, slowly sweeping back and forth with his mounted weapon.

“You get him?” Jacobs shouted up.

“Reckon so,” he replied.

The officer popped open the side-door and slipped out, yanking back the charging handle on his Colt Commando, switching to semi-automatic. He edged away from the vehicle, rifle raised to his shoulder, peering through the smoke.

Steiner rolled from behind the burning huts, downwind, the smoke blowing away from him. Lying prone he raised his rifle and fired. Jacobs' left shoulder was exploded and he went down. Gunfire tore across the top of the Humvee, slamming into the machine gunner. He screamed and flopped back inside the vehicle. The driver grabbed his rifle and slipped across the seats to the open passenger door. A single round hit him in the throat, throwing him back inside the cab, where he lay, drowning in his own blood.

Steiner rose to his feet and slowly edged towards Jacobs. The Ranger officer crawled across the ground, vainly reaching for his rifle with his good arm, fingers just out of reach. Steiner kicked the weapon away.

Lying twisted in his own pooling blood, Jacobs coughed and stared up defiantly. "You fucking traitor!"

"Depends on your perspective." Steiner smiled, his face covered with small cuts, blood and dirt smearing the skin.

He fired twice. Jacobs jolted and then lay still in his own pooling blood.

Steiner slipped into the grass, running fast, bent low, putting some distance between him and the hunters. Dropping to his knees, he pulled on his camouflaged ski mask, dropped to his belly and wriggled away.

Larsen jumped from his Humvee before it slowed. He reached Jacob's vehicle and halted, staring at the bloody scene. Paulus approached.

"I want that fuck dead. I want his head!" Larsen snarled.

Paulus shrugged nonchalantly, "We can't waste men and time on this shit. Pull back; defend the plane and the hostages. Reinforce the gates. We can't afford to go on a manhunt, it could be the distraction they're waiting for outside."

Larsen glared at the Ranger, "I'm in command here, I want him neutralised!"

"He has been neutralised. Keep him sealed off, what harm can he do. If you want him dead, give me three men, I'll hunt him down."

Larsen paused, raising his radio. "All units pull back. Gate details hold firm. All other units fall back to the central area. We will dig in around the plane and hold firm until evac. Repeat, all search units fall back to plane. Alpha 2 out"

"Well, what'll it be?" Paulus drawled.

"All right, we're going with your plan."

"What plan would that be?" Paulus smiled thinly.

"Don't fuck with me, Paulus, pick your three men and move out. I've got the gate and outer perimeter sealed off, all other units are pulling back to the plane. You've got three hours tops, find that fucker and waste him."

Paulus let a silence hang, as he drew on his cigarette, smiling slyly at Larsen.

"Whatever you say, Captain," the Ranger seemed to have the unerring talent of making a salute seem like an insult. He turned and walked away.

"Dafoe, Henson, with me!"

Two Rangers, both Corporals jumped from the Humvee. The white soldier, Dafoe, grinned broadly and punched his tall, solemn black partner, Henson.

"Ooh, boy, we're going on safari, we gonna get us some!" Dafoe laughing, dancing excitedly. Henson rolled his eyes.

Paulus turned to the assembled soldiers, just arriving; "I need a sniper, the best."

A small, wiry Hispanic soldier stepped forward, dressed in an elaborate camouflage ghillie suit and floppy bush hat. Holding a compact MP5, he had a M40A1 bolt-action sniping rifle, fitted with a x10 scope, slung across his back.

"What's your name?"

"Suarez, Marine Recon."

“You any good?”

Suarez smiled shyly, “Sure.”

Paulus looked across at Larsen, who nodded tersely.

“Okay, Suarez, you’re with us.” Paulus grinned. “Us three are going to be the beating party, we’re going to track this fucker down, drive him out into the open, right into your sights, okay? ”

Suarez unslung his rifle, worked the bolt, chambering a round, and smiled.

Chapter 29

About five hours after taking off from Andrews Air Force Base, the Lockheed C-5B Galaxy settled down on a runway set high in the mountains of northern Colombia. As the huge plane taxied to a halt, its tailgate lowered and a team of armed soldiers disembarked, scattering and forming a defensive perimeter around the aircraft. Colonel John Ullrich walked out into the steamy heat, rifle slung from his shoulder and halted, squinting about him, before donning dark glasses against the fierce glare of the sun.

The high mountain clearing was fringed by dense jungle, the chatter of birds and animals rising from within. Around the runway were scattered various makeshift huts and at its head a crumbling, dilapidated concrete control tower. Amongst the buildings and parked vehicles armed men patrolled, eyeing the aircraft and its passengers suspiciously. The men were a curious mixture of sunburnt Europeans, muscular with short-cropped hair, tough looking Hispanics and blacks, all carrying Russian made assault rifles and Heckler and Koch automatic weapons. Squatting around the edges of the base, curious natives, dressed in little more than rags, watched the unfolding drama.

Ullrich paused and lit a cigarette, Hooker waited at his elbow, shotgun held cocked and ready in his hands. A Humvee approached at high speed, dust swirling in its trail, screeching to a halt beside the plane. Yuri Pletsov jumped from the passenger seat of the vehicle and strode across to the Colonel. Grinning, he threw his arms around the American.

“Jack, my friend, I’m so glad to see you!” the tall, blond Russian laughed, “You made good time.”

“Yuri, everything is arranged?”

The Russian waved his hand around him, “Perfect, no?”

“Who are the guards?” Ullrich nodded to the motley soldiers scowling in their direction.

“Ten fellow Russians, all former Spetsnaz, men I regularly work with. Also twenty Cubans I recruited from my friends in Havana when I passed through. Mostly blacks, very tough. The rest?” Pletsov grimaced and spat, “Local criminals, drug dealing scum.”

“Now, now, don’t be rude about our hosts, this is the local cartel’s airstrip. For a modest fee, we get use and their men keep Bogota off our backs.”

“Ha, those monkeys down there are worse, they don’t have the cajones to come up here, the cartels run the north. Even with US government help, with American soldiers and CIA, they can’t destroy the cartels. Business as usual, they keep their produce flowing into your country.”

“Supply and demand.” Ullrich shrugged, “Thought you’d appreciate that.”

“Business is business, I have nothing against drugs, I do a little business back home with them. But these savages!” he spat again, cursing in Russian. “I don’t trust them, they are just animals.”

Ullrich laughed, “Don’t worry, we’ll be out of here soon, and you can get back to civilisation.”

“Civilisation?” Pletsov laughed coldly, “By the way, I heard you pulled a fast one in Washington, you tell them you have a ‘Suitcase Bomb’. What’s this, you don’t buy my produce, but you use it as a threat?”

“Worked, didn’t it?” Ullrich smiled.

“So you didn’t have one. You wouldn’t use it if you did, would you?”

“I may be mad, but I’m not completely fucking insane!” he laughed.

“That’s the difference between you and me, I will do anything.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Come, my friend, we can contact your people back in the States, get this business over with, get the fuck out of here. Before the Colombians slit our throats!” the Russian

climbed back into the Humvee, “You like?” he slapped the vehicle, “Compliments of USA, via the Colombian Government.”

“Lovely, Yuri. Maybe after we’ve finished with the radio, you can take me for a spin.” While Pletsov laughed, Ullrich turned and gave orders to allow the men off the plane.

“I do better than that, Jack, we have party, vodka, rum, plenty of food. When the rest of your men arrive, they join us.”

“Sure.” Ullrich and Hooker climbed into the Humvee. Pletsov slammed the vehicle into gear and sped away back to the tower.

* * *

“Alpha 2, this is Alpha 1, come in,” the satellite radiophone squawked at Andrews.

Larsen hunkered down in the growing gloom, “Alpha 1, this is Alpha 2, come back now.”

“Eagle 1 landed, the Eerie is secured, ready to receive Eagle 2.” Ullrich reported from the other end.

“Received, departure imminent.”

“Any problems?”

Larsen paused, glancing at the men around him. “One problem, it’s being dealt with.”

“Control the situation. We don’t have time to fuck about. Secure your end, then get the fuck out of there, understood?” Ullrich snapped.

“Understood, Alpha 2 out.” Larsen signed off.

Climbing to his feet, he turned to Sergeant Barnes.

“Any word from Paulus?”

“Well, he’s swept all but the last quadrant of the base, he’s clearing that right now.

Nothing yet,” the big Sergeant replied.

“All right, order the gate details to rig the entrances and fall back. Have all units report to the plane, tell the pilot to prep for take off.” Larsen ordered.

“What about Paulus?”

“I’ll deal with our gung-ho Ranger.”

The guard details at all four main gates finished booby-trapping the entrances, setting up trip-wires and pressure and motion activated C-4 explosive charges and claymores. As darkness descended, the soldiers fell back.

Sitting in the tall grass, an ill-defined shape that could barely be made out in the failing light. Suarez remained motionless, his sniper ghillie suit, bedecked with ribbons of camouflaged fabric, blurring his outline. His face, streaked with paint was further hidden behind a veil hanging from his bush hat. His bolt action rifle rested across his knees. He still had the 10x telescope sight fixed atop his weapon, but he had an image-intensifier ready to replace when the light finally failed.

His breathing was soft, deep and regular, his pulse rate low. Slowly he seemed to merge into the land, feeling the rhythms of nature, the gentle caress of the warm breeze.

His eyes, having grown accustomed to the gloom, swept the open ground in front of him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement. He turned slowly, raising his rifle. Again he saw the grass flicker, far off to the left.

“Beater, Shooter here, do you have anyone off to the north-west?” Suarez whispered into his radio.

“Positive, Shooter.” Paulus replied softly.

“Shit!” the sniper lowered his rifle.

Paulus, Dafoe and Henson crawled slowly through the long grass, spread apart as a three-pronged fork, sweeping steadily forward. Dafoe carried a Galil SAR, loaded with a 35 round magazine, the other two with Colt Commando assault rifles. All three, faces smeared with camouflaged paint, had stripped down their kit, even ditching their body armour, all for

the sake of stealth. Silently they probed, hoping to surprise their target, or drive him out into the open for Suarez to pick off.

The Captain's radio crackled in his ear, "This is Alpha 2, all units fall back, Evac is imminent."

Paulus moved silently on.

"Paulus, answer, godamnit!" Larsen cursed over the air.

"Shit!" the Ranger halted. "Paulus here, what the fuck do you want?" he snarled quietly.

"We're pulling out, fall back."

"I heard the fucking the message."

"Then get your ass back here. We leave in eight minutes, with or without you."

"You do that, me and my men can take care of ourselves. Anyway, I don't like leaving a job half done." Paulus grinned in the dark.

"This is an order, Paulus, fall back immediately!"

"All Beater and Shooter teams, switch to secondary frequency." The Ranger Captain ordered, cutting off Larsen's irate voice.

"You think he's going to Court Martial us." Dafoe sniggered over the radio.

"Cut out the chat, lets get moving, I don't want to miss that ride and have our asses left hanging out in the wind!" Paulus slithered onward.

Henson smiled to himself as he wriggled through the dirt, chuckling softly as he thought about the Captain sticking it to that West Point snot. With his rifle balanced in the cradle of his arms, he moved through the grass, darkness descending around him, the shadows lengthening.

Henson paused for a breath, sweat stinging his eyes. He slowly raised his head. In the distance, he heard the roar of the Galaxy's engines. There was a flicker of movement to his left, he turned, the grass beside him swaying. A shadow flickered over him. He grabbed his

rifle, unsafing it, rolling over, bringing the weapon round. The dark figure fell on him, the rifle discharging between them. The two men struggled in the dark, wrestling desperately, their grunts almost silent. Henson parried a blow, desperately seeking his assailant's face or throat, trying to inflict some harm. With the rifle trapped between them, Henson grabbed the man's throat, squeezing, crushing it in his powerful hand. A hand locked over his mouth, then Henson felt a sharp, burning pain beneath his ribs, ripping agonisingly upwards. The assailant drove his knife deep into his belly, digging beneath his ribs, twisting, tearing. He ripped the bloody weapon free, then plunged it in, again and again. Henson bucked and writhed, then shuddered once and laid still.

Steiner rolled off the dead body, wiping his bloody hands on his uniform, cleaning off his knife on the dead man's clothing. Quickly he stripped any ammunition or useful equipment from the corpse, before moving out.

Paulus was calling into his radio, voice rising in rage, "I heard a shot, report!"

"Beater 2, the discharge was to my right." Dafoe reported.

"Shooter, shot was from your area, muzzle flash spotted." Suarez whispered.

"Beater 3, come in!" Paulus whispered, receiving no reply. "2, check him out."

"Received," replied Dafoe.

"Shooter here, do you have anyone closing on me from the north-east?"

"Negative, shit, I don't know could be 3 with radio difficulty, keep target covered, hold fire until we have confirmation." Paulus snapped.

"Understood."

The light was fading fast, but Suarez could not risk switching scopes. With his rifle raised, he aimed, zeroing in on the area he had spotted movement in the grass. Nothing. Then there was a brief rustle and flicker in the grass, closer still to him.

"Beater, report, target is closing." Suarez whispered urgently.

"Understood." Paulus replied, "Beater 2, come in, anything?"

“Negative.”

“Shooter, stand by.”

Suarez cursed softly, blinking the sweat out of his eyes, flexing his fingers around the stock of his weapon, his palms slick against the wood. Through his sight he saw movement. A dark shape slowly rose from the grass, less than a hundred yards off.

“Target is visible, request orders. Do I have clearance to fire?” the sniper whispered desperately.

“Hold.”

“Oh shit!” Dafoe’s voice broke across the radio.

“Report.” Paulus urged.

“Henson’s down, he’s fucking dead, looks like he’s been gutted!”

“Shoot!” Paulus shouted.

Suarez smiled, slowly squeezing his trigger.

There was a sudden buzz, like an approaching insect, then something slammed into the sniper’s upper body. The silenced round sliced through his unprotected torso, puncturing a lung, severing his spine and exiting through his back, ripping open a fist-sized wound. The rifle fell from his lifeless arms, and Suarez flopped back into the grass.

“Shooter, come in!”

Suarez lay on his back, wheezing, battling for air, staring up at the stars. Unable to move, he felt a flicker of movement as something slipped by him.

“Shooter is down, Beater 2, deploy Willie-Peter, burn him out!” Paulus snapped two White Phosphorous grenades from his webbing. Rearing up on his knees, he tossed both canisters far out ahead of him. Off to his left, Dafoe did likewise.

All four incendiary grenades exploded close together in a string of blinding flashes. Flames engulfed the tinder-dry grass, the strong breeze fanning it, driving the fire quickly

forward. Towering flames lit the dark sky, black smoke rising into the star-lit night. The crackle and roar of the flames growing as it ate outwards.

Paulus stumbled out of the grass, onto the tarmac airstrip, Dafoe closely behind him. Both men edged forward, trying to keep up with the ravenous flames, rifles raised to their shoulders, the glow of the fire reflected off their damp faces.

Suarez, his eyesight fading heard the approaching flames, smelt the choking smoke. He tried to scream, the sound escaping as a gurgle. He struggled to move, only succeeding in painfully wrenching his head from side to side. The fingers of the flames licked at his limbs, searing through his flesh. He opened his mouth, screaming silently as the flames swallowed him whole.

“There!” Dafoe shouted, as a darkened figure raced from the edge of the burning grass, silhouetted by the flames. Both Rangers opened up, squeezing off short bursts, edging steadily forward, firing off burst after burst.

The figure seemed to dance in front of the leaping flames as he ran. A burst knocked him down, but he was quickly back up, hobbling onward, turning to return the fire, his silenced rifle spitting out rounds as he backed off.

Aboard the Galaxy, the pilot called out over the radio.

“We’ve got to go, Captain!”

“Very well.” Larsen stared out of the open rear door of the transport plane, watching the flames leap into the night, the inferno lighting up the whole base. “Let’s get the fuck out of here!”

The plane taxied slowly forward, the tail door rising with a dull electric whine. Picking up speed, it turned onto the runway, engines roaring.

Paulus and Dafoe moved slowly forward firing, the flames to their rear. The figure dived between two buildings, rounds shredding the woodwork around him. The two Rangers paused and reloaded. Cocking handles rattled, the Captain nodded to Dafoe, silently

signalling with hand signals. The two separated, each moving around the building on opposite sides, edging down the walls, weapons raised.

The Galaxy lifted off, engines shrieking. Banking steeply, the plane ploughed back over the base as it burned below.

Paulus glanced up, merely muttering, “Fuckers.”

Dafoe froze as he saw the plane slip away overhead. Suddenly he realised they were all alone. Gripping his rifle he slipped around the edge of the building. Out of the shadows, a figure stepped, rifle raised. Steiner fired. His rifle clacked uselessly. Dafoe grinned, whirling round, firing a short burst, blowing the other man off his feet. Steiner crashed backward, slamming into the ground, his rifle spinning away. He wasn't sure if the rounds had penetrated his vest, but the burning pain in his chest told him at the very least his ribs were broken. Also his left shoulder was shattered, ripped open by a single round.

Gasping, he snatched his Glock automatic from his holster, raised it and fired twice quickly at the closing figure. One round tore into the Corporal's belly; the other hit him in the thigh. With a single cry he crumpled.

Paulus wheeled around the corner of the building, firing. Steiner rolled away, bullets ripping into the ground around him. Shots blasted from his pistol as he crawled away, forcing the Ranger Captain to duck back into cover. Stumbling back onto his feet, Steiner continued firing into the wall, keeping Paulus pinned back, while he edged away into the inky night.

Paulus reloaded, took a deep breath and lunged from cover. Swinging his rifle from left to right, he saw nothing. Shuffling forward, the dark night was silent. He dropped down by the prostrate Dafoe.

“How you doing?” he whispered, rifle still raised, aiming out.

“Never better!” He doubled up, gasping.

The Captain inspected his wounds, “The leg injury is just a flesh wound, but you been gut-shot, we got to get you to a doctor, or your going to bleed to death. Not quick, but sure!”

“Jeez, don’t sugar-coat it or anything!” Dafoe croaked.

A sudden explosion ripped into the night, quickly followed by another.

“What was that?” asked the Corporal.

“The gates, they must be coming. We got to go!” Paulus leapt to his feet, hauling the other man up, wrapping his arm around him, gripping him tight. Dafoe threw his arm around his officer’s shoulder, his compact assault rifle dangling from his free hand. Stumbling away, the wounded man biting back his pain, explosions rippled behind them, flames leaping into the night-sky.

The combined Federal/Military assault teams had moved in the moment the plane cleared the ground. They deactivated the obvious booby-traps at the gates, but as they stormed through, they triggered secondary, concealed devices. Claymores scythed down the attackers, ripping them apart at the first gate, then at the second, before the teams regrouped. The electric fence was shut down, and assault teams equipped with ladders and ropes slipped over the perimeter. Strike teams moved out.

Steiner watched the attackers sweeping in, moving through the buildings. Moving to a clear section of the fence, he quickly scaled it and quickly melted away into the dark.

The assault team reached the central hanger, deactivated explosive charges rigged on the doors, and burst in, finding all the remaining hostages, trussed and hooded, but otherwise unharmed.

Paulus snipped through the fence with wire-cutters, dragging Dafoe out through the opening after him. The Corporal had passed out, so he threw him over his shoulder and carried his rifle one-handed. He slipped around the heavy force ringing the perimeter. They

seemed more concerned about keeping the press and TV media out than watching for escapees.

Paulus hunkered down, laying the groggy Dafoe beside him. He spotted a single cop sitting alone in a squad car, parked way out on the edge of the police lines. The fat officer seemed to be enjoying the comfort of his car, cheerfully listening to the radio.

Paulus grabbed Dafoe's webbing, dragging him behind him, and crouching low he approached the vehicle, silenced automatic levelled before him.

The cop heard the rear door of his patrol car pop open. Turning around, he grumbled, "What the fuck now?"

Paulus jabbed the muzzle of his pistol into the cop's face and dragged Dafoe onto the back seat with him.

"You do what I say, take us where we want, you might just live to remember this night." Paulus stayed down low, pistol pushing through the back of the seat. "Understand, fatty?"

The terrified cop nodded, sweat covering his fleshy face.

"Then let's get the fuck out of here!"

Chapter 30

“Alpha 1, this is Alpha 2, come in!” the radio in the control tower squawked, Ullrich lifted the handset and replied.

“This is Alpha 1, report, Alpha 2.”

“Eagle 2, clear of US airspace, no signs of pursuit, over.” Larsen replied.

“Understood, dispatching package, hurry on home, Eagle 2.”

“Roger that, Alpha 1, out,” the Captain signed off.

Ullrich turned to Pletsov, “Okay, let’s see off our guests.”

The Colonel and the Russian, followed by Hooker, headed out of the tower. Outside, a Gulfstream 111 executive jet aircraft had recently landed and was being refuelled. The pilot stood nearby, watching the ground crew servicing his plane.

“Jeff, good to see you!” Ullrich shook the pilot’s hand warmly.

The wiry man smiled coolly, “Jack, how goes it?”

“Smooth as,” he laughed. Ullrich turned to Pletsov, “Jeff and I met up in South-East Asia, in the early seventies, he flew with ‘Air America’.”

“Ah, a company man,” the Russian smiled.

“Freelance these days, much like you it seems, comrade,” the pilot muttered.

“Such is the New World Order,” laughed Pletsov.

“Who’s your co-pilot?” asked Ullrich.

“Carl Weaver,” he nodded to a younger man supervising the refuel. “Worked together during the eighties, Nicaragua, El Salvador, made some runs during the Iran-Contra deal, we can trust him.”

“Running cocaine for the Contras, you must feel right at home here with our Colombian friends?” the Russian smirked.

“The heroin trade in Afghanistan was pretty lucrative too, wasn’t it, Colonel?” the pilot smiled coldly.

Pletsov bobbed his head, “Touché, maybe we went up against each other back then?”

“Maybe?”

“Maybe we can work together one day?”

“We already are, aren’t we?”

“This is a favour to Colonel Ullrich, I mean business, something more mutually profitable.”

Three soldiers, led by Chuck Meadows, led the two hooded hostages across the dusty field. They halted by the plane as the ground crew finished refuelling. Ullrich and the others approached.

“Well, Mr. President, General, we must say our farewells now. I hope you have a pleasant journey,” the Colonel said cheerfully.

A muffled curse came from beneath General Harker’s hood.

Ullrich laughed and nodded to Meadows who started leading the two prisoners aboard the jet.

“Oh, by the way, Mr. President, don’t forget our little chat. Remember, with power comes responsibility, I wouldn’t want to come visiting again!” Ullrich watched, hands on hips, as the two men were bundled aboard. Inside, Meadows tied each man into his seat, leaving their hoods in place.

Meadows straightened up, taking in his handiwork, and grinned, “Remember to stay in your seats until you reach the terminal!” he laughed and led his men off the plane.

“They think you’re going to deliver them direct to Washington, but they’ll be on your ass as soon as you enter their airspace.” Ullrich whispered to the pilot. “Put down on the strip in Texas, dump the prisoners and get the fuck out of there. We’ll contact them later, let them know where to retrieve them.”

“Understood, don’t worry about me, I’ll go in so low and be in and out so fast, they’ll barely see me!” he chuckled.

“Good luck.”

“See you soon.” The pilot climbed up the steps and his co-pilot sealed the door. Strapping themselves into the cockpit, they quickly ran through the pre-flight checks and fired up the twin engines. The plane trundled across the rough ground before slipping onto the runway. Picking up speed, the jet streaked down the airstrip, leaping skywards, wagging its wings in salute as it peeled away.

“Well, Jack, now we celebrate!” Pletsov slapped Ullrich on the shoulder, “I have prepared such a party you have never seen!”

“Lead on!”

* * *

Half a dozen long picnic tables stretched out in front of the control tower, all covered with a resplendent feast, whole roast suckling pig, sides of beef, roast fowl, vegetables, fruit and bottle after bottle of vodka and rum. Almost a hundred sat either side of the tables, perched on benches, or else milled about, laughing and chatting, plates and glasses in hand. The table was constantly replenished, local Colombians bringing dish upon dish to the table, in one long procession from the nearby huts, where pots boiled and fires roared.

Ullrich sat at the head of one of the tables, Pletsov, the only non-American present, sitting beside him. Also gathered round him were Morrow, Watson and Chuck Meadows. As the air filled with raucous laughter and shouted salutes, Hooker sat off alone to one side of the Colonel, plate of roast chicken resting precariously on his knees, shotgun leaning against the side of his chair. Sourly, he picked at his food, eyes flickering nervously. He watched the men gorging themselves and growing ever drunker. Silently, he watched the Colombian and Cuban guards patrolling the base, rifles cradled in their arms. Whatever the Sergeant thought

of spics and niggers, these men looked like professionals. They looked mean and he felt the hatred coming off them in waves. He drew his shotgun close.

The only men excluded from the party were the aircrew of the Galaxy, the three men remaining by their aircraft. Take-off was planned for later and they were being kept from the temptation of drink. However, the Colonel had promised to send over some food, and true to his word, the co-pilot and flight engineer, standing smoking by the tailgate of the plane, watched a group of Colombians, bearing food approached.

The party arrived, a young, blond-haired Russian in the lead.

“Your food, sirs!” he mumbled shyly in a thickly accented voice.

The two men grabbed the plates and started eating hungrily.

The Russian frowned, “Where other man, pilot?”

“He’s up front, we’ll get him in a sec,” one of the Americans mumbled through a mouthful of food.

“I, Misha!” the Russian said proudly, jabbing his thumb towards his chest.

“Great,” one of the Americans muttered disinterestedly.

“You?” he pointed at the two men.

“Dave, Charlie,” one said, indicating himself first, then the other man.

“Ah!” he paused awkwardly, smiling shyly; “I like plane!”

“Great,” one said in a bored tone, leaning over to his friend and whispering, “Fucking Russians.” Both laughed.

Misha turned to a tall black Cuban with the party of Colombians, rattling a quick-fire burst of Russian. The man approached with a covered tray. The Americans kept eating, glad of the peace, staring down at their rapidly clearing plates. The Russian nodded at the Cuban and pulled the cover from the tray.

“Hey, Misha, or whatever your name is, got some more to eat?” the beefy flight engineer looked up and froze.

The blond Russian smiled, silenced P7 automatic levelled before him. The American opened and shut his mouth, reaching across to the co-pilot. Misha fired twice, the silenced rounds punching into the man's upper chest, tossing him back against the plane's fuselage and sliding down into the dirt. The Russian turned as the other man looked up and put two rounds into him. Checking around him, Misha stepped over the two bodies and put a round in each head.

The black Cuban pulled an AKSU compact assault rifle from under another covered tray, yanking back the cocking handle. Misha barked some orders in Russian at the Cuban, who in turn snapped commands to the Colombians. The group laid aside their plates and trays and grabbed the two dead men by the heels and dragged them inside the plane.

Misha crept quietly through the long, gloomy interior of the aircraft, past the stowed Humvee and chopper and assorted weapons and equipment.

Inside the cockpit, the pilot was engrossed in paperback novel, tucked in his flight seat, legs propped up before him. He heard nothing as the Russian slipped up from behind, drawing out a long, double-edged knife. Misha lunged, slapping his palm across the pilot's mouth and driving the blade of the knife up through the bottom of his lower jaw, through his mouth, through his upper palate and into his brain. The pilot jerked and shuddered, then slumped in his seat. Misha wiped his knife clean on the dead man's flight suit.

Back at the party, the celebrations were in full swing, the well-fed soldiers slinging back the booze.

Petrov stood, "Excuse me, Jack, I'll just check if there's been any radio communication. I'll be right back."

"I'll come with you." Ullrich made to stand.

The Russian laid a friendly hand on his shoulder, "No, my friend, you stay and enjoy the party."

The Russian ambled away, lighting a cigarette as he entered the control tower.

Ullrich relaxed in his seat and sipped his drink.

“How long till the second bird arrives, Jack?” Watson leant across.

“Two hours, max. We’ll be airborne within an hour or so after that and out of this shithole.”

“Thank God for that!” the Colonel muttered, raising his glass.

Hooker, as sensitive as a dog sensed a change in atmosphere among the guards. He cocked his head, eyes slitted. The guards nearest the table edged backwards. Eyes focused, they moved with purpose. He laid his plate aside and gently laid his hand on his shotgun.

A flutter of movement on the roof of the nearby canteen caught his eye. He turned, hand tightening around his weapon. Two men scrambled across the hut’s roof, grabbing hold of a big tarpaulin sheet. They yanked away the cover, revealing a big Browning M2 .50 calibre heavy machine-gun. One man climbed behind the big gun, the second prepared to belt-feed him.

Hooker snatched up his shotgun and was on his feet running, his mouth open, shouting.

“Colonel!”

Ullrich turned, a smile on his face.

The M2 opened up, belching out heavy .50 cal. slugs at almost 600rpm. The gunner worked the machine gun from side to side on its tripod, hosing down the tables. Taken by surprise, the soldiers stood little chance. As bullets ripped through the tables, shattered wood, plates and shredded food was blown up in great gouts. The Americans were caught completely by surprise. Row upon row was blown away, ripped open by the gunfire, blasted clear from the exploding tables.

Hooker reached the Colonel, diving through the air, knocking him to the ground, shielding him with his body.

Two serving hatches in the canteen hut crashed down and two machine guns mounted on bipods were poked out. The M60 and HK21 both opened up, cutting into the soldiers at ground level as they searched for cover. From up above, a Russian PK Machine gun, mounted on the balcony of the control tower opened fire slicing into the diners from the flank.

The machine gunners, all Russians, worked over the area methodically, raking their fire across the tables, cutting the soldiers to pieces. While some tried desperately to reach their rifles and heavier weapons, only to be cut down, others tried hopelessly to return fire with their sidearms. They were chopped apart in seconds.

Morrow hit the dirt, Meadows and Watson were on their feet quickly, the SF Major with his Colt Commando at close hand, began squeezing off bursts as he moved.

The surrounding Cuban and Colombian guards joined in, firing their rifles into the survivors as they tried to flee. Meadows cut down three guards with a single burst, while Watson fired his pistol. The Colonel, taking out one guard, lunged at another, pistol-whipping him to the ground and firing a round into his head as he went down. He snatched the man's HK assault rifle, joining Meadows as they fought to provide cover for the fleeing survivors. Both men fired into the canteen, their bullets slicing through the wooden structure, ripping the machine gunners apart.

Hooker dragged the Colonel to his feet, leading him off, racing towards the cover of the jungle. Bullets ripped up the ground as they fled. Morrow followed, firing his sidearm as he moved.

One soldier, a young Special Forces Sergeant, Clift, wriggled through the shattered remains of his dead comrades and scrambled into the riddled canteen. The two dead Russian gunners lay entangled in a bloody embrace. He snatched up the HK machine gun and crouched aiming directly up through the roof above and opened up. The blast of the automatic fire was deafening within the building, wood and debris showering down on him.

The 7.62mm rounds sliced through the roof, cutting into the two gunners on the roof, ripping them open from below and blowing them clear off the roof.

Lunging out of the hut, Clift moved quickly, firing as he moved. Gunfire still ripped down from the tower. Ducking into cover, he edged along the wall, weapon aimed down from his shoulder. He sucked in a breath and swung into the open, bringing the machine gun up and firing into the balcony. The tower gunner struggled to bring his weapon round, masonry exploding around him, trying to draw a bead on the man below. He was blown back against the wall, weapon flung clear. Clift tossed away the empty machine gun and drew his SIG automatic. A Cuban armed with an MP5 burst through the tower door. Clift fired twice, knocking him down. He snatched up the man's weapon and sprinted off.

With the gunfire easing, the survivors were battling through the guards, trying to reach the jungle. Hooker blasted out shell after shell from his SPAS 12, ripping the dazed guards apart. The Colombians panicked and fled, Spanish voices shrieking as they disappeared into the smoke. The Cubans stood firm, firing into the survivors. Ullrich reached a stockpile of his men's weapons. He snatched up two Commandos and a Galil SAR. He slung the Israeli rifle over his shoulder, cocked one of the Colts and tossed the other to Hooker, who ditched his empty shotgun. More survivors reached the weapons and rearmed.

Meadows and Watson, until now fighting a lonely, desperate rearguard action were suddenly joined by heavily armed reinforcements. The closing Cubans were caught by surprise and cut down by the barrage that ripped from the swirling smoke.

About dozen survivors, now heavily armed fled into the bush, quickly swallowed up by the verdant, steaming jungle, gunfire rattling impotently behind them.

Pletsov stood on the balcony of the control tower, a dead Russian soldier bleeding at his feet. He lowered his binoculars and snapped at the soldier standing beside him.

“Hunt them down, kill them all!”

*

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Gunfire crackled in the surrounding bush. The surviving Americans plunged deeper into the mountaintop jungle. Reaching a small clearing, the dozen or so survivors paused, catching their breath.

“We make our stand here!” Ullrich ordered, checking his assault rifle.

Meadows took charge, setting up a perimeter. One soldier carrying a pack of claymores moved out into the surrounding undergrowth, escorted by another man carrying an M4, both quickly deploying the anti-personnel mines.

The two soldiers eventually returned and dug in on the perimeter.

The defenders settled down, silently waiting, weapons pointing outwards from the clearing. From the bush came the crashing of footsteps, muttered curses in Spanish. Ullrich crouched in the centre of the armed circle, Hooker squatting beside him.

A sudden blast shook the trees, screams ripped through the jungle as a claymore's ball-bearing shot ripped outwards, cutting down the approaching soldiers, shredding the surrounding plant growth.

“Hold.” Ullrich whispered.

The Colombians and Cubans led by a single Russian tried to regroup, but two more tripwires were caught, triggering two more claymores. More attackers fell, ripped apart, dead and dying.

Ullrich lowered his hand. The soldier holding the claymore trigger flicked off the safety and hit it twice. The jungle surrounding the clearing erupted, trees and plants ripped apart as the shot carved outward through the attackers. Screams echoed through the air as the blasts died down.

“Now!” Ullrich barked.

The defenders opened up, their gunfire ripping into the jungle, automatic fire chattering, M203s spitting explosive rounds, blasts uprooting trees. The foliage smouldered as the red-hot rounds ripped through, slicing into the surviving attackers.

The Russian leading the assault hit the dirt as his men were cut down around him. Many of the battle-hardened Cubans followed suit, but the Colombians, frozen in shock, still concussed by the claymore blasts, were ripped apart where they stood, chopped down with the undergrowth and trees around them.

“Back, back!” the Russian cried in pidgin Spanish.

Still under savage fire, the attackers fell back, wriggling through tattered undergrowth, ignoring the dead and dying scattered around them.

“Cease fire.” Ullrich ordered and the gunfire halted. “Save your ammo, they’ll be back.”

* * *

The bloody remnants of the patrol stumbled out of the bush. Pletsov waited hands on hips, standing on the edge of the runway.

The blood splattered Russian patrol leader saluted the Colonel.

“They’re dug in pretty deep, sir, they were waiting.”

“Did you inflict any casualties?” Pletsov said impatiently.

“We never even saw them, I think we barely got off a shot. Those fucking Colombians are worse than useless, they could hear us coming a mile off!”

“Get out of my sight!” he barked, turning to Misha as the other man trudged away.

“As soon as we have dealt with the second plane, you and I will lead a team and deal with this. Assemble a patrol, Russians and Cubans only, I promised our friends I would deal with this. I want all the loose ends tidied up before I report.”

“Colonel,” Burghov called from the tower, “They’re here.”

“Alpha 1, this is Alpha 2, come in. Making our final approach, request clearance.”

Larsen’s voice crackled over the tower radio.

“This is Eerie, Alpha 1 not present, clearance granted, hurry on home.” Petrov said in a suddenly flawless American accent.

“Received, Eerie. Alpha 1 too busy celebrating, eh?” Larsen laughed.

“You bet, and we’re waiting for you to join the party, we’ve got everything laid on for you!”

“Looking forward to it, Alpha 2 out!” Larsen signed off.

The Russian Colonel turned to Burghov and Maxim.

“Prepare the reception.”

* * *

Aboard the Galaxy, Larsen handed the radio handset back to the pilot and grinned.

“Take us in, Pete.”

The Captain stumbled back through the crowded interior of the plane as it began its descent. The soldiers swayed inside the vibrating fuselage, looking up expectantly as the Captain reached them.

“We’re almost there, men. We made it, Colonel’s got a party laid on for us.”

A cheer echoing down through the long plane.

Dropping low, the mountains and lush jungle below rushed by in a blow. With a whirr and a clunk the landing gear descended. The Galaxy banked and began its final approach to the runway.

“Colonel, look!” someone shouted out and Ullrich looked up. The huge Galaxy transport plane came in low, the shriek of its engines rising.

“Oh shit, they’re early!”

“Oh Christ, they’re flying straight into a trap!” someone muttered.

On the runway, Maxim and Burghov lifted Stinger FIM-92 man-portable surface-to-air missile launchers, heaving them over their shoulders. The air rippled as the thundering jets of the aircraft drew near, descending upon the base.

Both men visually acquired the target, aligning it with the open sight on the launcher, tracking the huge plane as swept downwards. Maxim fired, the missile leaping skyward, flames leaping from the rear of the launcher. The SAM arced through the air, automatically homing on the target.

Aboard the Galaxy, the pilot shouted, “Missile, incoming, evade, evade!” He jerked his control stick, the engines howling in protest, but with such a large aircraft, so low, it was useless.

“What the fuck!” Larsen stumbled sideways as the plane banked.

The Stinger slammed into the port outer engine, ripping it apart, shattered metal peppering the fuselage.

The pilot struggled to maintain control, trying to pull up and abort the landing. With the remains of the engine afire, the plane listed heavily to port, flames lapping the left side of the fuselage.

Burghov launched his missile, sending it streaking toward the falling aircraft.

Larsen stumbled into the cockpit.

“What the hell...” he shouted above the raised voices of the aircrew and the shriek of warning sirens.

“Second missile inbound!” the co-pilot shouted.

“Oh Christ!” Larsen whispered as he saw the Stinger racing directly towards them.

The SAM hit the second port engine, the huge blast shearing off the left wing. The crippled plane rolled over, flames engulfing it, and began to break up as it fell.

The flaming ruin crashed into the jungle just short of the runway, a huge blast filling the air, a fireball leaping high above the trees.

Ullrich and the survivors sat in silence as they watched the plane go down and as the explosion ripped through the jungle, setting it ablaze.

The Colonel's radio crackled.

"Jack, can you hear me?" Pletsov's voice called out, taunting.

"You fucking cockroach!" Ullrich snarled.

"Now Jack, this is nothing personal!" he cooed.

"Nothing personal!"

"It's business, only business!" the Russian said.

"Who'd you sell out to?"

"Who'd you think?" Pletsov laughed. "The Americans of course!"

"What Americans?" Ullrich asked, dumbfounded.

"I don't know, people in your government, people with influence, I don't ask questions, I just take the money!"

"But why?"

"Oh Jack, you were always so naïve. Obviously you were played. They had you do something they wanted, now they get rid of you, neat and tidy!" he laughed.

Ullrich buried his face in his hands.

"Jack, you come in, I make it quick, painless, for old times sake. You make me hunt you down. Well?" Pletsov continued.

"So it was just the money, Yuri?" the American whispered.

"Just money!" he laughed, "What else is there. They promised me more than you could dream of. I mean, I just blew 50 million in gold out of the sky! But it wasn't just the money, these are the men running the country, they promised so much more. With their

influence I get most favoured trading status, I am untouchable. In a few years, I own Russia!”
he laughed.

“You think they’ll let you live, Yuri?”

“Why not. Me they understand, I have a price. You they fear!” he paused. “So what is your answer, Jack?”

“Come and get me you asshole!” Ullrich whispered.

“That’s what I hoped you’d say. One last battle between old enemies. See you soon, my old friend!” Pletsov signed off.

* * *

Pletsov led Misha and Maxim, along with about a dozen heavily armed Cubans, out. As they slipped silently into the bush, the teams separated, the first under Pletsov, the second led by Maxim. Misha remained at the Colonel’s side, AKSU in hand.

The two teams moved swiftly, but stealthily, watching each step, slipping silently through the thick undergrowth.

Maxim closed from the right, the Cubans strung out behind him, a Russian NCO taking up the rear. The jungle steamed, moisture dripping from the leaves. It was eerily still as they passed among the tattered bodies of the dead, lying where they fell in the first attack. A couple of the Cubans crossed themselves.

Maxim pushed aside a hanging branch with the muzzle of his AK and peered ahead into the gloom, the sun barely filtering through the thick canopy. Suddenly a bush ahead seemed to quiver, then rise up. He cried out and swung his rifle round.

Meadows, heavily camouflaged with foliage, reared up, firing point blank into the Russian, cutting him down, then turning his Colt Commando on the men behind, squeezing

off a long burst, ripping through them. The ground beside him opened up and Clift rose holding a Galil SAR, firing short bursts as he straightened up.

The Cubans dived for cover, squeezing off ill-aimed bursts.

At the rear, an American lunged from behind a tree, firing his AK as he came into the open. The Russian NCO dived sideways, the bullets ripping past him, tearing into the back of a Cuban. The Russian, lying prone, brought up his AKSU and fired into the exposed American, chopping him down. Glancing sideways, he recoiled in horror as the eviscerated corpse of one of the earlier attackers moved and slowly rolled sideways. Another bloody figure sat up from beneath; a grin cutting through his gore smeared face.

“Hello, pal!” Watson levelled his MP5 and fired a three round burst into the Russian, killing him where he lay. Rising to one knee, the sub-machine gun jammed into his shoulder and began ripping into the rear of the Cubans.

Meadows and Clift both tossed in frags, the blasts ripping into the prostate soldiers, tearing them apart.

Watson lobbed a stun grenade in to midst of the Cubans, lurching forward as it exploded. Dashing among the stunned survivors, he fired, cutting each down, quickly weaving, squeezing off burst after burst.

The air finally grew still. Out of the smoke walked a blood-smeared figure, a grin plastered on his face. Meadows and Clift lowered their weapons when they saw Watson.

“Good to get out of the office!” laughed the Special Forces Colonel.

Pletsov and his patrol paused, dropping down when they heard the gunfire, waiting. When the noise of the firefight dropped off, the Colonel keyed his radio.

“Maxim, come in!” static was the only reply.

Pletsov signalled the patrol to rise and they moved off.

After the noise of battle, the jungle’s silence seemed doubly ominous, but the assault team kept moving, the Colonel at its head, Misha taking up the rear.

Pletsov paused, halting the patrol, sending a Cuban out ahead on point. The tall black soldier hefted his HK assault rifle proudly and moved off, soon disappearing into the dense bush ahead. The patrol waited. A brief rustle ahead disturbed the silence, then all was still again.

The Colonel stood and waved the men on. The Cubans' resolve was haemorrhaging. They lagged further and further behind and the Russians had to chivvy them on.

The patrol halted, Pletsov kneeling beside the body of the Cuban point-man, lying splayed, throat slit, rifle missing. The Russian officer stood as a murmur passed through the men. He scowled, then waved them forward.

Suddenly the jungle erupted on either side, slicing into their exposed flanks, cutting the patrol apart. Petrov hit the dirt, bringing up his HK rifle, firing into the bush. From the rear he could hear the chatter of Misha's AKSU.

The incoming fire was unforgiving, pinning them down. Pletsov saw only one narrow path open.

"Follow me!" he shouted in Russian, rising up, firing from the shoulder, ripping into the treelines, moving forward, then cutting off the trail and crashing through the undergrowth. Misha and the two Cubans followed, fighting their way out, rifles rattling.

Bursting through the bush, a startled American stumbled across Petrov's path. The Russian put a short burst into him, blowing him out of his way. With the other three close behind, they ran on, gunfire pursuing them.

One of the Cubans edged ahead of the Colonel and tore through the bush into a small clearing. He stumbled, startled for a second as he saw the guns arrayed before him. He swung his rifle round, but the Americans fired, blowing him back into the bush. Pletsov burst through, diving for cover. The second Cuban was cut down.

“Take cover!” Misha shouted in Russian, tearing a grenade from his webbing, pulling the pin and tossing it into the clearing. The grenade detonated with a dull blast, shrapnel ripping through the clearing.

Petrov and Misha moved past the small group of dead Americans and headed back into the bush. The jungle around them came alive as armed men emerged from the undergrowth, weapons raised. Misha fired, cutting down Clift and Morrow. He spotted Ullrich and squeezed the trigger.

Hooker slapped the rifle from the young Russian’s hands, swinging the butt of his weapon round, slamming it into his belly, dropping him to the dirt, bringing it down again on the rear of his head.

Petrov froze then dropped his rifle and raised his hands, smiling.

Ullrich waved off the other men, handing his rifle to Hooker.

“Just you and me, Yuri!” the American whispered.

“OK.” Petrov lunged, slamming his fist into Ullrich stomach, bringing his knee up into his face as he doubled up, tossing him backwards into the dirt. The American quickly swung his foot around, sweeping Petrov’s feet from beneath him, sending him crashing to the ground. Jumping up, Ullrich kicked the Russian in the face as he clambered up, flipping him over onto his back. Petrov quickly scissored his legs, cutting down the approaching American.

Both men rose to their feet. Petrov pulled a long knife from a sheath on his belt, smiling thinly. Ullrich pulled a K-Bar knife from his webbing. Both men circled each other. The Russian lunged; Ullrich parried and struck, slicing open the Russian’s right upper arm. He stumbled, but recovered, whirling around, arcing his knife, the tip catching the American’s cheek, cutting it open. As he recoiled, the Russian kicked the knife from Ullrich’s hand, grabbed the front of his blouson, drawing him in close for the kill. The American slammed his knee into Petrov’s groin, then drove the tip of his elbow into the side

of his head as he doubled up. Ullrich whirled him round, yanking the Russian's arm behind him, jerking it savagely, the wrist shattering with an audible crunch, the knife falling from his hand.

Ullrich locked his arm around the Russian's neck, squeezing tightly. With one last titanic effort, Petrov swung the American over his shoulder, slamming him down on the ground, then driving the heel of his boot down into his face. He raised his foot to strike again, but Ullrich rolled sideways, knocking his foot away as it fell, throwing the Russian off balance and sending him crashing.

Both men rose gasping to their feet and circled each other, Petrov's right arm hanging weakly by his side. He threw a high martial arts kick, his foot slamming into Ullrich's hip as he turned sideways. As the Russian moved in, raising his good hand to deliver a fatal chop, Ullrich rolled onto the balls of his feet, quickly blocked the blow, then struck the Russian twice hard in the face, snapping his head back, sending him stumbling. Dazed, wavering on his feet, Petrov stood exposed. Ullrich stepped in close and with a roar drove the heel of his right hand up into the base of the Russian's nose, shattering it, driving the bone up into his brain.

The Russian crumpled face first down in the dirt. Ullrich sank down next to the dead man.

The three surviving Americans stood in silence.

"Shit!" Hooker shouted, looking about him, "The other Russian's gone."

Drag marks led out of the clearing from where Misha had laid.

"Forget it." Ullrich rasped, "We've got to get out of here."

"Why, they won't come again?" asked Watson.

"They won't, but their employers will."

* * *

Misha stumbled out of the jungle. The waiting Russians raced towards him.

“What happened? Where’s the Colonel?” Burghov asked.

“Dead, they’re all dead! We’ve got to get out of here, now!”

“What about the Americans?”

“Let the jungle have them, that and the Colombian savages. Prepare the helicopter.”

Misha collapsed in the dirt, burying his face in his hands.

On the opposite mountainside, hidden in the thick bush, two heavily camouflaged figures watched the sudden burst of activity in the base almost a mile away. Peering through high-powered binoculars, they watched a Sikorsky Super Stallion transport chopper being wheeled from a hangar.

“Eagle-Eye, this is Hawk-Eye, Russians preparing for evac, looks like contract complete,” one of the men whispered into his radio.

“Received, Hawk-Eye, has Force Surrogate been terminated?” a voice replied.

“Positive confirmation impossible, handful of survivors fled into the bush. Russians hunted them down. Likely Surrogate termination complete.” The spotter replied.

“Understood. Estimated time till hostile evac?”

“I would guess imminent.”

“Understood. Light up the target, Falcon coming on line. Eagle-Eye out.”

The spotter laid aside the radio and his partner handed him a long rifle-like electronic device, hooked up to a small power-pack. He hefted it over his shoulder and trained it on the base control tower, resting his finger on the trigger.

Less than a hundred miles off the north-east coast of Colombia, high over the Pacific Ocean, a Northrop B-2 ‘Stealth Bomber’ banked, its bomb-bay doors swinging open.

Cruising at around 400mph, a large, tailed missile lowered from the plane’s bomb-bay. With a gentle clunk, the missile slipped its moorings and dropped away, small, stubby wings

deploying on either side. Its engine ignited and the ALCM streaked away. The B-2 banked, picking up speed and headed back to US airspace.

The ALCM (Air Launched Cruise Missile) was developed as a strategic weapon system, designed to strike targets deep within the USSR without the planes carrying it needing to penetrate Soviet airspace. With a range of 2500 kilometres (1600 miles), the ALCM was designed to carry a 200 kiloton nuclear warhead, but this missile had been adapted to carry a conventional warhead. The ALCM streaking deep into Colombia, flying low, guided with terrain-contour matching for maximum accuracy, its radar altimeter maintaining its altitude, was carrying a 1000kg HE warhead.

The E-3 Sentry, an adapted Boeing 707 airliner fitted with a massive rotodome mounted on two struts above the fuselage circled high just off the Colombian coast. The AWAC aircraft tracked the missile and contacted the spotters.

“Hawk-eye, this is Eagle-Eye, come in.”

“Hawk-Eye receiving.”

“Light her up.”

The spotter squeezed the trigger of his radar marker, effectively lighting a beacon for the incoming missile.

“Thunderbolt incoming, ETA 3 minutes,” the AWAC operator reported.

“Understood.”

“Status?”

“Refuelling of chopper complete, loading, preparing for dust-off.”

“Understood, keep apprised.”

At the base, Misha waited impatiently, puffing on a cigarette as the surviving Russians and Cubans loaded their electronic equipment and weapons aboard the chopper.

“Come on, come on!” he urged in Russian.

Standing around, armed Colombians eyed them. Misha wished he had time to eradicate these scum, but he couldn't afford to waste a second. He had the uneasy feeling the Colombians natives had a similar feeling about their departing guests and that they would have no compunction about butchering them.

The last crate was hefted aboard the chopper and its engines began to crank up.

"Move, move!" Misha barked, waving the men aboard, his MP5 resting in his arms. As the last of his men bundled aboard, the Russian spat on the ground and swung himself up into the doorway.

"Let's get the hell out of here, Nikolai!" he shouted into the mouthpiece of the radio headset he pulled on.

"Hawk-eye, target acquired, get your heads down, this is going to be a big one!"

"Roger that, Eagle-Eye, Hawk-Eye out!" The two spotters sunk into their deep foxhole, pulling Kevlar helmets over their heads.

As the Chopper cleared the ground, its engines shrieking, the Cruise missile streaked in from above, slamming into the control tower. A blinding flash lit up the sky, searing heat gobbling up all available oxygen, sucking it deep into the heart of the blast. The mountains themselves seemed to shake, as fire leapt outwards, enveloping the mountaintop base and engulfing the surrounding jungle. A massive compression wave tore out through the mountain air; the two spotters a mile away, hands clasped over their ears, screamed to avoid burst eardrums. Finally sound caught up with light and an air-shattering blast tore outwards, ricocheting through the mountains.

The two spotters poked their heads above the parapet and gazed out to where the base had once been. The distant mountaintop was now a lifeless scene of utter devastation. A huge crater marked where the tower and main buildings had once been, the runway was torn and buckled, the earth around roughly churned. Everything within a half-mile radius was flattened, all buildings obliterated, the trees at the edge of the jungle splintered and torn up

by their roots. The bush itself smouldered gently; the once lush vegetation charred black. The helicopter had vanished, ripped to shreds, and nothing stirred amidst this scene of utter desolation. As the ravaged ground smouldered, a giant pillar of smoke rose high above, forming an ugly mushroom cloud.

As the rumble of the blast died, the sound of pounding helicopter rotors filled the air. A Black Hawk and two Super Stallions swung into view, banking around the mountainside. As the lead Black Hawk swept down, 12.7mm and 7.62mm miniguns opened up from its open side-doors and gun pods. The rounds ripped into the ground and burning trees, further churning up the grim scene below. Hellfire missiles streaked from the chopper, slamming into the surrounding jungle, igniting in a thunderous fireball.

The smoke swirled as the three choppers settled down, door guns still ripping into the treelines. Soldiers spilled from the helicopter, fanning out, securing the LZ. Twelve heavily armed men jumped from the Black Hawk, all Americans. Taking up point, they headed out. As the Black Hawk took off, circling overhead, scanning the jungle below, the rest of the force followed the leading American soldiers. Around a hundred troops had landed aboard the two Super Stallions, mostly Colombian Army Special Forces taught by US Advisors.

The force quickly searched and secured the shattered remnants of the base, the Colombians digging in, setting up communications equipment. The twelve Americans co-opted around two dozen Colombians and headed out into the blackened bush. Reaching the edge, they were amazed to see two local natives, smoke-blackened and bloody, dressed in little more than rags, stumbling dazed, but alive out into the clearing. The Americans halted. The point-man glanced back at the squad leader. He nodded curtly. The soldier on point raised his M4 and fired a short volley, cutting down the two survivors.

The patrol trampled over the dead bodies, grinding them into the scorched earth. Fanning out they swept through the trees. As they plunged deeper, hacking through the bush, cries were heard, followed by short staccato bursts of fire.

As darkness fell, the Colombians lit a fire and waited. From the jungle the chatter of gunfire and screams echoed through the night.

Chapter 31

“Here is this morning’s news, on Thursday August 8th.

“The President is today expected to announce his new cabinet, with sources suggesting that, in an unprecedented move, serving General Paul Harker, presently Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, will be named Vice President and Secretary of Defence. At present it remains unclear whether General Harker will continue in his previous post, but this seems unlikely. The General is believed to remain in the service, at least for the time being, while supervising the nation’s defence and security in this time of crisis. This unprecedented step is believed to have come about due to the current violent instability, the General’s lack of political experience more than made up for by his military expertise.

“Paul Alexander Harker was born in 1946, son of Gillian and Frank Harker. He spent his early life around Fort Bragg in North Carolina, where his father was an officer with the 82nd Airborne. Frank Harker was a highly decorated veteran of WW2 and later Korea, and the family followed him through his various postings around the world.

“At eighteen, Paul went to West Point, distinguishing himself during his four years and graduating near the top of his class in 1968. Volunteering for infantry, he joined the 82nd Airborne, the unit his father had retired from recently at the rank of Colonel. Within months, the young Lieutenant Harker was shipped to Vietnam.

“During his first tour of duty, Harker distinguished himself on many occasions in combat, receiving the Silver Star and a Purple Heart. During his second tour, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and promoted to Captain. His Company earned itself a fearsome reputation with the enemy, resulting with the North Vietnamese putting a bounty on the young officer’s head.

“On completing his second tour, Harker volunteered for Army Special Forces. Completing his training, he returned to Vietnam, leading a twelve man A-Team on countless

deep penetration missions behind enemy lines, in the process earning himself another Silver Star.

“After Vietnam, Harker remained with Special Forces, joining the Delta Force counter-terrorist unit in the late seventies. After the abortive Iranian rescue mission of 1979, Harker became second in command of Delta, and during the invasion of Grenada helped rescue American students held hostage by the left-wing rebels.

“Harker transferred to Intelligence and through his work at the Pentagon, eventually to the Chiefs of Staff. Promoted to Brigadier General, it is believed he played a crucial role in the planning of operations in Panama and in the Gulf. As a Lieutenant General Harker became Army Chief and last year he was appointed Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

“Married, with two teenage children, General Harker is universally respected by his peers and subordinates, and many testify to his warmth and charm. Hopefully these talents will help him in his new career.

“It is believed that the time General Harker and the President spent as prisoners of renegade army officer, John Ullrich, cemented their relationship, with the new President coming to rely on the officer’s courage and iron resolve. Since being rescued from an abandoned airstrip in southern Texas two days ago, it is understood the two men have been in close conference, discussing possible measures to re-establish security and stability in this fraught time for the American people. Surely in this time of national emergency, these two men, both having served their nation in war, are the team most likely to succeed.

“As note of interest, General Harker and John Ullrich were near contemporaries at West Point and at various times during their military careers. Although it seems the men did know each other and even worked together on occasion, the pair never became friends. However, sources close to the General confirm he did know Ullrich, adding that this knowledge could prove a vital tool in countering any elements of the renegade Colonel’s private army still operational.

“Be sure to tune into our special tonight at eight o’clock eastern, examining the life and career of General Harker, ‘*American Soldier, American Saviour.*’

“Meanwhile, in northern Colombia, a combined force of American and Colombian troops continue to search the mountain-top lair of Ullrich, looking for survivors. Their speedy assault on the terrorist lair, two days ago, is believed to have caught Ullrich off-guard, with most of his men quickly overwhelmed by the superior force. After putting up a brief and brutal defence, the fanatical terrorists were wiped out, only a few fleeing into the surrounding jungle. Most of these were soon hunted down, any remaining having likely perished from wounds and the numerous perils of the jungle.

“While the combined force continues to sweep the area, searching for Ullrich’s body, questions have been asked about the total absence of prisoners taken. A Pentagon spokesman explained this, stating that the degree of fanaticism among the terrorists led them to refuse to surrender, choosing instead to fight to the death. Asked about confirmation of Ullrich’s death, the spokesman said they may never find the former officer’s remains or make a confirmed identification, due in part to severe damage to many of the bodies, but he added that they were convinced that Ullrich and all the men with him are dead.

“However, at present, no one can be sure that there are not elements of Ullrich’s army still in place within the United States, and concern remains high about possible retaliatory action.

“Investigations have begun into Ullrich affair, with preliminary findings indicating a Russian involvement, possibly Communist, with former Soviet military personnel found amongst the dead with Ullrich’s men. According to the FBI, this tallies with Ullrich’s left-leaning political beliefs. Also, links with American Militia groups have been mooted, a link forged by Ullrich’s supposed racism.

“Meanwhile, here in Washington, preparations continue for Friday’s funeral service for our fallen President, and elsewhere services have been taking place for the Secretary of Defence and all those who perished in the dastardly attack.”

* * *

The funeral for Jeff Parsons, much delayed during the crisis, took place late on Thursday morning. Mourners gathered around the grave, their dark dress and sombre demeanour in stark contrast to the gleaming blue azure sky overhead, the warm sun bathing the cold stone slabs scarring the ground.

As the coffin was lowered into the ground, Sarah Parsons tossed a single white rose down onto the casket, her face frozen in a mask of grief.

As the crowd began to break up, the Acting Director of the FBI shook the widow’s hand, offering his condolences before hurrying away, surrounded by a phalanx of bodyguards. The new Deputy Director, Philip Newman, a thin smile on his face, quickly shook Sarah’s hand, his cold, clammy hand limp in hers, then hurried after his boss.

Assorted friends and colleagues of Parsons filed past the widow, shaking hands, some of the women tearful, embracing Sarah, sobbing as she stood unwavering. She just nodded, smiling wanly as the muttered platitudes washed over her.

A tall, thin man appeared before her. She looked up, noting his right arm in a sling, a cane held in his left hand. The dark suit was immaculately tailored, expensive shoes burnished, but the face seemed at odds with the clothes. The young man’s face, bruised and scratched, eyes hidden behind dark glasses, was lean, slightly twisted, his dark hair shorn close to his scalp. His spare features were at once hard and brittle. He smiled sadly, his split upper lip twitching painfully.

Sarah held out her hand. The young man raised the cane in his left hand and wagged his slung right arm. His eyebrows raised behind his glasses; "I would if I could!"

"I'm sorry." Sarah lowered her hand, smiling despite herself at the idiocy of the situation.

"My name's Saul Steiner, I worked with your husband."

"You're an Agent?"

"Yes, we were working on his last case. I can't tell you how much we all admired him. He'll be sorely missed," pain seeming to course his face.

"Thank you," she smiled.

"His death was so unnecessary," he shook his head. "How are you managing?"

"OK."

"If there is anything I can do, really anything, just call me!" Steiner rested his cane against his leg and fumbled in his jacket pocket. Wavering unsteadily, he stumbled forward. Sarah caught him, steadying him. Steiner noticed the strength in such a small, slender woman. He smiled as he straightened up.

"Thanks, here's my number call any time," he handed the card to Sarah.

She read it, looking up, she said, "Looks like you're the one who could use some help!" she smiled crookedly.

"Me?" he grinned, "I'm beyond help!"

Leaning heavily on his cane, he limped away.

"Will I see you at the wake later?" she called.

He paused, looking back over his shoulder, "Can't, I'm afraid, but call me."

Slowly he hobbled away, Sarah watching as she shook another hand and listened to the mumbled condolences.

"Who's that?" Frank Willis muttered, nodding towards the limping man edging away from Sarah Parsons.

Standing next to him on the little knoll, set back from the grave, Rachel Vansen squinted through her dark glasses. Both Agents were pretty beaten up, their faces bruised and cut, like many of those around the grave.

“Steiner,” she muttered.

“Who’s he?”

“An agent out of Quantico, we were both on the HRT. Real hotshot, total asshole.”

Willis laughed, “How so?”

“I dunno, good agent, crack shot, but kind of a jerk. Gives you the creeps!” she shuddered.

“The *creeps*?” Willis chuckled.

“Something about him. Ex-army, thinks his shit don’t stink. He can be quite charming, but kind of haughty and aloof, a loner. Can’t work out if people don’t want to get close to him or he wants to keep his distance, either way, the cool sort. In company, friendly and charming enough, but get him alone, he seems awkward and then seems to vanish before your eyes.”

“How do you mean?” Willis frowned.

“Can’t really explain. Like he’s afraid, ashamed maybe. Becomes like there’s nothing there and melts into the shadows.”

“Freaky.”

“You said it, some of us think he’s cracked, there is something disturbing about him.”

“Introduce me.” Willis started forward.

“What the fuck for?” Vansen hurried after him.

“I want to meet him.”

“Why?”

Willis shrugged.

“Shit!” Vansen muttered.

The pair approached the limping man.

“Hey, Steiner! Solly!” Vansen called.

The man slowed and turned, a frown furrowing his brow.

“You remember me don’t you?” she laughed pleasantly.

“Sure, Vansen, Quantico.”

“Oh, you don’t have to be shy, you can call me Rachel!” she grinned. Willis looked at his hard-boiled partner, suddenly flirting so coquettishly. Then he noticed Steiner was blushing. Jesus, he thought.

“Yeah, Rachel.”

“I didn’t know you knew Parsons?”

“We worked together.” Steiner whispered.

“What on?” she smiled.

“This and that.”

“Oh this is Agent Frank Willis, we both worked with Parsons,” she introduced the two men. “You still with the HRT?”

“Not at the moment, I’m on assignment.”

“Oh yeah, where?” Vansen seemed to be edging closer and closer to Steiner, invading his space.

Steiner grinned crookedly and tapped his nose.

Vansen laughed, laying a hand on his chest, their bodies only inches apart.

“You give me a call sometime, Solly, you and me can go out. You got my number?” she leaned into him.

“Oh yeah, I got your number!” he laughed and walked away.

“You want a ride?” she called after him.

“I’m okay, thanks,” he replied without turning.

Willis and Vansen walked away.

“You think he acts weird, if you behave like that around him, I’m not surprised. You scared the B-Jesus out of me, that’s for sure!” Willis shook his head as they walked.

“I use all the weapons in my arsenal!” she grinned.

“He looked pretty beat up.”

“And we don’t? Half the Bureau’s fucked up one way or another. We came out of it better than Steiner, he came out of it better than Parsons and dozens of others of poor schmoes!”

“I guess, I wonder what he’s been up to though?”

“What’s the sudden interest in Steiner?”

“Don’t know, but his name rings a bell, and have you noticed he kind of looks like the photo-fit of Riesman, you know the guy with Ullrich.”

“Jesus, you’re getting paranoid as shit, that picture looked like anyone, you can’t tell shit from a photo-fit, they look like anyone and no-one.”

“I suppose.”

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As night fell, a dark sedan swept into an underground car park, situated near the Watergate Complex. Steiner slid from behind the wheel and strode across the gloomy interior, his footsteps echoing against the cold concrete walls. The cane was gone, as was the sling, in their place just some bandages on his right arm and a slight limp as he moved.

Popping open the front passenger door of a dark Mercedes sedan, he slipped in.

“How’s it going?” Richard Hobson asked.

Steiner looked across at Hobson, sitting behind the wheel.

“Okay, by the way I hear congratulations are in order,” Steiner stuck a cigarette between his lips. “National Security Advisor, very nice!”

Hobson pulled a cigarette from his own pack, lit Steiner’s then his.

“Another job title.” He muttered, exhaling a plume of smoke.

“Up the greasy pole. Smoothly, just as planned.” Steiner smiled, slouching in his seat.

“A word in the right ear.” Hobson laughed.

“That’s military efficiency for you.” Steiner snorted.

Hobson glared across, “Watch your mouth, Steiner!”

“Sure,” he drew deeply on the cigarette.

“What have you been up to?” Hobson growled.

“This and that.”

“Nice funeral?”

“Very tasteful.” Steiner looked out of the window.

“So it is true what they say about the murderer returning to the scene of the crime.”

Hobson sneered.

“Yeah, I saw you there.”

“And I saw you talking to the grieving widow, what the fuck was that all about?”

Hobson demanded.

“Just tidying up loose ends, making sure she doesn’t know anything.”

“You keep away from her, I’ll handle it, you keep your fucking distance, you hear me!” he shouted, his face flushing apoplectically.

Smirking, Steiner looked sideways at the older man, “My, my, you don’t have a crush, do you, Dicky? And your best pal not even cold in the ground. How indecent!” he chuckled.

“Don’t you fuck with me, you little shit, I’ll rip your fucking heart out!” Hobson jabbed his finger at him.

“What would a pretty, smart young woman want with a fat fuck like you. I know power is the ultimate aphrodisiac, but...”

Hobson lunged across the interior of the car, grabbing the other man by the collar, jerking him round, locking his big hands around his neck. Steiner remained loose and relaxed. He gently brought his forearms up between Hobson’s wrists, then quickly snapped them wide apart, tearing the hands from his throat, then driving the heel of his hand into the bridge of the driver’s nose, the bone and cartilage crunching. Blood streamed down his face as he reeled back.

“You fuck, one day you’ll go too far!” Hobson held a handkerchief to his bloody face.

“That’s up to the General. I’ll play it my way, I’ll report when I have anything.” Steiner popped open the passenger door and slid out. Pausing, he ducked back down inside and grinned.

“I hope I haven’t ruined your looks!” He laughed and slammed the door, walking away into the shadows.

Chapter 32

The three Colombian Indians wandered along the dusty road, drifting lethargically in the stifling heat. The two young men and teenage boy, all dressed in grubby shorts and T-shirts chattered aimlessly. The left of the road was edged by verdant jungle, stretching up the mountainside, the right a desolate wilderness of tree stumps and trampled dirt, rolling down to a meandering river.

The air in the foothills of the mountains was dense and steamy; in the distance came the sound of chainsaws and the rumble of heavy machinery. The young natives avoided the sounds, dodging work with the logging teams.

As they chattered, the bush ahead on the left rustled and the three youths froze in disbelief as a wiry white man, dressed in grimy military fatigues and carrying an automatic rifle, stepped out of the jungle. The man paused, as if sniffing the air, then slowly turned and grinned at the gawking natives. The three youths slowly backed off, but then from behind the jungle rustled and yielded another white man, this one a giant, huge and frightening, his white-blond hair shaved back hard against his square skull. This one did not grin, just glared, pointing his rifle at the three of them. The Indians glanced from one to the other, then quickly across to the river. The teenager stifled a sob of alarm. The three took off, leaping off the road and racing through the tree stumps.

“Stop!” a voice cried from behind in Spanish, but the three kept on running. There was a single shot, the bullet tearing over their heads. They froze, turning slowly, staring back up at the road. Between the two other white men, another had now appeared. He supported yet another man, who sagged against him, his arm slung around his shoulders. This one did not look well.

“Come here, everything is all right, we will not hurt you!” the man carrying the other said in Spanish. This one was a tall, lean man, grey-haired, very tough looking, but the

frightened Colombians obeyed, shuffling back towards the road. Climbing onto the dusty track, they stood before the white men, hanging their heads.

“You live near here?” the grey-haired one asked softly.

“Yes, sir,” the eldest muttered.

“How far?”

“Ten minutes walk, sir.”

“You seen any soldiers, Colombians, Americans?”

The Indian looked up at the tall white man, “Only you, sir.”

“Good. Take me to your village, my friend here is sick, he needs help.”

“Yes, sir,” the young man muttered fearfully, he and his friend heading off, walking slowly, the white men following closely behind.

Ullrich handed the semi-conscious Watson over to Hooker, the big NCO easily supporting the groggy officer, half carrying him along the dusty road. The Colonel waggled his aching shoulders, rotating his stiff neck, unslinging his Galil SAR, following closely behind the cowed Colombians.

The four Americans had been in the bush for almost a week, hacking their way through the dense jungle, avoiding skirmishing patrols that often swept within feet of them, while helicopters pounded across the sky above. With their meagre rations quickly exhausted and water running low, they stumbled on, but Watson had become sick in the last 48 hours, vomiting, diarrhoea and the sweats, finally lapsing in and out of consciousness. It looked like dysentery. His state continued to worsen, dehydrated, exhausted and drifting into a daze-like coma. He needed immediate medical help.

Ullrich wanted to avoid contact with any locals, fearing exposure, but Watson’s illness and their own dwindling supplies left no alternative, indeed the other three were wasting away from hunger and exhaustion, their thirst and debilitation making them clumsy, becoming little more than dazed, shambling zombies.

Rounding a bend, they saw the ramshackle village ahead, a collection of wood and straw huts, mixed with a few pre-fabricated huts, probably purloined from the loggers, the mix reflecting the dress of the villagers, a mixture of tattered modern garb and ancient tribal dress. Their argot, rising in a chatter, seemed a hybrid of Spanish and some tribal tongue. Open fires burnt in the centre of the tiny village, goats and dogs wandered among the grimy barefoot natives. Around everything hung the air of squalor, like a thousand villages Ullrich had seen in his career, from Vietnam onward, the filth and desperation the same the world over.

A cry rose up from the villagers when they saw the approaching white men. Entering the edge of the encampment, the three young men scattered, dashing across the open centre of the village, approaching a grizzled old man, outfitted entirely in tribal dress. The youths chattered excitedly to the man, obviously the headman, reporting in their strange argot. The old man, his leathery inscrutable native face fixing on the Americans. He held up his hand and approached them.

The old, wizened man halted in front of Ullrich, staring defiantly up at him.

“What do you want?” he rasped in Spanish.

“My friend is sick, he needs help.” Ullrich indicated Watson, hanging across Hooker’s broad shoulders. “Also we would be grateful for food and water. We have travelled far; we’re thirsty, hungry and tired. All we want is to rest and to eat. We will not stay long.”

“We have no doctor or medical supplies. We have little food, we are poor. Perhaps the loggers camp, they have a doctor, it is not far...”

“We cannot go to the loggers camp. We only require a little food and rest, we can pay.” Ullrich interrupted.

“Why can you not go to the loggers, perhaps it is the soldiers there?” the old man whispered slyly.

Ullrich shrugged, “We don’t want trouble, but your army is hunting us...”

“But you would bring us trouble. It is not only our army that hunts you, white soldiers have come here.”

“You know who we are, that they seek us?”

“You are trouble, that is all I need know, we will give you food and water, but you must leave here quickly, the soldiers may return, we will be punished!”

“I understand, thank you.” Ullrich nodded deferentially.

The old man waved them into the camp, Hooker set Watson down in the shade of a hut, and two native women began to wash and tend to him. The big Sergeant settled down in the dirt beside Meadows and Ullrich. Food was quickly set before them, with it large earthenware jugs of water. The three Americans thirstily gulped down the water and began devouring the food. The natives squatted nearby watching the white men with a mixture of curiosity and fear. Ullrich was suddenly aware of his own filth and stench, even among these squalid villagers.

The three Americans kept their rifles near, but as they ate and drank, they became relaxed, even sleepy. They sat back, content in the sun. The headman approached them.

“Your friend is cleaned, we give him medicine we have, but he is very sick, he must see doctor, go hospital, or he may die.”

“I understand. How far is the nearest town?” Ullrich asked.

“Almost hundred miles, but doctor at loggers, other logging camps between here and town. They have radio, telephone at loggers. We are very poor. Your friend must go doctor, hospital, he die.”

“He’ll die, we’ll all die if we give up to the army.”

The old man shrugged, “You must go soon, we give you food and water for your journey,” a native youth approached the headman and whispered to him, he nodded. “Your friend is awake, he wants to speak to you.”

Ullrich climbed to his feet, slinging his Galil and Watson's Commando and followed the youth.

Watson sat propped up in the shade of a hut, an Indian girl by his side feeding him water, some spilling down his chin. He waved aside the proffered food and grinned feebly at Ullrich as he approached. The Colonel squatted down by his side.

"How are you, Charlie?" he asked.

"Been better." Watson chuckled, his laughter tailing off into a hacking cough.

"We're going to have to move soon, its going to be a journey a hundred miles or more, on foot."

Watson nodded, "I'm slowing you up, aren't I?"

"We'll manage."

"It'll be tough going, I can't expect you to carry me. Anyway, I don't think I could make it."

"I'm not leaving you, I've never left a man, I won't start now. We can lay up somewhere, wait for you to recover, move slow, speed isn't important." Ullrich shook his head.

Watson smiled grimly; "I ain't going to get better, not on my own. I know without a doctor I won't make it."

"We can snatch a doctor somewhere, maybe get transport as well," he pleaded.

"You're dreaming, Jack. I should be in a hospital, you take me with you I'll slow you up, get you killed." He reached up, laying a hand on his friend's shoulder, "Leave me, Jack, you got to make it out of here. Leave me with supplies and a weapon; I'll hole up. Maybe I'll pull through, you can get out, maybe come back for me." Both men knew it was a lie.

"We can't hand you over to them to get medical help, it would expose us."

“I understand, anyway they’d kill my ass, sure as shit.” Watson smiled sadly, “No, I’m better off on my own. With supplies and rest, I could pull through, you know its the only way.”

Ullrich nodded, “I’ll try to make it back for you.” Both men smiled and nodded at the lie.

Ullrich pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his tunic pocket, handed one to Watson, took one himself and lit them both with his Zippo lighter. The two men sat close together, smoking in silence, staring out into the sun-lit village.

Outside the hut they heard the scuffle of feet and whispered voices. The hushed words seeped through the straw hut, most garbled native dialect, but the odd word in Spanish: Americans, Pesos, Army, and Reward. Ullrich and Watson looked at each other. Lifting the Colt Commando, Ullrich yanked back the charging handle and handed the weapon to the other man. Watson cradled the rifle in his arms and smiled.

“I’ll be back, stand fast.” Ullrich whispered, slipping to his feet, heading out of the hut, cocking his rifle as he moved, flicking the safety off.

Striding across the open village centre, Ullrich saw Hooker and Meadows sitting together, smoking, the smaller man clowning about, the Sergeant stonily ignoring him. Hooker looked up; Ullrich caught his eye, giving him an almost imperceptible nod. The Sergeant reached across, drawing his rifle close, at the same time nudging Meadows. Still smiling and laughing, the Special Forces Major drew his rifle nearer.

Drawing closer, Ullrich heard the rattle of both men’s weapon’s as they chambered rounds. The watching villagers gathered nearby seemed to freeze and draw up straight at the harsh metallic sound. The Colonel reached the two men and they jumped to their feet, weapons ready.

The headman hurried over, “You leave?” he burred.

“Yeah.” Ullrich muttered, his eyes sweeping the village.

“No hurry, no hurry, you rest, stay!” the old man blustered breathlessly.

“No, we better go now.”

“No, no, you stay!”

Ullrich’s eyes narrowed, “You changed your tune,” he whispered, “You want us to stay?”

“Yes, stay, stay!” the headman cried eagerly.

“Don’t think so.” Ullrich nodded to the other two and they headed off towards Watson’s hut.

The villagers swarmed around them, blocking their way, the old man clinging onto Ullrich’s sleeve. The three Americans waded through the throng, cries rising around them. Another crowd appeared, gathering ahead of them, blocking their way.

“You stay, you stay!” the headman shouted pleadingly above the rising roar of the swarming villagers.

“Fuck!” Ullrich muttered. He swung his rifle, slamming its hilt into the old man’s head, knocking him to the ground. A roar of anger rose from the villagers. He raised the Galil and fired a short burst in to the air, silencing the throng. He lowered the rifle and aimed it at the crowd ahead.

“We are leaving!” he shouted in Spanish.

The mob around the Americans drew back, sweeping up the headman.

The three Americans moved forward slowly. The crowd ahead stirred, spitting out a single man, held awkwardly in his arms an old bolt-action rifle, rusted by age. He raised the rifle and fired.

The poorly aimed round flew wildly off to Ullrich’s right. He raised his Galil and fired a short burst into the little man, ripping him open, throwing him to the ground, his rifle spinning away.

Silence hung for a minute, then a great cry rose from the massed villagers, and they surged forward, weapons suddenly appearing, machetes, scythes and clubs waved above their heads as they charged.

Ullrich opened up, cutting down the first rank off the mob ahead, but more came, and still more as he fired into each, slicing them apart. Meadows and Hooker fired into the crowds on their flanks and closing from the rear, each burst chopping down a cluster of charging villagers, men and women, old and young, even children. But still they came.

The three men cut through the crowds as they moved, like chopping a path through a jungle, wading through the bodies to Watson. The villagers never got close enough to use their crude weapons. Bodies lay heaped dead and dying in their wake as they reloaded and forged onwards.

Ullrich heard the rattle of a Colt Commando ahead; he urged the others on. Suddenly gunfire opened up on them from their right. Dropping low, they saw three natives firing from behind the cover a steeply banked berm. One had another old bolt-action rifle, another an ancient double-barrelled shotgun, the third a rusty revolver.

“This is getting fucking silly!” Meadows muttered.

Ullrich nodded to Hooker, the two officers opened up, hosing down the berm, keeping the shooters' heads down. The Sergeant stripped two fragmentation grenades from his webbing, removed the pins, and lobbed one, then the other high through the air, their handles springing clear. The two frags arced high and dropped behind the bank, the two explosions coming on top of each other, ripping the position apart.

Ullrich cut down a group charging from the flank, “Move, move!”

The three were up moving fast, firing as they went, bullets ripping into the surrounding huts, dropping everyone in sight.

“It must be some fucking reward!” Ullrich muttered under his breath as they rounded the corner.

Watson was dragging himself across open ground, pausing to fire, each burst felling more attackers. Ullrich saw him.

“Charlie!” he shouted.

Watson grinned.

Suddenly heavy gunfire ripped into the ground between them. Watson rolled into the shelter of a hut; the other three dived for cover.

Ullrich peered around the corner. A Jeep and two trucks reared into view, Colombian troops firing from them as they sped down the road. The three vehicles roared to halt, heavily armed troops spilling from them and fanning out. The incoming gunfire intensified.

“Colonel, we gotta get out of here!” Hooker whispered in Ullrich’s ear, while Meadows struggled to return fire. He peered out, and saw Watson tucked in the shadow of a wall, less than 100 metres away. The troops were closing from the flank, incoming fire were keeping him pinned down.

“Charlie!” he shouted desperately above the gunfire.

His old friend grinned and winked, “Go, get out of here!” he called.

Ullrich shook his head.

“Do it, get the fuck out!” he shouted and leant out of cover, firing into the approaching soldiers, driving them to ground.

Ullrich turned to the other two, “Alright, let’s go.” He jumped to his feet and headed fast towards the river, Hooker close behind, Meadows taking up the rear, firing as he moved. Gunfire chewed up the ground around them, spitting dirt and stones into the air, splintering tree stumps. Reaching the river, the three leapt down by its side, ducking below the tall bank, bullets ripping into the top.

Watson kept firing into the approaching troops, barely pausing when a round ripped into his right thigh. As the blood pooled around him, he surprised himself by laughing,

ramming home his last magazine, and opening up. When the gun cracked dry, he tossed it away and unholstered his Beretta automatic, racking back the slide and waiting.

Too busy watching and waiting for the approaching troops, Watson did not hear the small group of villagers creeping around the rear of the hut. The American fired two rounds from his pistol at the soldiers, laughing wildly, when suddenly the villagers lunged out, waving their clubs and machetes.

“Shit!” Watson whispered, bringing his pistol round.

They leapt, the single round fired knocking down one of the attackers, the other three pouncing, bringing their weapons down again and again on the helpless American, hacking and pounding wildly, blood splattering their contorted faces.

Watson’s anguished screams rose through the air, travelling down to the river where his comrades waited. They crouched shivering as the shrieks reached them, the torment interminable, before the screams finally died, choked off in a strangled cry.

The army Jeep rolled down closer to the river, the big .50 calibre machine gun mounted on the rear ripping into the riverbank, blasting gouts of dirt high into the air. The troops swarmed across the scarred ground, firing as they moved.

The Americans jammed their rifles over the ledge and fired into the approaching men, cutting down the first wave, the rest hitting the dirt, returning fire, driving the defenders back down.

As the Americans tried to fight back, the Colombian troops swept around, cutting them off. Hooker and Ullrich lobbed grenades, Meadows providing covering fire, the blasts ripping the air, the screams of the wounded attackers rolling down the river.

From far off came the unmistakable cough of a mortar firing, closely followed by a second. The shells fell, straddling the American’s position, blasting earth from above down on them and splashing into the river, blasting water high into the air. The Americans

crouched, occasionally returning fire, as the creeping shells drew closer. Drenched with water and splattered with mud, they looked at each other grimly.

“We’re out of grenades.” Hooker muttered.

“Ammo?” Ullrich asked.

“Only one more clip after this one.” Meadows said, indicating the magazine already seated in his weapon.

“Same.” Hooker grunted.

“I’ve got one more, and of course two, three pistol clips.” Ullrich said.

“We’ve all got pistol ammo, but that is gonna be useless here.” Meadows muttered.

“Save one round, they ain’t going to take us alive.” Ullrich said.

“Fucking A!” Hooker grunted.

The mortar shells were blasting all around them.

“Their spotter has got our range, they’re firing for effect.” Ullrich ducked as a shell exploded close by.

Meadows jumped up, ripping off a long burst, dropping down as the heavy machine gun tore into the bank above.

A crazed shriek rattled through the air.

“What the fuck is that?” Ullrich snarled, “Cover me!”

The Colonel straightened up, the two other men firing from either side of him. He spotted a rag-tag bunch of villagers dancing and caterwauling just to the rear of the dug-in troops. He peered through his field glasses. He spotted the headman, flanked by villagers waving bloody clubs and machetes. One of them was waving a pole; something mounted on its end. Ullrich looked closer. He sucked in a breath as he recognised Watson’s battered head jammed on the end of the pole, blood streaming down the wooden shaft. He howled, lifted his rifle and opened up, firing wildly at the mob, sending them scattering. Ullrich continued firing even as the incoming rounds ripped into the ground around him. He screamed, face

contorted, emptying his rifle's 35 round magazine. Hooker and Meadows dragged him back down into cover.

“What the fuck?” cried Meadows.

“Fucking savages!” sobbed Ullrich.

“What?”

“They cut off Charlie's fucking head, stuck it on a pole!” the Colonel almost screamed.

“Jesus!” whispered Meadows.

“Fucking cocksuckers!” Hooker snarled, bolting up, firing out, his weapon spewing a long, uncontrollable burst.

Meadows reached to grab him, but Ullrich's arm snapped across, stopping the Major.

“Leave him,” he muttered.

Hooker dropped down, his ammo exhausted. He tossed his rifle aside, drew his Colt .45 automatic, chambered a round, and with his left hand pulled a small, snub-nosed, hammer-less S&W revolver from his webbing and drew it close to his chest. He squatted and waited, a pistol in each hand. Meadows popped, checked and reseated his last Commando magazine, unholstered his SIG, chambered a round, reholstering it still cocked. Ullrich also checked his HK pistol, seating it in his open holster, then drawing his Galil close.

As the mortar shells exploded around them, they sat and waited in silence. Out in the field the Colombian troops crawled closer, slithering through the dirt and brush.

A dark-painted Black Hawk helicopter swept down through the gully, its 12.7mm and 7.62mm mini guns ripping into the bank as it passed overhead. The three Americans scattered; miraculously avoiding being hit as their world erupted. Hooker cried out as a ricocheting round winged him, but he choked off his cry, quickly binding a tourniquet around his left arm.

The chopper settled down outside the village. Four heavily armed white soldiers jumped out, ducking to avoid the downdraft as the Black Hawk lifted off again, sweeping away at speed.

The four men, unmistakably American stalked over to Colombian CP.

“Who the fuck’s in command here?” the lead American barked.

A nervous Colombian officer stepped forward, “I am, sir.”

“Well, you ain’t anymore!” the American turned, the dismissed officer already forgotten, addressing the junior officers and NCOs in Spanish. “Kill those mortars, get your men ready to move. My chopper will pin down the targets, your troops will advance at speed and clean up anything left. Understood?”

The Colombians only glanced at their former commander briefly before acknowledging the command and hurrying off.

The mortar fire ceased, an eerie still descending.

“They’re coming.” Ullrich whispered.

They waited.

Then came the thud of approaching helicopter rotors and the Black Hawk hovered into view, sweeping down the river, its guns opening up as it closed. The three Americans fired back vainly as it closed, chewing into the ground around them.

“Another one!” Meadows cried, pointing at a second Black Hawk sweeping down the river from the opposite direction.

“So they’ll kill us twice.” Ullrich grunted, emptying his weapon into the first chopper.

Suddenly the second Black Hawk shuddered, a missile blasting from its side-mounted pod. Stunned, the three Americans watched as the Stinger missile slammed into the nose of the first chopper, detonating, ripping it open and dumping the burning wreck in the river.

The surviving Black Hawk banked, hovering and opened up with its miniguns, ripping into the approaching Colombian troops. The Jeep exploded and dozens of exposed men were torn apart as they scattered, fleeing in disarray.

“Who the fuck...” the watching American officer snarled, quickly diving for cover as the chopper ripped into his position. Grass smouldered around the chewed up bodies as the chopper continued to pound the fleeing troops.

Ceasing fire, the chopper swung around, moving slowly down to the three Americans by the river. Hovering low at the waters edge, the door gunner relinquished his weapon and held out his hand.

“Colonel Ullrich, I think we should get the fuck out of here, sir!” Max Paulus grinned, waving to the men.

“Paulus, Jesus!” Ullrich almost laughed.

The three men splashed through the water and clambered up into the chopper. All three aboard, the pilot cranked up the collective, dipped the nose and the chopper peeled away. Paulus swung behind his 7.62mm door gun and opened up, ripping into the village and surviving troops as they raced away, hugging the ground, engines shrieking. They swung out of the gully and picked up speed, sweeping away through the rolling hills and valleys.

“Good to see you, Colonel.” Paulus grinned as he slumped down next to the passengers.

“I’m more than glad to see you, Captain, you saved our asses, we were dead meat!” Ullrich slapped him on the arm, “I thought t you were dead, on the second Galaxy?”

“A hitch, I got left behind, I’ll explain later. Me and Dafoe got out; he’s laid up with a friend’s sister, a nurse, tending his wounds. He’s loving every minute. I rounded up some of the other men and some contacts and got my ass down here, figured you’d make it out!”

“Barely, but right now we got to figure what the fuck went wrong!” Ullrich’s grin vanished, “Its time for payback.”

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Back on the ground, the American in command and his three men wandered through the ruins, bloody carnage on all sides.

“I want that chopper traced, tracked and found!” he growled.

“Gonna be difficult, all these mountains, flying at low altitude. We’re out here in the back-end of beyond, in the fucking Stone Age,” one of his men replied.

“I don’t want to hear it, they’ll have my balls if I’ve fucked this!”

A wiry, old man approached, nodding and grinning.

“Who’s this asshole?” muttered the American officer.

“Headman,” one of his men whispered.

“My brave American friends!” the old man cooed, “I am so glad you have come, we have suffered, but now we will have our reward!”

“Your reward?” the American grinned.

“Yes, sir, the reward for delivering the white bandits, we did well, did we not?” he grinned, bobbing his head, “Have we not earned our reward?”

The tall American grinned, “Sure,” he turned to his men, “Give him his reward.”

One of the Americans fired a short burst into the old man’s chest, ripping him open and knocking him down.

“Terminate this place, and every fucking thing in it,” the American leader muttered, turning away.

His three men led out a team of Colombian troops and swept into the village, firing as they went, cutting down everything that moved, human or animal. Gunfire chattered and screams rose and fell as they tore through its heart. The American commander stood outside smoking. Anyone tried to flee; he cut them down with casual volley fired from the hip.

A quarter of an hour later, as they were choppered out, the village was no more, just scattered dead bodies, food for carrion, the huts ablaze, black smoke swirling away through the jagged gully.

Chapter 33

The dark sedan wound through the busy downtown DC traffic, the light fading quickly to evening gloom, the harsh artificial lights illuminating the night as it fell. Busy traffic clogged the streets as workers hurried home. National Guard and Army units stationed on street corners, set up makeshift checkpoints and OPs, covering each bustling street.

Steiner relaxed behind the wheel of his car, his digital scanner flicking through the various emergency frequencies, broken sentences and fractured voices filling the air. He glanced in his rear-view mirror, checked the tail several cars back, smiled and pressed his foot down on the accelerator.

Hanging back, the second dark sedan kept pace with Steiner, keeping him in sight, tracking him as he weaved through the traffic.

“Where’s this asshole going?” Willis muttered behind the wheel of the second car. “You think he spotted us?”

Vansen shrugged, “Who knows, if he has, he isn’t trying hard to shake us, he’s just playing with us.”

“Slippery little bastard, ain’t he?” Willis smiled crookedly.

“If you only knew.” Vansen twiddled with the knobs on the radio, flicking through the news, locating a pop station.

“How’d you mean?” Willis looked at her sideways.

“Fuck, I dunno. You were the one all hot to play secret squirrel and tail the freak. Don’t try and drag me into your paranoid fantasies.”

“Tell me about him, back at Quantico.”

“Like I said, I didn’t know him that well, then again nobody did. Kept to himself, no real friends,”

“You knew about his military record?”

“Pretty much, some of the guys thought it was hot shit, hero stuff, pumped him for war stories, wanted some gung-ho macho shit. He didn’t play along. That plus his holier than thou attitude pissed some people off. Some of the real macho assholes started trying to rile him, you know, whispering that he was a faggot, ragging on him. He laughed it off, except one time. This asshole, Figgis, huge guy, real jock, ex-football star, the whole nine yards, real prick, got in Steiner’s face. Baiting him, infantile name-calling shit, but then he went too far. Started shoving Steiner, but still he didn’t rise to it. Guess Figgis ran out of patience. He wanted a fight, so he slammed Steiner back against a wall, right in front of a couple of dozen HRT agents. No one did anything. No one said anything or lifted a finger to intervene. Anyway, Steiner, still grinning his lop-sided grin, didn’t seem that bothered. But then something came over him; his eyes kind of clouded for an instant and then his grin just gets wider. Figgis was right in his face, apoplectic, spittle spraying off his lip onto Steiner’s face. Steiner just stood still and silent. I mean completely still. Then from nowhere he suddenly flicks his head forward, butts Figgis in the face, shattering his nose. Blood everywhere. Figgis stumbles back, dazed and howling. Steiner just stepped calmly forward, drove a fist into the other guy’s solar plexus, doubling him up and brought down this sharp karate chop, knocking Figgis down onto the floor. Then he jammed his foot in this big guy’s throat, pinning him to the ground, choking the air out of him. We just froze, watching this whole thing unfold. But looking at the expression on Steiner’s face; so calm, smiling happily, but an almost savage mania in his eyes, I knew he was going to kill him. Figgis just lay there on the ground, sobbing for mercy, while Steiner calmly choked the life out of him.”

“What happened?”

“That was the weird part, we didn’t do a thing, just stood and watched. Then suddenly his eyes cleared and he just laughed. He lifted his foot of a half-dead Figgis and walked away.” Vansen shook her head.

“No comebacks?”

“The bosses wanted to keep out of it, just a pissing contest between agents, and anyway the senior agents present didn’t intervene when Figgis was busting Steiner’s balls, so they couldn’t complain when he fought back. Figgis didn’t file a complaint, I think he was terrified of Steiner. All the rest, those who had been on Steiner’s back, they must have felt the same, because they backed off after that. Pretty smart move, if you ask me. I reckon Steiner could have killed every last one of them without batting an eyelid,” she laughed coldly.

“So you reckon he’s capable of anything?” Willis asked.

“Like?”

“I don’t know.”

“What are you thinking?” Vansen turned.

“Well, if Parsons planted him, with someone else’s help, maybe he turned, or maybe there was a secret agenda the whole time, Parsons being used, maybe even Ullrich?”

“Ullrich?” she groaned.

“I’m not saying Ullrich wasn’t a psycho with his own agenda, but maybe someone saw a way to use him and Steiner was put in place to monitor him, maybe even subtly manipulate him.”

“This is paranoid bullshit, you really are fucking losing it, where are you getting this shit from?” Vansen laughed mirthlessly.

“Hey, I’m just thinking out loud, knocking a few ideas around!” Willis tried to laugh back.

“This is getting pretty wild, careful who you share your ideas with, you could end up with an extended stay at ‘The Retreat’!” Vansen referred to the private wing maintained by the FBI at a mental health facility on an estate in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

“Hey, just go with me for a minute.”

“Okay,” she sighed.

“I asked around, people around at the Bureau, some in the Army with Steiner. I’m sure Steiner was Riesman, that he infiltrated Ullrich’s group, under supervision of Parsons and others.”

“So you say, but you have no proof, but carry on.”

“This was not a Bureau sponsored action, no records, nothing, Steiner just unaccountably assigned to Parsons, duties unspecified, then he becomes invisible. This was a black op.”

“But why not go through Bureau channels?”

“Well apart from the bureaucratic bullshit, Ullrich was believed to have infiltrated all levels of national security and intelligence gathering. Everyone was compromised, including the Bureau. The only way to guarantee security was to run the op freelance, black, with only a privileged handful privy to the facts.”

“Reasonable hypothesis.”

“Steiner goes into prison, gathering information, but is caught up in a breakout, now he is with Ullrich. Everything dandy, after a while he must have made contact with his handlers, but as time rolls on, Ullrich continues to operate, stepping up his action. Does their operative supply information to close him down; does he try to bring Ullrich down himself? No.”

“And?”

“So Parsons gets suspicious, had Steiner gone bad, turned and joined Ullrich? Maybe, but unlikely, he is still in contact. So maybe he’s up to something else, playing a different game, maybe there is a different agenda, operated by Steiner and his other handlers.”

“To do what?”

“I don’t know, but Parsons gets suspicious, maybe confronts his fellow handlers, so they have to take action.”

“They kill Parsons?” Vansen looked aghast.

Willis shrugged, “Damage limitation, and you want to know my guess?”

“Oh Jesus, this is going to be great!”

“I reckon it was probably Steiner pulled the trigger on Parsons.”

“Of course, why not!” Vansen laughed wildly, shaking her head.

“Keep it in the family, and he could get access to Parsons apartment, they knew each other, kill him, make it look like Ullrich.”

“Or, maybe I’m being dense, maybe Ullrich really did kill Parsons, Riesman died in the breakout, and Steiner was off shuffling papers somewhere.”

“Maybe. I’m only bouncing ideas around.” Willis smiled.

“Careful, soon you could be bouncing around a padded cell. This is delusional!”

“Possible.”

“Yeah, but not plausible, and anyway you don’t have a shred of proof!”

“True, but I know who could provide it.”

“Don’t tell me?” Vansen groaned.

“Him.” Willis pointed through the windshield at the car they were tailing.

“You want to arrest Steiner?” she muttered in disbelief.

“I’m not that crazy, no we just have a little chat, broach the subject.”

“And he fesses up of course?” she snorted.

“I didn’t say it was going to be a friendly chat, maybe we sweat him a little.”

“Oh, I see, we just abduct a Federal Agent and torture him till he tells us what we want to here. Good plan!”

“I didn’t say it was perfect.”

“You’ve completely lost your fucking mind, you know that?”

Willis shrugged, “Think about it.”

Vansen sighed.

Steiner's car swung off the expressway, pulling into the parking lot of a Denny's restaurant.

"Now where's he going?" Willis groaned.

"Looks to me like he's going to sample the fine cuisine of Denny's!" Vansen laughed.

Steiner parked and climbed out of his car and walked briskly over to the brightly-lit restaurant.

Willis and Vansen parked a short distance away and watched and waited.

Steiner entered, walking across the restaurant, entering the bathroom.

"Maybe he isn't going to eat." Willis muttered.

"Not unless he's suicidal as well as homicidal?" Vansen grinned.

The two sat and waited. After a few minutes, Willis reached down and turned off the car radio.

"He's taking his time," he grunted.

"Maybe he's all backed up?" she laughed.

"Knock it off!" he drew his Smith & Wesson automatic, pulling back the slide, chambering a round. He slid the cocked and locked pistol back into his holster.

"What the fuck are you planning on doing?"

"Checking the john." Willis said dryly.

"Great fucking idea, what if he's still in there, he knows you? What do you say, 'Hey, what are the chances of us two bumping into each other all the way out here!' Think straight, he'll either blow us wide open, destroy our careers, so we end up working in a fucking Denny's, or if you're right, he'll kill you!"

"Maybe, or we snatch him right here, right now and have a chat."

"Shit!"

“I have to check, he could have gone out the window, or something! You wait here, watch the car.” Willis slid out of the sedan and hurried over to the restaurant, entering and heading straight into the men’s room.

Vansen drew her SIG P228 automatic, chambering a round, resting the weapon in her lap, waiting, listening out for gunshots.

Nothing. Not a sound, and no sign of Willis or Steiner. She waited a couple of minutes, then popped her door and climbed out, her pistol hanging low by her side.

A figure appeared from around the side of the restaurant. Vansen’s fingers tightened around her weapon. Willis emerged from the shadows, the front of jacket and shirt scuffed and dirty, tie torn.

“What the fuck happened to you?” she asked.

“He’s gone, an open window in the bathroom, I went out through it, but I’m a bit wider in the girth than Steiner,” he dusted down his front.

“No sign?” she asked.

“Nothing, he made us.”

“But his car’s still here.” She nodded to the parked vehicle nearby.

“He led us out here deliberately, dumped us and switched to a secondary vehicle, he’s long gone. God knows when he made us, probably right from the start.”

“Shit!”

From a small rise, a short distance away, Steiner watched the two agents immersed in conversation, lying prone, eyes behind small binoculars.

“Well, Agents Willis and Vansen, who’s being nosy then?” he smiled crookedly.

He lowered the binoculars and slithered down the back side of the hill and melted away into the dark.

Around a quarter mile away, moving over rough ground, Steiner reached his second vehicle, a Jeep Cherokee. He climbed up behind the wheel, started the engine and sped away, the screech of tyres filling the night.

* * *

Steiner swept into the underground parking lot. Climbing out from his vehicle, he strode over to the waiting Mercedes and climbed in.

“You’re late!” Hobson sat behind the wheel, puffing angrily on a cigarette.

“Couldn’t be avoided, I had company.”

“A tail? You didn’t lead them here?” Hobson snarled.

“What do you think I am, fucking stupid, I dumped them and switched vehicles. It was Willis and Vansen, Parsons’ sidekicks, been tailing me for two days.”

“I know, we have the matter in hand, it’s being dealt with.” Hobson muttered.

“Well deal with it, or I will, it’s becoming an irritation.”

“We’ve got bigger problems, Ullrich’s alive.”

“Why am I not surprised.” Steiner snorted.

“There was a firefight down in Colombia, he got away with two others, one probably Hooker. They were picked up by a chopper, god knows where they are now.”

“Heading back here fast, mightily pissed off and looking for payback, I’d say.”

Steiner grinned.

“We have to prepare. That woman of his, Sherilyn Groves?”

“She’s secure, give me a team, I’ll stake her out, wait for Ullrich to show, take him out.”

“Unacceptable, she is a security hazard. I’ve taken control of the situation. I have team inbound for Mexico, they will extract any useful information and terminate the woman, then secure the site and wait for Ullrich.”

Steiner glared at Hobson.

“You must have known I’d find her, now I will deal with it.”

“Why kill her?” Steiner whispered softly.

“Why not? She knows too much, we don’t need her alive. As long as Ullrich thinks she is, he’ll come. I don’t need any complications. I want all the loose ends tidied up.”

Steiner snatched his pistol from his holster, swung around and jammed the muzzle under Hobson’s chin, driving him back into the seat with his left forearm.

“She is mine. Call the hit off, I’ll handle it,” he whispered.

“Fuck you!” Hobson spluttered.

Steiner pushed down harder on his forearm, crushing Hobson’s windpipe.

“You want to tidy up loose ends, what about Parsons’ widow? Maybe she knows more than she’s saying, a reckon that thread could be snipped.”

Hobson bucked beneath him.

“Call off the hit, or I there will be repercussions.”

“Can’t.” Hobson gasped. Steiner eased the pressure on his throat. “No time, too late, no way to contact the team, I can’t do anything!” Hobson spluttered.

“Bullshit. Do it.”

“Please, it’s the truth, they’re on their own, no radio contact, it’s a totally deniable operation. You have to believe me!” Hobson pleaded.

“When?” Steiner whispered.

“Within 24 hours.”

Steiner withdrew his weapon and sat back. Hobson rubbed his neck, “Please, just leave Sarah out of it!”

Steiner glanced at the other man coolly. He popped open the door and slid out. He paused for a moment, then ducked back down inside the car, whispering softly. “You better hope I get there in time, or I’ll come back for Mrs. Parsons, then I’ll come after you.”

He straightened, turned, and walked away into the shadows.

Chapter 34

Deputy Juan Hernandez slumped in the passenger seat of his Tijuana Police squad car, puffing on a cigarette, staring gloomily out into the dark Mexican night. Next to him, dozing behind the wheel snored Ricardo Escobar. The senior officer nudged the driver, who came awake with a snort, wiping the spittle from the corner of his mouth.

“What?” Escobar groaned groggily.

“Nothing, just waking your lazy ass up. If we got to sit out here all night, not just me going to stay awake.” Hernandez grunted.

“It was you insisted we kept up the guard, I mean that dumb American Ullrich is dead. What’s the point?” he moaned.

“What’s your problem, we’re paid up to the end of the month? Anyway, I won’t believe Ullrich’s dead until I see the body. He is one tough bastard, and if he’s still breathing I don’t want to piss him off.”

“You might be scared of him, I’m not. When the month’s up and the money’s finished, I’m out of here.”

“You never were too smart, Ricardo, Ullrich would have your balls for breakfast!” Hernandez snorted.

“I’m not scared of no man, Ullrich don’t mean shit to me. No money, no show.” Escobar puffed out his barrel chest.

Hernandez stubbed out his cigarette and looked over at the darkened house.

Headlights flashed in the distance and a car pulled into view. The Jeep Cherokee approached slowly, its US plates clear. Hernandez nudged his partner, and then turned and popped open his door and climbed out. He unsnapped his holster and rested his hand on the hilt of his Colt King Cobra .357 Magnum revolver. Escobar climbed from the car, jacking a shell into the breach of his Mossberg Persuader 12-gauge pump action shotgun.

The American Jeep rolled to a halt a few yards away, the two vehicles nose to nose. Escobar hung back by the squad car, Hernandez slowly advanced on the Jeep, hand tightening around the grip of his pistol.

The driver's door of the Jeep popped open and a man slipped out.

"Hey, Officer, am I glad I found you!" the man was young and slim, his fine, blond hair trimmed short, silver-framed glasses perched on his thin nose. Hernandez quickly dismissed the gawky American as any threat.

"Can I help you?" Hernandez asked in thickly accented English, his grip relaxing on his pistol.

"Sure can, I'm totally lost!" he waved the unfolded map in his left hand, "I was heading into town, but must have taken the wrong turning somewhere, this is my first time in Tijuana!" The man smiled amiably.

"Man, you sure are lost!" Hernandez grinned. Fucking Tourists.

"If you point me in the right direction, I'll get out of your way," the American laughed.

"Sure." Hernandez approached, pistol hand held out for the map.

The Mexican cop heard a soft cough sound off to his side. Frowning, he turned.

Escobar staggered, his throat ripped open, blood streaming down his front, slumping against the car. Dropping his shotgun, he coughed and blood spurted from his mouth. There was a second soft pop and Escobar's head exploded like over-ripe fruit, blood and brain matter showering the cruiser. The headless body crumpled, falling into the gutter by the roadside.

Hernandez turned, his mouth opening.

The blond American smiled, a small Ruger automatic pistol with integrated silencer raised before him, aimed square at the Mexican. Hernandez opened and closed his still extended hand, mouth hanging open.

The American fired two quick shots, one on top of the other, the discharges almost noiseless. Both rounds hit Hernandez just below the left eye, ripping through his skull, a fine pink mist erupting from the rear of his head. With a look of shock frozen on his face, the Mexican toppled slowly backwards, hitting the ground with a soft thud.

Dark, masked figures emerged from the shadows carrying silenced automatic weapons. Moving silently, they gathered up the two bodies, opened the trunk of the cruiser and dumped them inside. While two men covered the street with silenced MP5s, one man, carrying a bottle of some sort of fluid, proceeded to wash the blood stains from the street and the police car. The blond man stood and watched.

Two men emerged from the rear of the Jeep; both dressed in Mexican police uniforms. Silently they headed over to the squad car and climbed in, settling into their seats. The blond man surveyed the scene, then nodded to his men, signalling towards the house. They separated, two heading to the rear of the house, the other three approaching the front door. The blond man hung back by the Jeep, watching.

The squad at the front dropped low and crouched around the door. One man fiddled with the door lock and quickly popped it open. The three men swept inside.

They moved silently through the house, each wearing night-vision image-intensifying headsets, eyes bulging like insects. They swept from room to room, securing each as they moved. Reaching the bedroom they paused. The team leader signalled them to wait. He leant close to the door, his ear pressed against the wood. He straightened, nodded and signalled to his men. One moved back to cover the door, the other crouched low beside it while the leader laid his hand gently on the knob and slowly turned it.

The door yielded, swinging silently open, the man beside the door swung in, his silenced pistol raised two-handed, moving swiftly forward. Suddenly there was a blast, a muzzle flash illuminating the darkened room. The man went down. The man covering the door opened up with his silenced MP5, gunfire mere stutters, bullets raking the bed. Through

his headset he saw a blurred green-hued figure roll clear, he pivoted and squeezed the trigger. The team leader knocked his barrel up, bullets thudding into the ceiling. He shook his head. Quickly he stripped a stun grenade from his webbing and tossed it into the room. Both men rolled clear.

The detonation sounded deafening in the still night, the flash lighting the room. Both men swept into the room, weapons raised, stepping over their fallen comrade. A figure was hunched by the bedside. The leader kicked his prisoner to the floor, frisked and disarmed them, then secured both hands behind their back with plastic snap-cuffs. He stood, placing his foot on the rear of the prisoner's head and pinched his throat-mike.

"Target secure," he whispered into the radio.

"Received, I'm coming in."

The blond man walked into the house, ignoring the second two-man team entering from the rear of the house. He headed straight to the bedroom. He halted in the doorway. He looked quickly at the wounded man on the floor, being tended by a comrade, then at the prisoner.

"Think you made enough noise?" the blond man sneered.

"Unavoidable," the team leader grunted, "You want to relocate to the secondary area?"

"No, nothing on the scanners, the taco-heads are sleeping. How's he?" he jerked his head towards the wounded man.

"Flesh wound, shoulder, he'll live," the team leader said.

"Good, bring the prisoner into the living room." The blond man snapped, turning on his heel.

Two men dragged the prisoner up and dragged the groggy captive out of the room. In the living room, the blond man waited while the prisoner was dumped in a chair and secured.

The blond man smiled, "Hello, Miss Groves."

*

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Sherilyn raised her head and stared at the smiling blond man. She glanced around her. Dark-dressed men surrounded her, weapons trained. Nearby, one man sat on the sofa while another attended to the wound in his shoulder.

She looked back at the blond man.

“Who the fuck are you?” she snarled.

“That’s not really important, is it,” his smile never faltered, “We just want some information.”

She stared at him silently.

“This can be quick and painless, or…” his voice trailed away.

“Jack’s still alive isn’t he?” she smiled slyly.

The man frowned, his smile wavering.

“You’re scared he’s coming back to get you,” she laughed, “You should be!”

The man stepped in close, swinging the small lead-filled sap in his hand, slamming Sherilyn across the face. The chair shook as she sagged.

He stepped back.

“One way or another,” he whispered.

Sherilyn looked up, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth, the side of her face already swelling up.

“Tell me!” she shouted.

The man shrugged, “Okay, Ullrich might still be alive, for now.”

“Ha, I knew it!” she laughed.

The man sighed.

“Has he been in contact?” he whispered.

“If he had, I’d have already known he was alive, wouldn’t I, fuck-wit!” she snorted.

The man swung the sap, slamming her across the same side of the face. This time she cried out.

“Don’t fuck with me, bitch!” he grabbed her by the hair, jerking her head up. “Did you know?”

“No, I didn’t fucking know!” she shouted, blood staining her lips.

“What was the contingency plan if you were separated, where would you meet?” he snapped.

“I just wait, he’d come for me.”

The man nodded.

“You don’t know where he’d head to?”

“Jesus, I don’t know, I didn’t ask. He’d show up when he was ready,” she groaned.

“What do you know about his operations?”

“As little as possible,” she snapped.

He swung the sap, hitting her hard again across the right side of her face. She screamed.

The other men sat and watched silently.

He jerked her up by the hair.

“His plans?” he barked.

“I don’t know shit! I tried to keep out of it, he didn’t tell me anything. Perhaps he was trying to protect me from goons like you!” she sneered, blood streaming from her mouth, her lips split, face swollen grotesquely.

“Your boyfriend was once a *goon* like us, and he sure as shit ain’t been no angel recently. But you shut your eyes and ears to that. How fucking convenient!”

He hit her again. She shrieked and the chair toppled over. The man nodded and one of the others dragged her up, righting the chair.

She hung in the seat.

“What is the signal when he comes? Passwords?” the man whispered.

“No signal. No password.” She muttered foggily, head down.

He nodded.

“What about Riesman?” he said softly.

Her head shot up. Her right eye swollen shut; she stared one-eyed at the man.

“What do you know about him?” he asked.

“Nothing, why?”

The man shrugged.

* * *

The sniper perched on the garage roof opposite, covering the house and street with his HK G41 automatic sniping rifle. He pivoted back and forth on the bipod. It was a dark, but warm, still night, and he felt comfortable and relaxed. He even yawned.

Behind him, the sniper felt a cool breeze, but it was localised. Then he froze, sensing movement disturbing the air behind him. He let go of his rifle and slowly reached for his holstered pistol.

The thin wire of the garrotte looped around his neck and jerked back, biting into his flesh. He bucked and screamed silently as his breath was choked away, clawing at the wire as it sliced through his jugular and carotid artery. His last breath escaped as a sigh and he fell limp. The dark figure behind him lowered him onto the surface of the roof.

The killer dropped behind the silenced sniping rifle and peered through the scope. He watched the two men sitting in the police squad car. His breathing slowed and steadied and he became still. He was at a diagonal to the car, his only clear shot on both men through the windshield. He aimed first at the passenger. He was less than two hundred metres away. It

was an easy shot. He flicked the safety/fire selector to three round burst, focusing easily, completely still and composed. He gently squeezed the trigger.

The three silenced rounds punched cleanly through the windshield, both hitting the passenger in the face, his head exploding, splattering the interior of the car. The shooter pivoted and fired again. Three more rounds sliced through the windshield, striking the driver full in the face, erasing his features, a scarlet geyser splattering the windows.

“What was that?” the blond man inside asked, head turning.

One of the men peered around the corner of a curtain, checking the street.

“Nothing. It’s clean,” the man reported.

“Check it out,” the blond man snapped, turning back to the woman bound in the chair.

The man unslung his MP5 and opened the front door and trudged grudgingly out.

He paused in the doorway as the door shut behind him. The darkened street was still. He sighed and headed out across the front lawn. He glanced across at the police cruiser, parked in the shadows. Looked okay. He glanced up to the sniper’s position.

“Sierra-Bravo, come in,” he whispered softly into his radio. Nothing. He pinched his throat mike, “Sierra-Bravo, come in.” Still no reply. “Shit!” he muttered. Trudging over to the police cruiser, hoping to use their radio, in case his was screwed.

Approaching the car, something seemed wrong. He squinted in the dark, raising his weapon as he neared. He froze, sucking in a sharp breath. Blood smeared the windows of the vehicle; jagged holes like starbursts scarred the windshield. Inside, two headless men sat behind the dashboard.

He backed off, sweeping with his weapon, heading towards the house. He felt horribly exposed, his eyes flicked wildly from side to side. His breathing became a ragged, breathless pant. He backed past the parked Jeep. A figure rose from behind the vehicle, silenced pistol in hand. The man saw him too late, his head twisting in alarm. The man

behind the Cherokee fired twice, hitting the other man in the head, flipping him over backwards, and slamming him down on the lawn. The shooter edged around the vehicle and stood over the prostrate man, levelled his pistol and fired twice more, deflating the man's bloody head.

He stepped over the corpse, holstered his pistol and unslung his own MP5 sub-machine gun with integrated silencer. Moving swiftly, but silently, he approached the front door.

“So you don't know anything?” the blond man sighed, standing over the slumped figure of Sherilyn.

“What do you want me to know?” she mumbled, her face a discoloured, swollen mask. More blood trickled from her mouth as she enunciated each painful word, her front stained with gore.

“You don't have to know anything,” the blond man whispered softly, drawing his silenced Ruger, raising it, the muzzle only an inch from the top of her sagging head.

The front door swung open.

“About fucking time!” the blond man said, turning.

A dark, masked figure stepped through the doorway, silenced MP5 raised, drawn tight into his shoulder. He fired a short burst knocking the blond man down. He swung around, squeezing off a volley as he moved. The first two men were cut down in an instant; the third barely unholstered his sidearm before he was blown off his feet. The wounded man on the couch stared up agog. His fingers scrabbled blindly at his holster. The shooter put a short burst into his face, the subsonic rounds going through and through, puncturing the couch, down fluttering like snowflakes.

A stillness fell over the room. A faint red mist clouded the air. The gunman circled the room, checking the men, tapping them with the toe of his boot. He approached the blond

man, stretched out on a rug, lying in his own pooling blood, clawing feebly for his pistol, thrown just out of reach. The gunman looked down at him.

“Who?” the blond man whispered.

The shooter fired a single round into the man’s forehead, scorch-marks tattooing the edges of the wound. A whisp of smoke rose from the bullet-hole, then a thin thread of blood trickled down between the man’s dead eyes, fixed blindly on the beyond.

He lowered his weapon and turned, gently lifting Sherilyn’s head, his index finger beneath her chin. She stared up groggily at the masked figure with her one good eye, her broken lips parting.

“Who?” she croaked.

He reached up and pulled off his ski mask. Steiner smiled and gently touched Sherilyn’s battered face.

“Paul,” she cried softly, losing consciousness.

Chapter 35

Steiner got Sherilyn out of Mexico and had them flown to New York. He set her up in an apartment in the East Village and had a doctor and nurse tend to her wounds. He stationed a small team in second apartment across the street to watch over Sherilyn. He put an old friend in charge. The German, Hans, was a fearsome looking Teutonic mercenary, former GSG 9 and Foreign Legion paratrooper. Now he ran a private military consulting business out of Monaco that supplied soldiers and weapons to just about anyone willing to pay. He had worked freelance for the Agency on many occasions, where he and Steiner hooked up. Despite his frightening appearance he was soft-hearted and Steiner trusted him with his life.

Hans brought in an American, Lithgow, with him. He was ex-Special Forces and now freelance and on the German's payroll. Steiner briefed them, before bidding a difficult farewell to Sherilyn.

He stayed with her for two nights, tending her while she slept. But despite her pleas he had to go. On the third day he headed back to Washington.

* * *

Steiner arrived back in DC later that day. As night fell, he headed toward his rendezvous with Hobson. In his rear-view mirror he spotted Willis and Vansen on his tail. He smiled.

Leading them on a meandering tour of Washington, he eventually pulled up outside a shopping mall near the Capitol. Leaving his car beside the edge of the busy road, he weaved through the traffic and walked briskly into the mall.

Vansen climbed out of the tail car and followed him inside.

Steiner hurried through the busy shopping centre, emerging on the other side. He quickly hailed a taxi, jumped inside and sped away.

Vansen returned to the car.

“I lost him.”

“Shit!” Willis slammed the steering wheel.

* * *

Hobson sat behind the wheel of his Mercedes sedan, sweating anxiously, puffing on a cigarette. The passenger door popped open, he instinctively reached for his pistol. A gloved hand stabbed into the car, in it gripped the smooth, black shape of a Walther P99 automatic pistol.

“Hands on the wheel, where I can see them!” the voice snapped.

Hobson complied.

Steiner slid into the front passenger seat, keeping his pistol trained on the driver.

“I didn’t hear a car.” Hobson muttered.

“Taxi, dropped me outside, gave me a chance to sweep the garage, making sure you hadn’t laid on a reception committee for me.”

“Why would I do that?” the driver said softly.

“You know about Mexico?”

“Of course I fucking know about Mexico, you fucking moron!” Hobson bellowed, hands rising angrily.

“Hands on the wheel.” Steiner waved his pistol.

Hobson seethed, his sweat dampened face flushing, “You left quite a fucking mess for the Mexican cops to find, half a dozen dead white men, all heavily armed, carrying no ID, and two dead Tijuana deputies, stuffed in the trunk of their own car. Do you know how many strings I had to pull to deal with this? The General is screaming for blood, why shouldn’t I just give him your fucking head on a platter!”

Steiner grinned, shrugging nonchalantly.

“Does this fucking woman mean so much? Do you think with your dick?” Hobson’s hands tightened around the wheel, his knuckles gleaming white.

“Maybe it was just a matter a professional courtesy, it was after all my operation.”

“Don’t give me that shit!” Hobson spat. “Your operation? It was the bitch!”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“Where is she?”

“Safe, where you can’t find her. I have men watching her. Anyone comes near, they’ll have a fucking bad last day.”

“I can find anyone, kill anyone I want!” Hobson bellowed.

“Kill her, I kill your girlfriend, Mrs. Parsons, then I’ll kill you. Slow.” Steiner smiled crookedly, his eyes cold.

“I could have you both killed.”

“Maybe, then maybe I have a fund of evidence, including a signed statement documenting my involvement in this operation, implicating several high ranking figures in certain unsavoury criminal acts: murder, sedition and that’s just for starters.”

Hobson blanched.

“If I meet an untimely end this information will be released to the media and other highly placed sources.”

“You’re bluffing!” Hobson whispered dryly.

“Try me.”

“But something could happen anytime, I mean in your line of work, even an accident, you’d blow the whole thing open.”

“You just better hope I’m real careful.”

“What do you want?”

Steiner smiled, seemingly strangely relaxed, “You leave me alone to run this operation as I see fit. You provide any necessary resources. No interference. I will deal with Ullrich and upon termination, I will decide what happens to Miss Groves.”

“She is a security...” Hobson snarled.

“I decide who or what is a risk, I will deal with this matter once and for all. A terminal solution will be achieved, according to my plans and orders. Moneys will be made available to me, unlimited, untraceable funds to bankroll me. Ullrich and all his people will be eliminated, everything else sanitised and compartmentalised.”

“You’ve got a fucking nerve!” Hobson was apoplectic.

“Do you agree?” Steiner asked calmly.

“What fucking choice do I have? Yes, I agree.”

“Good.”

“You just better pray you don’t fuck up!”

“I’ll worry about that.” Steiner popped open the side door and slid out, keeping his gun trained on Hobson.

“Don’t try to contact me. Do not try to track me. I will contact you.” Steiner grinned crookedly, “And Hobson, one more thing, you ought to learn to calm down, you look like your going to have a fucking seizure!” He reached across, drew Hobson’s weapon, a SIG P228, popped the magazine, and worked the slide, ejecting the chambered round. He tossed the weapon on the back seat and pocketed the ammunition. “A man of your age runs a high risk of heart attack or stroke. I wouldn’t want anything to happen to you!” he slammed the door and walked away.

Hobson squeezed the steering wheel, rage and panic knotting his insides. His eyes twitched to the rear-view mirror repeatedly. Finally he jerked his head around, his bloodshot eyes searching the gloom.

There was nothing, only darkness.

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Steiner let himself into his darkened apartment. He hung up his jacket and tossed his keys onto the hallway table. Entering the living room, he reached down to switch on a lamp. Light flooded the apartment.

“Don’t fucking move!” a voice behind him rasped.

Steiner spun around, reaching for his holstered weapon. Light and pain exploded in his head as the blow knocked him to the floor.

When he came to, Steiner found himself tied up, sat on a chair in the centre of his living room. His weapon was gone.

“About time!” a voice came from the shadows.

His head pounding, Steiner peered into the gloom. He dimly made out two figures hanging in the darkened fringes of the room.

“Who the fuck are you and what do you want?” Steiner snarled.

“My questions exactly!” the man stepped out of the dark.

Steiner blinked.

“Jesus, you’re Willis, aren’t you? What the fuck are you pulling?”

The tall, black FBI Agent smiled. “Just a few questions.”

“Who’s your friend?” Steiner nodded at the other figure in the shadows.

Rachel Vansen stepped out of the gloom.

“Vansen! Perhaps you can explain what the fuck this is about!” Steiner said.

“Sorry, Steiner, this is Willis’s show, I’m just along for the ride!” she smiled.

“Tell it to the court, right after the Bureau disciplinary board where they can your asses!” he snapped, bucking in his chair.

Willis swung his heavy S&W automatic, slamming it across Steiner's face, ripping his head around. He grunted, shaking his head, blood streaming down his front from the deep gash in his cheek. He looked up at Willis.

"Now you really gone and fucked up, you've not just thrown away yours and Agent Vansen's career, you've booked yourself a trip to a Maximum Security Federal Penitentiary. They ain't too keen on cops and feds up there. You'll spend perpetuity getting butt-fucked by big dumb-assed crackers called Bubba and Duke, and when your teeth fall out, or get knocked out, you can give blow-jobs for cigarette butts."

Willis grinned, "Your best hope is life without parole, getting fucked up the ass by some big black brother, maybe called Leroy. Maybe he'll make you his wife. But your most likely bet is a short stay on death-row, followed by a one-way trip on gurney for a lethal injection."

"And why would that be, Agent Willis?"

"You tell me. Mind you, you should be pretty used to prison life, after your short stay in Walker Federal Penitentiary." Willis smiled.

Steiner frowned, then smiled pleasantly, gazing up at his captor.

"I think you got me confused with someone else."

"I don't think so, but you were registered as one Paul Riesman."

"Oh yeah?"

"Struck up quite a friendship with John Ullrich, then he breaks out, you go with him, join his little army," Willis held up a blurred photo-fit baring a passing resemblance to Steiner.

"That's your proof? Good luck!" Steiner laughed.

"Nice of you to turn up at Agent Parsons' funeral, you worked with him," he glanced at an open manila folder on a nearby table. "Attached, duties unspecified. What does that mean?"

“This and that, dull really, not at liberty to talk about it.”

“Right. Parsons recruits you, puts you inside with Ullrich, hoping to get information on his group, I guess, but he breaks out, you go with him.”

“This is fascinating, please continue.” Steiner smiled pleasantly.

“Parsons figures you can still get Ullrich, set him up, take him yourself, but nothing happens, Ullrich is getting busier all the time. Parsons gets suspicious, starts asking questions, and maybe threatens to go public. Whoever was handling you with him couldn’t risk this, so Parsons gets a visit, shutting him up for good!”

“Ullrich killed him.”

“Looks that way, same weapon Ullrich uses. You’d know that. Then Ullrich hits the White House, kills the President, gets out of the country, but is then ambushed and he and his men are killed. All neat and tidy.” He paused. “Then you pop up again, looking a little worse for wear.”

“Nice story. You’ve not been getting much rest recently have you, a lot of stress I bet, losing a close friend like Parsons.” Steiner whispered.

“Who was running you with Parsons? What was the plan?” Willis leant in close, snarling.

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about!” Steiner sneered. “Vansen, get this madman off me!”

With an almighty roar, Willis rose up, slamming his pistol across Steiner’s face, blood splattering the carpet around his feet. Coughing, he struggled to raise his head, spitting more blood from his mouth.

Willis jammed the muzzle of his pistol in the top of Steiner’s head, thumbing back the hammer.

“Tell me, Steiner, who was running this, who gave you your orders?”

Steiner looked up, his eyes fixing on Willis.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“You killed Parsons didn’t you, you little cocksucker?” Willis dug the pistol’s muzzle deeper into Steiner’s flesh.

“What were you doing? What were you using Ullrich for?” he snarled.

Steiner groaned.

Willis grabbed him by the collar, jerking his head up, placing the muzzle between his eyes.

The two men stared at each other.

“It was the President all the time, wasn’t it, you wanted the President dead?” Willis gasped.

“Whatever you say.” Steiner whispered.

“But something spectacular creates an environment. Why?”

Steiner stared at him silently.

“Who benefited?” Willis’s eyes drifted out of focus as he sank deeper into thought.

Only the sound of Steiner’s rasping breathing filled the silent apartment. Blood streamed down his face, covering his front, spilling onto the floor around him. He stared silently at Willis.

Willis stared back, rage crossing his face. Steiner grinned crookedly and winked. Fury engulfed the black agent.

“Who are you working for?” he screamed, driving his head back, the pistol boring into his forehead.

“You’ve gone to far, Frank!” Steiner said softly, “There’s no turning back now. If you’re right, I’ll never speak, you have no proof. All you’ve done is abduct, forcibly imprison and violently assault a fellow agent, you’re finished, and you know it. Right or wrong, you’ve crossed the line, you’re finished!”

“Then I might as well go the whole way. If I’m wrong, you won’t be around to testify, if I’m right, I may have missed those at the top, but at least I’ve got the trigger-man!” Willis smiled, his eyes flashing wildly.

“Do you have what it takes to kill a man, Frank, I mean close up, in cold blood?” Steiner asked coolly.

“You want to find out?”

“It takes a unique individual for such a task. Are you aware of the term, *Dark Angel*, Frank?”

Willis frowned.

“Rumour has it the CIA retains operatives specifically trained for killing, for wet work. Such operatives are known as ‘*Dark Angels*’, deliverers of divine retribution, or as close as we come to it in our modern secular world. These Dark Angels are entrusted with carrying out this country’s most distasteful tasks, Executive Orders, Presidential orders to assassinate this nation’s enemies. Rumour also has it that these Dark Angels have also penetrated many organisations in this country, and abroad, including the FBI, the Agency’s bitter rival, responsible for domestic security.

“Now, John Ullrich, although not a Dark Angel, was primarily an assassin for the CIA, so I suppose you could call him the godfather of the Dark Angels.

“Frank, what do you think the ultimate wet job would be, the pinnacle of a Dark Angel’s mission? I’ll tell you. The assassination of the head of a hostile nation state. Now suppose individuals within our government decided that the elected head of our nation presented a clear and present danger to these United States, that this person must be removed by any means necessary. Would not the ultimate accomplishment of a Dark Angel, a pure killer, be the assassination of the head of his own country, the President of the United States.”

“What are you trying to say? Are you talking about Ullrich?” Willis asked quietly.

“Ullrich is just a soldier, a blunt instrument, but still a useful tool. A tool utilised by the Dark Angel for his mission. The Dark Angel is the assassin.”

Willis frowned, his eyes a gleam, “Are you saying you are one of these Dark Angels, are you admitting you were behind the killing of the President, that you were ordered to do so?”

“No,” Steiner smiled pleasantly. “I was just telling a story. You told a great one, I returned the favour.”

Willis scowled, “Who gave you your orders? Answer me!” he bellowed.

“You’re losing it, Frank!” he smiled.

“Answer me, or I’ll fucking kill you!” Willis shouted.

“Stop talking about it, do it!” Steiner whispered.

Willis straightened his arm, and drew back slowly on the trigger. Steiner closed his eyes.

“Frank!” Vansen called softly.

Willis turned.

Vansen fired two shots from the silenced HK P7 held in her gloved hands. Both rounds hit Willis in the side of his head as he turned, shearing off the side of his skull, blood splattering Steiner as the dead agent twisted and fell, hitting the floor hard at the prisoner’s feet.

Steiner opened his eyes and looked down at the body at his feet.

“What took you so long?” he sighed and rose from the chair.

“Dramatic tension,” she smiled.

Steiner’s blood splattered face broke into a grin.

Vansen strode across the room, reached up, placing her hand behind Steiner’s head and kissed him long and hard. The hand holding the pistol slid behind his back and drew him into her. He yielded, his hands bound behind his back.

Finally their lips parted, faces close, their breaths merged.

“Just like old times!” he grinned.

“You never call anymore,” she licked the blood from her lips, smiling.

“Too busy, business you know.”

“Yeah, it’s a bitch,” she thumped him playfully.

As they separated, Steiner spoke, “Hey, how about untying my hands?”

“I don’t know, I kind of like you like this!” she grinned crookedly, reaching out and grabbing his crotch.

“Maybe we can indulge your private fantasies later, but right now?”

She sighed, producing a knife, cutting his hands free.

“That’s a date. I expect people to keep their promises,” she whispered in his ear.

“Anytime,” he rubbed his sore wrists. “The weapon isn’t your service issue?”

“How fucking dumb do you think I am?” she snorted, “Totally untraceable.”

He held out his hand and took the pistol, unscrewing the silencer and pocketing both it and weapon. Vansen stripped off her latex surgical gloves.

“Ah, the snap of rubber!” Steiner sighed.

“I know how you love it so!” she grinned.

Steiner opened the front door, “Get out of here, I’ll deal with the mess.”

Vansen reached the open door and leant into him, her face close to his.

“I’ll be expecting your call. Soon.” She whispered.

“I’ll be in touch.” He smiled, closing the door as she left.

Inside the apartment, Steiner stepped over the body on the floor and lifted the telephone receiver and dialled.

“Cleaners,” a voice replied at the other end.

“This is Dark Angel Alpha One, I require a cleaning team at my home address. One package to go!” he paused, gingerly touching his gashed cheek, “And you better bring a friendly doctor, I’m going to need some stitches.”

“Understood, with you in less than fifteen minutes.”

Steiner hung up and slumped in a chair. Willis’ dead body lay curled at his feet, blood pooling around his shattered head. Steiner lit a cigarette and tried to blot out the stench of death.

Chapter 36

Everything had worked out wonderfully. People plot and plan away their lives and nothing ever comes out right, but sometimes shit just falls into your lap. Willis' apparent disappearance allowed Steiner to fit him nicely for a frame. He ensured certain Bureau funds went missing and that any lingering suspicions over Parsons' death and FBI moles were directed towards the errant Willis. Everything was neatly tied up and delivered with a ribbon. Even Sarah Parsons, the grieving widow was satisfied. She now had someone to blame for her husband's death, and although he had apparently fled, her grief and hatred were articulated and focused on a convenient suspect. Everyone was happy.

Life is sometimes truly beautiful.

* * *

As darkness fell, Steiner let himself into his apartment. He whistled happily to himself as he groped for the light-switch.

“Good evening, Mr. Steiner!” a voice rasped in the shadows.

Steiner froze. A lamp snapped on and his eyes locking on the tall, grey-haired figure sitting cross-legged in the chair across the room.

“Ullrich!” he whispered, his hand moving to his holstered weapon.

A flash of movement in the corner of his eye caused him to turn. He turned in time to see Hooker descend upon him. The punch knocked him down and as he lay, a boot was driven into his head. Darkness enveloped him.

* * *

Steiner began to come around. His head pounded, his body aching and stiff. He tasted blood in his mouth. He heard the rumble of an engine, felt the cold metal against his cheek vibrating. He stirred. Blind, hands and feet bound.

He heard a muttered curse and a boot crashed into his head. Blinding pain and swirling light. He lost consciousness again.

* * *

He eventually came too. He fought consciousness and its inherent pain, but his unforgiving mind cleared.

He opened his eyes. Although the light was dim, his eyes stung. He blinked, looking around.

He was bound; ankle and wrist, to an old, scarred chair, set in the centre of a poorly lit, spartan concrete building, probably a warehouse. The night sky was just visible through the high set windows, the glass smeared with grime, many panes broken. Although he recalled it was a warm night out, it was cool and damp in the building, like a slaughterhouse meat-locker. He shivered.

He noticed the silent men around him as his eyes focused. Ullrich sat smiling thinly in a chair directly opposite him, Hooker stood unnervingly close, at Steiner's shoulder. He felt the big man's rage radiating like a fierce tropical heat inside the cold building. Two armed men stood guard at the main doors, Dafoe and Meadows. He finally noticed another man, set back way in the shadows, lounging in a chair. The man smiled chillingly, the tightly drawn skin on his sharp-cheekboned face knotting, his thin-lipped mouth sneering, his face a mask. He recognised him as Paulus, the ex-Ranger.

Steiner's eyes slowly swivelled back to Ullrich.

“Well, Saul, you certainly fooled us, didn’t you?” his thin smile was frozen, “You don’t mind me calling you Saul, do you? Just that I feel we know each other so well, just under a different name.”

“How did you find me?” he whispered.

“Easy enough,” Ullrich shrugged, “We had your real name, just a matter of checking with contacts in the Army and the Bureau. We got your personnel file and address, too easy really!”

“What do you want?”

“I feel I should really be the one asking the questions, don’t you?” he said pleasantly.

Steiner sat stony-faced.

Ullrich lifted a manila file from the floor beside him and flicked through it silently for a few minutes. Finally he tossed it aside.

“Distinguished military record, Lieutenant Steiner, oh I’m sorry, Captain Steiner, you did receive your promotion while recovering in hospital. Shame it was cut short. FBI, interesting career choice. HRT, sharpshooter, very impressive!”

Steiner didn’t respond.

“So it was an FBI operation, your infiltration?” Ullrich asked.

“What else?”

Ullrich nodded just over Steiner’s shoulder.

Hooker’s big, ham-like fist slammed into his right ear, the pressure compression agonising, his eardrum almost rupturing. He shook his head violently, trying to clear the ringing from his ears.

“Don’t insult my intelligence, Steiner!” Ullrich said softly, “No FBI operation would grant you such latitude. You not only violated countless Bureau protocols, you broke various state and federal laws, not least murder and high treason.”

“By any means necessary.” Steiner whispered.

Ullrich nodded once more.

Hooker's fist slammed into his left ear. Searing pain exploded inside his inner ear and he briefly passed out. As he came round, he felt a trickle of blood running down from his ear. He was deaf in his left ear, he knew the eardrum had burst. Feeling violently nauseous, he had to choke back the rising vomit.

Ullrich was speaking. Shaking away the ringing in his ears and by focusing he began to make out the words.

"It was smart using a former soldier, especially from an elite unit. It's not just the facts, the information, the background knowledge it provided, they knew by sending someone like you, they would attract my attention. You carry the essence, the mark, something that is impossible to fake. You are not an FBI Agent."

"That's what it says on my pay-check." Steiner sneered.

"No, you are something else."

"What's that?"

Ullrich tilted his head, "A killer."

"A killer?" Steiner smiled.

"That's why they sent you, they knew I would see myself in you, would open up to you. You're no FBI Agent. You didn't exactly bust your balls trying to stop me, did you?"

"If I'm a killer, why didn't I kill you?" Steiner smiled.

"That's the \$64,000 question, isn't it? Obviously they weren't your orders, they wanted me for something. I guess I delivered, judging by my reception down in Colombia. It seems an elaborate way to remove a President, they did it far more simply in '63, but I'm sure they had their reasons. What I want to know are those reasons, and who gave the orders, who profited?"

"Let's say you're right, hypothetically, why would I tell you anything, if I knew anything?" said Steiner.

“Because you’re a smart little bastard, you’re the sort who likes to know the ins and outs of everything, what’s going on, how to play the angles. If you can fool me, I’m sure you can run rings round them.”

“You’ve got a pretty high opinion of yourself, you know that?” Steiner snorted.

Hooker drove his fist deep into Steiner’s belly, crushing the solar plexus, blasting the air from him. Steiner doubled up, gasping for air. Hooker grabbed him around the throat and jerked his head up.

“I really don’t think you’re in a position to play smart-ass, do you?” Ullrich said softly. “You may have fooled me and others,” he continued, “But you never fooled Sergeant Hooker, he smelt you from the get go!”

“Although my deodorant is formulated for a woman, they say it’s strong enough for a man?” Steiner muttered quizzically.

Hooker’s grip tightened around his throat.

“You really don’t seem to grasp the gravity of your situation.” Ullrich whispered, as if to a small child, “You have two choices, you tell me everything you know, and you die quickly, a single bullet in the back of the head. If not you will die a slow, agonising death. Either way I will get what I want, sooner or later you will talk. Either way you’re not leaving here alive!” he waved Hooker away. “What do you say?”

Steiner seemed to think for a moment, then smiled.

“Sorry, I can’t tell you what I don’t know.”

Ullrich nodded.

Hooker grabbed Steiner’s left hand, bound by the wrist against the chair’s arm, seized hold of his little finger and ripped it back, twisting it violently. The crunch of the bone shattering was clearly audible inside the building, but none present even winced as Steiner cried out.

Hooker stepped back. Steiner looked down at his finger, twisted and distorted, jutting off at an unnatural angle. He fought back the rising bile.

“Are you familiar with the term, *Dark Angel*, Steiner?” Ullrich asked pleasantly.

Steiner sucked in air, seemingly in shock.

“Of course you are,” the Colonel continued amiably, “Once the CIA was totally autonomous organisation, run by East Coast gentlemen, its ranks filled by what could be best described as ‘Cowboys’, tough, ruthless men, willing and able to do anything and everything they deemed fit to protect this nation. Such an organisation was essential to fight our enemies, the KGB, the Stasi, intelligence organisations that had the luxury of operating in totalitarian states, free from the scrutiny of limp-wristed, bleeding-heart journalists and self-righteous politicians, all trying to make a name for themselves That plus pissant tax payers squealing about their tax-dollar.

Unfortunately, by '76, after Vietnam, Cuba, all the other shit, Congress got what it always wanted. It got to put a leash on the CIA, make sure they play like nice boys. So now each year they have to account for every dollar spent, justify each action taken, and let Congress know exactly what they're up to.

“The warm, fuzzy politicians didn't want the CIA doing nasty things, hurting people. They don't like it, it makes them and the God fearing people of this land uncomfortable.

“Fortunately, many in the Agency realised the folly of this, so they began setting up various mechanisms to bypass political scrutiny; slush funds, illegal fund raising, increased black ops. The masterstroke was the *Dark Angels*: highly trained, totally deniable, totally autonomous assassins, infiltrating organisations around the world, including here in the United States. They're inside all the major corporations, local law enforcement, the military, especially elite front-line units like the SEALs and Green Berets. They're even inside the FBI. These operatives did not, and do not exist. They are totally compartmentalised, on their own, free to operate as they deem fit.”

Ullrich stared silently at Steiner, who just stared back.

“How do I know all this? Well I helped set up and train the first Dark Angels.”

“What the fuck has any of this got to do with me?” Steiner muttered.

Ullrich sat forward, smiling, “You my friend are a Dark Angel.”

It was silent in the warehouse as they stared at one another. Steiner remained utterly still.

“Speak to me.” Ullrich urged.

Steiner didn't move or speak.

The Colonel nodded to Hooker.

The Sergeant grabbed Steiner's left hand, the prisoner bucking in his chair, seized his ring finger and ripped it backwards, the bone shattering loudly.

Steiner gasped as he fell back in his chair. Sweat streamed down his face, his shirt was stuck to his body.

“This is pointless,” Ullrich whispered, leaning closer to Steiner, slumped in his chair. “You may be a Dark Angel, but I am the Avenging Angel, and here I am death.”

Steiner's head snapped up. His eyes locked on Ullrich's, a mad grin on his face. He spoke, his voice ringing with defiance.

“If I am what you say I am, and if I know what you want to know, what makes you think I will ever talk?”

Ullrich shrugged, “I don't. I went through the Ranger school, Special Forces and Delta programs. I was interrogated, tortured. It was worse at the Agency facility, the Farm. I know you have been tested, trained to stand up to torture. But training is one thing, the pain is real in training, but you know it will end, they will only go so far. But this is the real world, there is no limit, no end.”

Steiner glared back, “Do your worst, motherfucker!” he whispered.

Both men, faces close together, kept their eyes locked. Hooker tore back Steiner's middle finger, but he didn't even flinch as the bone crunched.

"You can cut off my toes with a bolt-cutter, rip out my teeth, wire up my fucking genitals in a bath, I won't tell you anything!"

"I believe you might be right, but I'll take that under advisement!" he signalled Hooker.

Steiner caught a glint of metal in the light, but his eyes never left Ullrich's face. The Sergeant bent down, a long, serrated bladed hunting knife gripped in his hand. He pressed the razor-sharp blade against the discoloured skin of Steiner's broken little finger, just above the middle knuckle. With a grunt, he drove down, slicing easily through the flesh, tearing through the bone with a long, sickening crunch. Steiner barely flinched, but sweat bathed his face. The knife drove through into the wood of the armrest. The finger fell away, blunt spurting across Steiner's knees.

The two men sat in silence, peering deep into each other's eyes.

Ullrich smiled grimly, "There are always drugs, the mind stripped of its guard will reveal all its secrets."

"You don't think I've had every drug known to man tried on me, stuff you never even heard of. You could do a fucking Vulcan Mind-Meld on me and you wouldn't learn any more than I wanted you to know!" Steiner gasped softly, eyes agleam.

"You think you are that strong, that disciplined?"

"Yes, but I'll be even harder, just to piss you off!" he laughed wildly, "Then afterward, I will come back, and I will kill you."

Ullrich laughed weakly, shaking his head, pushing his chair back. He recrossed his legs, drew a cigarette from a packet in his pocket and lit it. Sitting silently smoking, he nodded to Hooker.

Steiner remained perfectly still as he stared defiantly back at Ullrich, as the Sergeant ripped open his sweat and blood stained shirt. He didn't flinch or utter a sound as Hooker drew the long-bladed knife diagonally across his belly and chest, opening a long, deep gash. Blood streamed down his front, pooling in his lap and around the seat, the dark, viscous fluid dripping onto the floor around the chair.

Ullrich stood, "I'm going outside for some air, Paulus take over!" he walked away as he heard the first of a barrage of punches strike Steiner. The man never cried out, the only sound was the blows and the grunts of exertion from Hooker. The Colonel exited through a side-door, Meadows on his heel.

Hooker continued to pound Steiner about the face and body, blood smearing his knuckles. Steiner's features swelled and split, one blow to his torso yielded a soft crunch as a rib broke. He didn't utter a sound.

Paulus slowly approached, a thin smile on his lips.

"Hooker take a break!" he snapped.

The Sergeant paused, glaring at the officer, then turned driving one last punch square into Steiner's nose, crushing bone and cartilage, blood splattering his front. Hooker grunted and stomped away like a scolded child.

Paulus took hold of the chair opposite and drew it closer, settling right in front of the battered, bloody Steiner. Settling, he stuck a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. He drew deeply the cigarette, its tip glowing red, leaning back in the chair regarding the prisoner.

Leaning forward, he glanced at the bleeding stump on his left hand.

"You reckon anyone ever bled to death from a severed finger?" he glanced smiling up at Steiner's swollen face. "Probably not." He leant back in his chair and drew sharply on his cigarette. His eyes fixed on Steiner's, as if searching for recognition; he leant forward and casually drove the red-hot tip of the cigarette into Steiner's forearm. As the flesh sizzled and

stench of burnt flesh rose, Paulus peered deeper into Steiner's unblinking eyes, searching. Only a sharp exhalation of breath came from the prisoner.

Paulus raised the cigarette, blowing on the tip until it glowed. Again he pushed it into his forearm, hair and skin burning. He frowned, perplexed, lifted the cigarette and again blew on the tip, reviving it. Steiner only stared coolly back at him. Paulus stabbed the cigarette down hard on Steiner's arm, grinding it into the flesh, stubbing it out. He tossed the dead cigarette away and leant close.

"You're a tough little bastard, aren't you?" he grinned, "Or just pig-headed and dumb!"

Paulus drew an M23 automatic from his holster, eased back the slide to check the chamber, then cocked the hammer and flicked off the safety, resting the pistol across his lap.

"You tell us what we want to know, I'll do you myself, quick, painless, then all this will be over," he whispered soothingly.

Steiner didn't respond, his eyes never leaving the other man's face.

"Is it really worth it, all this, are they worth it?" Paulus shook his head.

The side-door scrapped open. Ullrich and Meadows entered.

Paulus eased the hammer down on his pistol and safed it. He smiled and stood. Glancing away once at Ullrich, he spun around, swinging the pistol, whipping it across Steiner's face, snapping his head sideways, ripping open the still fresh stitches in his face.

Paulus walked away and Ullrich came before Steiner.

"What do you have to say?" he asked.

Steiner glanced up, suddenly grinning, the smile further opening his wounds, blood streaming down his swollen face.

"You miss, Sherilyn, Jack?" he said softly.

Ullrich froze.

“Doesn’t seem to miss you too much though.” he started to laugh, “But I sure miss her, man, she is so sweet, real eager to please too!”

Ullrich howled, snatching a switchblade from his pocket, the long stiletto blade springing open, he brought it down hard, driving the blade through Steiner’s mangled left hand, pinning it to the armrest.

Steiner barely grunted, his blazing eyes fixed on the enraged Ullrich.

“What a woman, shame you couldn’t give her what she needs!” he laughed wildly, “Guess that’s why she came to me!”

Ullrich drew the pistol from his holster and jammed it hard against Steiner’s up-raised forehead. He squeezed grip-catch in the butt of the HK P7, his finger drawing back on the trigger.

“If I die, you’ll never find her.” Steiner whispered.

Ullrich paused, pure hate burning in his eyes, “I will eventually.”

“Maybe.” Steiner smiled.

Ullrich froze, seemingly racked with indecision. Hatred turned to despair, then cold logic. His finger eased off the trigger.

“Ready to deal?” he whispered.

Ullrich nodded curtly. “Untie him.” Hooker began unfastening his ropes; Ullrich stared down at the prisoner with disgust.

“You’re still going to die,” he whispered.

“Maybe?” Steiner shrugged.

“You’re only buying time.”

“Aren’t we all?”

Chapter 37

As darkness fell and the street lamps flickered into life, Paulus ambled down the New York street, hands deep in his pockets. He turned the corner and headed down the residential block, apartment buildings towered on each side. He slithered from pool to pool of watery artificial light, seemingly casually strolling, while his restless eyes scanned the street.

“Approaching target,” he whispered softly, his words carrying through his lapel mike and portable transmitter back to the van, parked three blocks back. “Approaching entrance, all clear.” His hand closed around the tiny subcompact Glock 26 jammed in his pocket, a short, stubby silencer screwed to the end of the muzzle.

He climbed the stoop and halted at the door. He scanned the electronic intercom, names marked by each button. Inside, he noticed a man sitting in a chair, reading a magazine, his work-shirt emblazoned with a name-tag.

Paulus tapped on the glass, attracting the man’s attention.

The paunchy, sallow man sighed and climbed to his feet and shuffled over. He peered through the glass, examining the man outside. He wasn’t black, looked smart enough, but you never could tell these days. He checked the can of mace in his pocket and fumbled with the door.

He finally opened it, holding it ajar and peering through the gap.

“Yeah?” he grumbled.

“I’m looking for a friend, I think they’re staying here.” Paulus said amiably.

“Names on the buzzer, you can read can’t you?” he sneered.

“You the concierge?” Paulus asked.

“Fancy name for it! I fix the toilets, tend the furnace, replace fuses; sometimes I watch the door. I’m just the dumb jerk who looks after this shit-hole. Why?”

Charming, thought Paulus, “Well I think my friend may be house-sitting, so her name wouldn’t be up there. Maybe you can help?”

“Look, buddy,” the Janitor sneered, baring his rotten teeth. “I ain’t got time for this. You come back when you know what you’re looking for, then maybe I’ll help!”

“Maybe I could just come in, describe her?” Paulus said as the man began to shut the door.

“Take a hike!” the man muttered.

Paulus jammed his foot in the doorway. The Janitor glared up angrily.

“Hey, fuck you asshole!” he spat angrily.

Paulus smiled, slid out his small pistol and stuck it through the gap in the door, the tip of the silencer only inches from the shocked man’s face.

“Open up, fuck-head, or I’ll redecorate this hall with your brains!” he whispered softly.

“Hey, Hans, we got action!” Lithgow shouted from across the street, peering through binoculars.

A toilet flushed and the German hurried from the bathroom, zipping his flies.

“What we got?” he headed for the window.

“Guy at the building door, talking to the janitor.”

Hans lifted binoculars and focused on the brightly-lit stoop.

“Gun, I see a gun!” Lithgow said urgently.

“I see it.” Hans replied calmly.

They watched as the door opened and the man hurried inside, shutting it behind him. The man turned briefly, staring out into the street, his face caught for an instant in the light.

“Paulus!” Hans whispered.

The two men moved deeper into the foyer, then the lights went out, the entranceway plunged into darkness.

Hans shifted to the image-intensifying night scope. He saw nothing for a moment, then Paulus appeared in the doorway, his lips seeming to move as peered out.

“Get on the phone to Steiner now, then prep the equipment!” Hans barked, watching the eerie green-lit figure waiting in the darkness.

* * *

A phone buzzed in the rear of the van.

“Switch that fucking thing off!” Ullrich barked.

Dafoe turned around in the front seat, pulling a mobile phone out of his jacket pocket.

“Ain’t mine!” he grinned.

“Who’s the fuck is it then?” Ullrich snarled, laying aside the radio and lifting a Colt Commando, seating a magazine and yanking back the charging handle.

“His,” Dafoe pointed at Steiner, “Laughing-boy there!”

Ullrich halted, turned and snapped, “Give it to me.”

Dafoe tossed the phone over. Ullrich pressed send.

“Steiner?” a voice asked on the other end.

Ullrich glanced across at the prisoner. Steiner stared back silently.

“Yes.” Ullrich whispered.

The phone went dead. Ullrich tossed it to one side and retrieved his rifle.

“Couldn’t have been too important!” Dafoe laughed.

“Shut up, Corporal, and just drive.” Ullrich snapped.

The van swept up outside the building. Further down the block, the Jeep Cherokee carrying Meadows and the Special Forces Sergeant Berg pulled into the curb and waited. The back doors of the van burst open, Ullrich jumped out, his rifle slung, silenced pistol in hand. He scanned the street and nodded. Hooker, carrying an MP5 with integrated silencer, bundled

Steiner out of the vehicle. The three men hurried up the steps, Dafoe close behind, silenced MP5 in hand. Paulus opened the door and they slipped in.

“Jesus, Ullrich and Hooker, we hit the jackpot!” Lithgow shouted excitedly.

“Look closer, we’re in the shit!” Hans muttered. Lithgow peered through his binoculars.

“What?” he watched as the party disappeared inside.

“The beat-up guy with them, it was Steiner.” Hans turned from the window, pulling his body armour on over his dark overalls.

“Bullshit!”

“It was him, they’ve got him. He brought them here, set them up for us.” Hans tossed a silenced MP5 over to Lithgow, who cocked and locked the weapon. The German checked his identical weapon and then lifted a Beretta MP3 semi-automatic shotgun, jacked a shell into the chamber and slung it.

“Let’s move!”

* * *

“Any problems?” Ullrich asked Paulus in the gloom of the hallway.

“No,” his smile was visible as he nodded to the pair of feet protruding from behind the reception desk. Dafoe leant over and looked down at the body of the janitor, his head twisted at an unnatural angle, his neck shattered. A look of shocked horror was frozen on his face.

“Ouch!” Dafoe laughed.

“Lead the way, Mr. Steiner,” the five men entered the lift.

Two dark-dressed figures dashed from the opposite building, hurrying across the street. Huddling in the doorway, they pulled on ski masks, then popped the door and they slid in.

“Jesus!” Berg muttered, sitting behind the wheel of the Jeep.

“Stand fast!” Meadows activated his radio transmitter, pinching his throat mike. “Eagle One, this is Sentinel, we have intruders, two, heavily armed, entering the building from the front.”

“Understood. Secure the entrance. We will deal with the threat. Eagle One, out.”

Meadows and Berg checked their silenced pistols and slid from the Jeep. Meadows also carried a Colt Commando, Berg a Mini-SAF, both unsilenced and slung, but ready. They hung back by the vehicle, keeping the entrance covered.

The lift reached the seventh floor. Dafoe moved out first, checking the corridor, then the rest followed.

“Which apartment?” Ullrich whispered.

Steiner nodded.

“The key?” Ullrich snarled, Steiner handing it over.

The Colonel hurried to the door, the key rattling in the lock in his haste. The door swung open and he rushed in. Hooker shoved the reluctant prisoner in after him, Paulus and Dafoe at the rear.

Ullrich hurried across the darkened apartment, approaching the bedroom door.

“Sherilyn!” he called out, turning the doorknob.

Three silenced shots ripped through the wooden door; Ullrich hit the floor. Three more shots splintered the wood. Hooker shoved Steiner aside, bringing round his silenced MP5 and opening up. The weapon stuttered as the long burst ripped through the door, ripping it apart. He emptied the entire 30 round magazine through the door, then paused to reload.

“Hooker!” Ullrich whispered urgently from the floor, “Cease fire, goddammit!”

“Are you okay, Colonel?” the Sergeant asked softly.

“I’m okay, just cease fire, okay?”

Hooker grunted.

Ullrich sat up, “Sherilyn, it’s me, Jack!” he called softly.

A tall, slender figure stepped into the shattered doorway, dressed only in a long T-shirt, a silenced P7 hanging at her side.

“Jack?” she asked softly.

“It’s me, honey!” he climbed to his feet.

Someone switched on a light.

Ullrich stood by the doorway, clutching his left shoulder, blood streaming down his arm.

Sherilyn blinked, her eyes adjusting to the glare, as she looked around the room at the assembled figures. Her eyes alighted on Steiner and halted.

“Paulus, Dafoe, cover the corridor!” Ullrich barked, the two ex-Rangers headed silently out.

A look of pain and anguish crossed Sherilyn’s face as she gazed at the battered Steiner.

“Paul!” she cried, a sob caught in her throat, as she moved towards him.

Ullrich held out his arm, halting her.

“His name isn’t Paul, Sherilyn. He is called Saul Steiner, he officially works for the FBI, but god knows who he really is. He was a plant, he betrayed us,” he said coldly.

She looked from Steiner to Ullrich, “You’re wrong, he rescued me, saved me from those men in Mexico!” she seemed confused.

“I know. I’ll be honest, I don’t know what that was about. But he used us.” Ullrich explained.

“You’re wrong!” she said adamantly, “He saved me, I know who he is!”

“He tricked you, just like everyone else.”

“Did you do this to him?” she asked nodding at his injuries.

“Yes,” he replied.

Sherilyn raised her pistol, pointing it directly at Ullrich’s forehead, her hand squeezing the cocking handle in the grip.

“You’re a liar!” she snarled, “You killed my brother. Only Paul understands!”

Hooker had his MP5 up and levelled on Sherilyn. Ullrich remained utterly still. Steiner stood by, a helpless spectator.

“He killed your brother, Sherilyn, he betrayed us all.” Ullrich nodded towards Steiner.

“Give me a reason why I shouldn’t kill you right here, right now!” she whispered, the tip of the silencer less than an inch from Ullrich’s forehead.

“Because I love you, he is using you,” he said simply.

“Is any of this true?” she glanced over at Steiner, her head shifting slightly.

Ullrich’s arm snapped up, knocking the pistol away. It spat once before he slapped it from her hand. She turned, hatred and rage on her face, lunging for the fallen weapon. Ullrich stepped into her, and with a single blow from his good arm, the heel of his palm slamming under her jaw, he knocked her down. She crashed to the floor, out cold.

Ullrich turned slowly, his lips curling in hatred, “Get him down on the floor, on his knees!” he ordered Hooker.

The Sergeant shoved Steiner down onto his knees in the centre of the room, levelling his sub-machine gun on him.

Ullrich slowly approached, stepping over Sherilyn’s unconscious figure, and drawing up over Steiner. He raised his silenced pistol and aimed it at the kneeling man’s head, fingers squeezing the cocking handle.

“You’re dead, you little fuck!” Ullrich rasped, his finger squeezing the trigger.

Steiner gazed up, a weary smile on his face and whispered softly, "Aren't we all."

The wall of the apartment suddenly exploded, shattered plaster and masonry ripping through the air, the concussion wave rippling through the room. Ullrich was blown off his feet, crashing to the floor. Steiner rolled sideways, lunging out with his foot, the sole of his shoe slamming into Ullrich's face, shattering his nose, blood splattering the carpet.

Two stun grenades bounced through the ragged hole, detonating as they hit the floor. The blinding flash and blast shook rippled through the air as grey smoke swirled. Hooker wheeled around, blood streaming from his ears, lips twisted as he screamed, his silenced MP5 up.

A shotgun blast ripped through the hole in the wall, the pellets scattering, riddling the room, shredding the wooden furniture and pocking the walls. A few pellets struck Hooker, peppering his right shoulder and upper chest.

A single darkened figure leapt through the ragged hole; face covered by a ski mask, silenced MP5 raised to his shoulder. Moving forward through the smoke, he spotted Hooker and pivoted, drawing a bead.

Hooker and the man fired simultaneously, both sound-suppressed weapons stuttering. Hooker's blast hit the man in the upper chest and neck, his weapon discharged uselessly before falling from his arms. He raised his hands to his ravaged throat, blood gushing from the gaping wound. He toppled backwards, crashing into the wall and slid slowly down to the floor.

Returning gunfire spat through the hole in the wall. Hooker dropped low. Paulus appeared in the apartment door, firing from the shoulder. Steiner scabbled away on his knees, diving behind the sofa.

"Colonel?" Hooker reached for Ullrich. He grabbed him by the collar and began to drag him from the room. Semi-conscious, Ullrich called out Sherilyn's name. Paulus covered

him from the doorway. The air alive with the buzz of silenced rounds, blasting the apartment apart, debris and burnt cordite swirling in the enclosed space.

Hooker got Ullrich out of the room and Paulus ripped a frag from his belt, pulled the pin and tossed the grenade into the apartment. "Fuck this shit!" He slammed the door after him.

Steiner heard the grenade hit the floor and dived from cover. He threw himself on top of Sherilyn as the frag detonated. The blast ripped over him, jagged shrapnel skimming past and slicing into the walls and furniture.

A masked figure slipped through the hole into the room, a shotgun slung across his back, MP5 raised to his shoulder. He moved cautiously forward, sweeping the devastated room with his weapon, his eyes barely pausing as they passed over the sprawling body of his dead comrade. He reached Steiner and rolled him over.

"Steiner, are you okay?" Hans pulled off his mask.

"What the fuck do you think?" he coughed.

"Hans, we have got to move, I need a weapon!" Steiner struggled to his feet.

The German walked across to his dead friend, pulling the pistol from his holster. He checked the chamber of the SIG P228 and cocked it, handing it to Steiner.

"Lithgow's dead?" he stated as much as asked.

Hans nodded.

"Come on!" Steiner led him out of the apartment. They halted at the elevator, the lights flashing as it descended. "The stairs!" The two men burst through the door and flew down the steps, almost leaping from landing to landing.

The elevator reached the ground floor and the doors opened. Meadows was waiting.

"Jesus!" he muttered, seeing Ullrich's bloody face as he hung semi-conscious, arm thrown around Hooker's shoulders.

“Chuck, we’ll get clear, cover our rear. We get separated, we rendezvous up-state.”

Paulus led the group out of the elevator.

Meadows nodded. He and Berg taking up station in the foyer as the others headed out. Dafoe started the van’s engine as Paulus climbed in beside him. Hooker dragged Ullrich into the rear and slammed the doors.

The stair door burst open, Hans emerging first. Berg spun, bringing up his Mini-SAF, but the German cut him down with a single burst. Meadows, standing on the stoop, whirled around, bringing up his Colt Commando.

“Go, go!” he shouted over his shoulder to the van.

Hans and Steiner swept through the foyer. Meadows raised his rifle to his shoulder and fired a long burst through the glass front doors.

Shattered glass and bullets sliced across the foyer, the ugly cacophony of noise swirling around Steiner and Hans. Both raised their weapons as bullets whipped around them, opening up together.

The pistol and sub-machine gun blasted 9mm rounds through doors, splintering wood, ripping them from their hinges. The bullets thudded into Meadows torso, sending him stumbling backwards, still firing his rifle as he reeled beneath the impacts. His vest took the brunt of the hits, but some struck home, blood splattering as rounds struck his limbs and throat.

As Hans reloaded his MP5, Steiner elbowed him aside, stepping into the shattered doorway, his pistol raised. Dazed, Meadows aimed his rifle, but Steiner fired first, two rounds punching into the Major’s forehead. He wavered briefly, a pink mist swirling behind his head, and then tumbled backwards down the steps.

The van took off, tires screeching as it fishtailed wildly. Steiner jumped over the crumpled body of Meadows, racing after the fleeing vehicle, his pistol raised one handed, extended before him, firing as he ran, spent cartridge cases flying back over his shoulder. The

van picked up speed, but Steiner kept running, even as his pistol clattered dry. Reaching the end of the street, the van swung wide, rounding the corner with a screech of tires and disappeared.

Steiner slowed and finally halted, his pistol hanging impotently by his side. Hans caught up with him, laying his hand on his shoulder.

“We have to go.”

Lights had begun to flood the street from the apartments above. In the distance sirens could already be heard.

“I will get Sherilyn, you get the car,” Steiner headed back towards the building. Hans shook his head and calmly reloaded his weapon.

Chapter 38

The crisis in Washington had seemed to have passed. Ullrich was still officially presumed dead. Work began rebuilding the nation's capital and the new President and his staff moved back into the White House. The National Guard was demobilised and the military stood down from high alert. Slowly life began to return to a semblance of normality in the country.

General Paul Harker retired from the army as a four star General, after a distinguished thirty-year career and took up his duties as Vice President and Defence Secretary full time. Although the state of national emergency was officially over, the General retained most of the exceptional powers granted to him by the President and Congress in that time.

The President believed Ullrich was dead, Harker knowing otherwise did not dissuade him from this view. From behind the scenes he maintained operational control of the combined CIA/Army team investigating Ullrich and hunting down his organisation.

Within this semi-official organisation, there existed an inner cabal of military officers and intelligence agents from the CIA, NSA and FBI, both serving and retired, as well as a handful of politicians and businessman, who knew the truth, of the survival of Ullrich and more importantly of the wider operation that utilised the renegade Colonel. Indeed it was this group, led by Harker, that had devised the operation from the start, an operation aimed at removing a sitting US President, permanently, and installing the Vice President as a puppet leader and placing their supporters in key positions. Ullrich was both the mechanism and the shield, he eliminated the President and operated as a patsy to deflect attention and created the necessary environment of panic to achieve the conspirators aims.

It had been a coup d'etat, successful in every respect but one.

Ullrich was still alive. But that was only a small irritation that would soon be resolved. Harker would not allow that to deflect him from the completion of his plan.

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Hobson was ushered into Vice President Harker's White House office, the door shut behind him. Harker stood, smiling, dressed in an immaculately tailored suit, his face seemingly aglow with health and contentment. He came around his huge desk, shook Hobson's hand warmly and indicated for him to sit.

Hobson was more than a little startled by this warm welcome. Indeed he was positively unnerved, having expected and braced himself for another bawling out by the General after the continuing failure to track down and eliminate Ullrich. Such cordiality unsettled him. He swallowed dryly. To him, such friendliness could only signify one thing. Assassins always came bearing smiles.

He looked about himself nervously, smiling weakly, when he spoke, his voice emerging as a croak, trying desperately to engage the Vice President in small talk.

"Nice office," he croaked feebly, "Right next door to the President himself."

Harker waved his hand dismissively, "That asshole couldn't find his own ass with both hands in a darkened room!" he muttered derisively. "I have to tell him what to do, say, think. I have to practically wipe his goddamn ass! I'm running this fucking country, while that dimwit, dip-shit sits in the Oval Office twiddling his thumbs!"

"Can't he write another book about owls, or something?" Hobson joked weakly.

Harker snorted, "Incompetent asshole is completely lost. Totally clueless. Next he'll be asking me to fuck his god-awful wife, he probably hasn't got a clue how to do that either!"

"Explains why she goes off on these crusades, profanity in rap and rock music, violence on TV and shit!"

"Sexual frustration, primary cause of fucking crusaders and goddamn dudley-do-rights!" he spat, then leant back in his chair, a smile spreading across his face.

Hobson shifted uneasily beneath Harker's unwavering gaze.

“Well, Richard, how goes the hunt?”

Hobson glanced uneasily around, “Is it safe to talk here, I mean I heard the whole damn White House is bugged.”

“It is,” he smiled. “But you forget, not only are my personal guards hand-picked, I own practically the whole Secret Service, most of the staff and half the officials. Not only do I run this country, I fucking own it!” He stretched lazily, “Nobody tapes me. I tape them.” He smiled coldly.

Hobson cleared his throat, “Well, General, it appears our friend, Steiner was behind the shoot out in New York. He ran into Ullrich. He came for his woman, but appears to have fled empty handed.”

“Interesting. Where’s Steiner now?”

“Stowing the woman somewhere. But is only a matter of time until we catch up with Ullrich. His organisation is destroyed, his people dead. He has nowhere to go.”

“Time is a luxury we cannot afford.” Harker’s cold eyes never left Hobson’s flushed face.

“My best people are tracking him, its over.”

“His back is to the wall. Now he is at his most dangerous, he will do the only thing left to him, he’ll fight. This is what he wanted all along, to make his final stand”

Hobson frowned.

“He’s a romantic, and a romantic likes nothing better than a hopeless cause. He’s on his way to Washington. It’s time for a reckoning.”

“He doesn’t know about you, and anyway it would be suicide to come here, we’d cut him down before he got anywhere near.”

“He knows, Ullrich’s not dumb. He knows it’s suicide to come for me, but he’s been nursing a death wish his whole life. Now he can finish it, hit hard and go out in his blaze of glory.” Harker’s smiling face bore an expression somewhere between admiration and amused

disdain. “No-one can stop a man willing to exchange his life for that of his prey, least of all a man like Ullrich.”

“So what do we do, just wait?”

Harker leant back, interweaving his fingers and laughed dryly, just once, the sound like a bark. Hobson jumped.

“We bring him here,” he smiled.

Hobson’s mouth fell open, “What?”

“I think it is time we executed the final phase of our plan.”

“It’s too soon!” Hobson blustered.

“It’s perfect. Ullrich returns for revenge, exacts it, but pays with his life. I think the media will gobble it up with spoons and ask for more.” He slowly stretched out his legs, crossing his ankles. “I’m running this country, I might as well have the title that goes with the job.”

“It’s too soon, it’ll cause suspicions!”

Harker lit a cigarette and stretched lazily. “A perfect ending for a perfect story. We all know how the American people like a good story. A hero, a villain, and a nice neat ending.”

“But, General...”

“Shut the fuck up!” Harker barked and snapped forward in his chair. “I want that dumb cocksucker who calls himself the President dead, Ullrich set up, dead and served up for the press, I want to deliver his fucking head to the American people!”

Harker savagely stubbed out his cigarette and fixed his piercing eyes on the cowed Hobson.

“Deal with it,” he growled.

“But how do we make sure he returns?”

“Use your fucking brains. It’s the woman. Use this Sherilyn as bait. He’ll come for her again, we just make sure we know when.”

“But Steiner...”

“Get Steiner to deal with it. That slippery little fuck should find this right up his street.” Harker held up his hand. “Oh, I know about his little thing for the woman. Tell him I don’t care. Do what I say and he can keep her. She’s just bait after all, Ullrich will be dead and that way we are both happy.”

“Yes, General.” Hobson nodded slowly. “I will arrange it.” He rose to his feet, his legs trembling beneath him.

“And, Richard,” Harker called amiably and Hobson turned, “Fuck up this time and you’ll be dead.”

Chapter 39

The motor-yacht bobbed on the grey waters of the Chesapeake Bay, the clouds speeding by in the stormy sky overhead, the warm wind whipping at the waves. The babble of raised voices emanated from below decks, swept up on the wind.

Dafoe sat ashen-faced in one corner, his shoulder strapped up from a round taken from Steiner as they fled in New York. Paulus stood back, leaning in the hatch, quietly watching. The boom of Ullrich's voice the confines of the boat, as he paced back and forth, speech and motion a blur. He finished taping together a batch of 30 round banana magazines for his Colt Commando, two at a time fitted together, end to end, inverted for quick reloading. He swept up the squat automatic rifle, slammed in one of the taped together twin magazines, yanked back the charging handle, checked the safety and laid it on the table.

Hooker stood in close at Ullrich's shoulder. "So you're just going to walk into Washington, find Steiner, snatch Sherilyn, then walk out?" he snarled.

"Pretty much." Ullrich popped the magazine in his HK P7, checked it and reseated it, pulling back the slide and slipping it into his belt holster. He lifted compact HK USP, checked it and jammed it into his shoulder holster.

"Are you fucking nuts?"

"Your point?" Ullrich pulled on his jacket, lifted his right foot, resting it on the edge of a seat. He pulled up the cuff of his black trousers, lifted a subcompact Glock 26 automatic from the table and stuck it in his concealed ankle holster.

Hooker grabbed Ullrich by the shoulder, spinning him round, "This is bullshit. Just walk away. We can find her later. Right now we gotta split. It's over."

"Maybe for you."

"You're walking into a trap, for what, just for some fucking cunt? Let the bitch rot!"

Ullrich grabbed Hooker, shoving him back, slamming him into the bulkhead. He jammed his right forearm across the Sergeant's throat, choking the air out of him. Hooker bucked and struggled for a moment then went still. Ullrich's glazed eyes burnt with rage.

There was the dry click of a pistol cocking. Ullrich felt the cold muzzle of the weapon press behind his right ear.

"Step away, Colonel!" Paulus whispered softly, his arm extended, M23 automatic placed behind Ullrich's ear. "Please!"

Ullrich eased the pressure on Hooker's throat. The Sergeant coughed and spluttered, sucking in air. Paulus kept his pistol up.

"You're going to die if you go there, they're waiting." Paulus said softly.

"I know." Ullrich winced.

"It's over, Colonel."

"It's never over." Ullrich stepped back and released Hooker. Paulus lowered the hammer on his pistol and let it fall by his side.

"I know it's a trap, I know we've been used, I know somebody played us. I don't give a shit what they're planning, what their whole bullshit schemes are. I'm not even going back for Sherilyn, it's over between us. I'm going back for me and you and all those boys that died for nothing, not just over the last few months, but all the way back. They play their fucking games, we die." He snorted. "No more, it's over, I'm going back for payback. I'm going to bring the whole fucking house of cards crashing down."

There was silence in the cabin, only the gentle lapping of the waves against the hull breaking it.

"I'm going back, just me. This is personal. It's probably a one-way ticket, but I don't care. I've got nothing left, I'm just going to take a few people with me."

The other three men looked at each other uneasily.

“I’ll give the rest of you time to get clear, take the boat, whatever, I owe you that much. Get away, start again somewhere else. This is my fight now.” Ullrich reached over and lifted his rifle.

Hooker squared his shoulders and cleared his throat, “Colonel, how long we been together? 25 years? More? We been through some shit before, you think I’ll quit now, leave you go to alone on this last mission?” He bared his teeth in the closest thing to a smile Ullrich had ever seen on his face.

“I don’t know about these other boys, but I’m in, I wouldn’t miss this for anything. I say we create the biggest shit-storm in history and take all the fuckers down with us!”

“Hooker, you are without doubt the dumbest asshole in all creation!” Ullrich stepped forward, laughing, as if to embrace the Sergeant, but pulled himself up, instead slapping Hooker on the shoulder.

“Shit!” Hooker muttered.

“Colonel,” Paulus holstered his pistol, “I’d consider it an honour if you would allow me to go along, sir.”

“Are you sure, Captain?”

“No one fucks me over, I gotta get me a little payback, you know?” he grinned crookedly.

“Colonel,” Dafoe struggled up onto his feet, coming to attention. “I know I’m fucked up, let me come along. Let’s finish this thing.”

Ullrich looked at the battered Corporal, frowning; “We’re all fucked up, son!”

“Please, sir.” Dafoe pleaded.

Ullrich smiled, reaching out, laying a hand on the young man’s good shoulder, “You’re staying with the boat.”

“But, sir...”

“Corporal, I don’t think you’re in a fit state for this. Anyway someone’s got to watch the boat. We’re going to hit town hard and fast, in and out, I want this baby prepped and ready to go when we get back. Think you can handle that?”

“Yes, sir!” Dafoe grinned, saluting with his good arm.

Ullrich turned back to the other two, “Well, gentlemen, time we got a little payback!”

* * *

Sherilyn slowly came awake, drifting happily for a moment, then the leash of reality snapped hard. She opened her eyes. She struggled upright and turned onto her elbow. She noticed the figure in silhouette sat in the corner of the room. She leant back against the headboard. The room was bathed in a thin, sickly yellow glow. She stared at the figure in silence.

She had been moved several times in the last few days, drugged and blindfolded during each move, she only remembered a blur of movement and noise, then one anonymous room after another. She was fed but otherwise left alone.

She glared at the figure, then sighed and cleared a throat; “Too ashamed to show yourself?” she spat.

The figure sat forward, reached across to the lamp and switched it on. Harsh light stabbed out across the room. Sherilyn briefly looked away.

Steiner blinked briefly against the sudden glare, then fixed his eyes on Sherilyn as she turned her glare back on him. A sneer crossed her lips.

“How long are you going to hold me?” she snorted.

“Not much longer.” he whispered softly, his gaze flickering.

“You think Ullrich will come for me?”

A faint trace of a shrug showed on his shoulders.

“You’ll kill him?”

He didn't respond.

"He rescues me, I leave him. You kill him, I leave you. Neither of you gain anything."

A thin wince or smile flickered across his lips.

"But then it's not about me is it?" she shook her head, "Not even about your little schemes and plots, whatever they are. Just you two gung-ho assholes in a pissing contest, each trying to outdo the other. Well you can play your dumb, fucking games, I don't give a shit, but I won't be your prize, not anymore, I'm out. You two can kill each other, like you killed my brother, and god knows how many others!"

"I didn't have anything to do with what happened to your brother, that was your cracker friend, Bud Riley, the one from town. He contacted the FBI, sold you out for the reward money. I didn't want what happened. I dealt with Bud." Pain sounded faintly in his voice.

"You killed him?" he nodded, disgust twisted her lips, "And I bet you think that'll impress the hell out of me, you butchering some poor, fat farm-boy!" she snorted derision.

A frown of confusion and pain crossed his face, the shadows exaggerating his anguish.

"You really don't get it do you? You think killing and the rest of this shit will impress me, win me. You and Ullrich are just the same. You don't understand anything else. You only bring death and misery. I despise the pair of you."

Steiner leant forward in his chair, anguish on his face, "But, I love you!" he whispered plaintively.

She shook her head sadly, "You don't know what love is. You want something, something you're missing. I'm just convenient, you don't see me, or anything beyond yourself. Your trapped in your own little world. Well I don't want in," she sighed. "I want nothing from you."

Steiner rose to his feet and moved uncertainly to the bed, reaching out with his right hand. Sherilyn's gaze never left him. His hand reached to brush her cheek. She snapped her head away, leaving his hand hanging in space. She fixed him with a sideways glance of pure hatred.

He drew his hand back and walked away, turning to face the wall.

"Let me leave!" she said coldly.

He sighed, turned and moved to the door, pausing as his hand touched the handle.

"Soon," he muttered flatly. He opened the door. Vansen stood in the doorway, a hand on her hip, a wry smile on her face.

"Having fun?" she chirped.

"Downstairs," Steiner snapped.

Vansen glanced over his shoulder at Sherilyn, fixing her with an icy glare.

Steiner slammed the door.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Steiner walked into the kitchen. Hans sat at the table, leaning back in his chair, sipping an icy beer; a SIG automatic lay in front of him. Steiner halted by the window and stared out at the sleepy Georgetown street.

Vansen sauntered into the room; "So the romance of the century is over?" she laughed.

Hans glanced at his friend. He noticed tears in his eyes.

"I'll head back to my place, start showing up at work. Ullrich will show soon."

Steiner said coolly, his back to the room.

"You sure you want to do it this way?" Hans asked.

"You stay here, wait for me to contact. Vansen, head back to your place, make the preparations."

"I could stay here?" she said slyly.

"You leave, Hans will keep this place locked down."

“Whatever you say!” she laughed coldly.

Steiner stared into the darkness. A heavy drizzle fell, the rain visible in the diffuse glow of the streetlights. Inside his pain died and he was filled with a terrible coldness. He felt empty. Life meant less than nothing to him. He yearned for death.

* * *

Steiner arrived at the FBI HQ on Pennsylvania Avenue at 10am in the morning, parked his car in the underground lot and headed straight up to his office. He spent the day alone in his office, reading a James Ellroy novel. After lunch in the canteen, he returned to his desk and took a nap.

At 5.30pm, the evening fading into a warm amber, he headed back down to his car. Slipping behind the wheel of his dark sedan, he slid a cassette into the stereo and started his engine. The car swept out of the garage and Steiner pulled on his dark glasses, loosening his tie. The music swelled from the stereo, strings rumbling, tubular bells chiming. He hummed along to Philip Glass’ ‘Mishima’, the tape a memento taken from Parson’s apartment. As the percussion pounded and the massed strings stabbed, he weaved through the growing downtown traffic, heading home.

He noticed the tail almost right away. He smiled to himself. Steiner’s sedan peeled off the road, tires shrieking. He into the mall garage. He slipped from the car and quickly disappeared amongst the crowds.

Wandering aimlessly through the mall, gazing in shop windows, he felt someone close. He stopped at a restaurant and ordered a drink at the bar. He smoked a cigarette, had another drink, then returned to his car.

It was quiet in the garage. The only sound the clatter of his own footsteps as he moved through the dim pools of artificial light, in and out of the shadows. He reached the car and groped in his pocket for his keys, pulling them out and bending to the lock.

A blur of movement flashed in the reflection of the side window. Steiner ducked sideways, allowing his keys to fall to the ground. The butt of the silenced MP5 sub-machine gun crashed through the window, the safety glass exploding. Steiner stepped into the attacker, driving his elbow back into his throat, twisting around, grabbing the figure and driving his knee up into his groin. The man doubled up with a grunt and Steiner grabbed him and slammed his head into the neighbouring car before letting him fall to the ground.

Steiner stepped away, sliding out his P99 automatic. He glanced down. The attacker rolled, his face falling into a pool of light.

“Hooker,” he hissed, jamming his foot down on the Sergeant’s throat. He levelled his pistol.

“I wouldn’t, if I were you?” A voice echoed across the cavernous garage.

Ullrich stepped out of the shadows, silenced pistol extended. He halted less than ten feet away. Steiner glanced up at him, a wry smile crossing his lips.

“But you ain’t me,”

“Evidently.” Ullrich brought up his left hand to steady his grip. “Now step away and put your weapon up.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“If you don’t, I’ll kill you where you stand,” he stated coolly.

“Sure about that?” Steiner seemed unfazed.

“Put it up, step away.” Ullrich’s voice dropped, his eyes narrowed.

“Kill me, you’ll never find Sherilyn. She’ll be dead in hours. If I don’t contact my associates at regular intervals, they have instructions. Irrevocable.” Steiner’s eyes locked with Ullrich’s.

“You won’t kill her, you feel the same about her as I do.” Ullrich rasped.

“Maybe,” Steiner shrugged, “Want to take the risk. My feelings are irrelevant. My people have orders, they will follow through.”

“I could make you make that call.”

Steiner’s smile widened, he tilted his head, “You know that won’t work.”

Ullrich seemed to relax, a sad smile and look of resignation crossed his face, “I guess.”

“I knew you’d come.”

“Evidently. It’s over between Sherilyn and me, you know?” Ullrich seemed pained.

“Still you came?”

“You know?” he shrugged and smiled.

“I know.”

“You know you and her won’t work?”

Steiner didn’t respond.

“She blames you as much as me for her brother’s death and everything else.”

“Yes.” Steiner drove his foot down harder, pinning the struggling Hooker.

“I know you didn’t bring them to the ranch,” Ullrich began. A door crashed behind him. Both men started, but their weapons never wavered. Voices sounded far off, then car doors opened and shut and a vehicle moved off. Ullrich continued, “I know it was that motherfucker Bud Riley from town.” He paused, “It was you who killed him?”

Steiner nodded once.

“Thought so. Didn’t help you none with Sherilyn though, did it?” Ullrich shook his head, “She’s made her mind up, it doesn’t matter how she feels about you, she won’t allow there ever to be anything between you and her. You and I are damned in her eyes.”

“Maybe she’s right.”

“Maybe, but still we’re here.” Ullrich smiled sadly.

Steiner returned the smile.

“You and I have ruined her. It’s time we left her out of this and let her be.”

“She was already ruined, we all were, we just realise it now.” Steiner said coldly from the shadows.

There was silence between them.

“Let’s finish this thing, you and I.” Ullrich broke the spell.

“You do what we want, you get Sherilyn, you go your own way.”

“Finish my role as the patsy. Then what, you kill me?” Ullrich shook his head.

“You don’t do it, Sherilyn dies and we hunt you down. You play ball, you get the blame, but we allow you to go. You disappear, get out of the country. We never hear from you again, you’re safe. You, Sherilyn, your remaining men. Vanish. We don’t care. But make sure you stay vanished.”

“You expect me to believe that?” Ullrich snorted.

“Take your pick. Do the job; maybe you get free, you and Sherilyn, hope we leave you alone. Refuse, she dies and we will hunt you down.”

“When you put it like that?” Ullrich grinned and laughed a hollow laugh.

Steiner, as if wrapped in pain, laugh along, his smile a wince.

“What’s the job then?” Ullrich asked in a tired voice.

“You find out day after tomorrow. Call me, 8.00am Friday, I’m sure you know my number.”

Ullrich nodded, “It’s a hit, isn’t it?”

“What else do we do?”

The two men stared back at each other with tired eyes.

“It didn’t have to be this way.” Ullrich called.

“It was always going to be this way.” Steiner replied.

They stood silently in the shadows, the traffic roaring distantly.

“Hooker?” Ullrich asked, raising his eyebrows.

Steiner nodded, releasing the pinned man. Hooker scrambled to his feet. He fixed Steiner with a black glare, his fathomless eyes unflickering. His hand moved to his holstered weapon.

“Sergeant!” Ullrich barked. Hooker’s head snapped around. The Colonel jerked his head. With a last backward glance, Hooker trailed back to his master.

Ullrich slowly lowered his weapon. Steiner did likewise.

“I know it’s Harker behind this, I know what he wants me to do!”

Steiner didn’t reply.

“Why are you doing this?”

Steiner shrugged, “We do what we do.”

“You’re probably right.”

The two men nodded silently to each other, and then Ullrich and Hooker stepped back, melting into the shadows. Steiner stood alone, his pistol hanging by his side. He slumped back against the car and let the darkness engulf him.

Chapter 40

Steiner's cell phone rang. He pulled it from his jacket pocket and flipped it open.

"Steiner,"

There was a brief pause. "Ullrich." the voice on the other end replied.

"Cutting it fine?" Steiner smiled.

"What's the address?" Ullrich ignored him, answering in a business-like manner.

"Okay. 117 Brookner Street, just outside Constitution Gardens, one hour. You and Hooker, no-one else."

"What equipment do we need?"

"I'll provide the gear, come as you are."

"I don't like this," Ullrich growled, "I need info, I don't like going in blind."

"One hour." Steiner hung up, snapping his phone shut, slipping it into his pocket. He looked up and smiled.

Sherilyn sat at the kitchen table, her wrists handcuffed, a roll of grey duct tape lying before her. Her eyes remained fixed on the tabletop. Hans stood at her shoulder, dressed in dark clothing; a Colt Commando slung from his shoulder, his holstered pistol visible beneath his jacket. He looked at Steiner expectantly.

Steiner looked at his friend and grinned, "It's a go."

The German beamed broadly. Steiner nodded down at the silent Sherilyn and strode from the room.

Hans pulled a strip of black cloth from his pocket and cleared his throat. Sherilyn looked up, her eyes fixing on his face. "I'm sorry," he mumbled, averting his eyes from her gaze. He placed the blindfold over her eyes and knotted it behind her head. He lifted the duct tape and tore off a short strip. He paused. "It'll be over soon," he whispered. Sherilyn turned her unseeing eyes towards him. He placed the tape across her lips, smoothing it down. She sat utterly still and accepting.

Steiner waited in the garage adjoining the house; he pulled out his phone and punched in a number.

“Vansen.” the voice at the other end replied.

“It’s me. Are you in position?”

“Roger that,” she sounded frighteningly happy.

“Ullrich and Hooker are on their way. We’re about to move.”

“Okey-dokey!” she chirped. “Counting the minutes, lover-boy!”

He hung up.

Hans led the bound Sherilyn through the door connecting garage and house. Hans handed her off to Steiner and climbed into the parked van’s cab behind the wheel. As Steiner took Sherilyn’s arm, she stiffened and recoiled. He waited until she relented. He led her to the rear of the van, helping her inside. She settled on one of the benches fixed inside. Steiner climbed in behind her and slammed the rear doors. He sat on the bench opposite, retrieved his silenced MP5 SMG, checked it and rested it across his knees.

“Let’s move,” he called.

* * *

Around 8.45am, the convoy of vehicles swept out of the White House main gates. The two police motorcycle outriders on point led the parade onto 17th Street. A police cruiser followed then two dark sedans and a van each filled with heavily armed Secret Service Agents. Behind them came two big limousines, each riding low on their axles, the heavy armour-plating and thick bullet-proof glass weighing them down. Then two more dark vans and three black sedans. Taking up the rear were two more police cruisers and a pair of motorcycle cops.

The convoy proceeded south at a sedate pace, dark helicopters buzzing above them. Police and Secret Service Agents lined the route; a babble of voices sounding over the radio

frequencies. OPs were set up on overlooking buildings and concealed hides. Along the route, thin crowds of onlookers watched, cheering and waving. The President of the United States waved back, smiling broadly, from behind the bulletproof glass of the first limousine. TV cameras caught his happy face as he swept by.

The convoy turned west onto Constitution Avenue, slowly picking up a little speed, the security net drew in tighter. In the distance, the gleaming white marble of the Lincoln Memorial came into view. The convoy turned left, heading into Constitution Gardens.

* * *

Ullrich and Hooker pulled up outside the small two-storey house set on a small rise outside Constitution Gardens, the sleepy street lined by almost identical clapperboard houses. The black Cherokee rolled to a stop, Ullrich turned off the ignition. Steiner stood on the porch, slouched against a post, sipping a chocolate malt through a straw. He smiled down at the vehicle and waved lazily.

Ullrich popped open the driver's door and slipped out onto the sidewalk. Hooker got out of the passenger's side, rounding the vehicle, a bulging canvas bag in his hand. Ullrich headed up the steps, his eyes sweeping the street, Hooker at his heel.

"How you doing?" Steiner straightened up, licking his lips.

"Let's get on with this." Ullrich muttered lowly.

"Sure." Steiner pulled open the screen door and pushed open the front door, "After you."

Ullrich looked across at Hooker and the big Sergeant moved through the open doorway, hand inside his jacket, resting on the butt of his .45 automatic. The other two waited on the porch, watching each other closely, while inside they heard Hooker moving around.

“Clear!” Hooker called.

Ullrich jerked his head, “You, inside!”

Steiner smiled, sucking lazily on his straw, slurping his malt. “You giving orders now?” he laughed.

Ullrich flicked open his jacket, laying his hand on his holstered HK P7 pistol, easing it free. “Don’t fuck with me!” he growled.

Steiner held up his free hand, turned and ambled into the house, still sucking on his straw. Ullrich quickly glanced up and down the street then followed him inside.

It was dark inside the house after the glare of the morning sun outside. Ullrich pulled off his dark glasses, his eyes quickly adjusting. Hooker had his bag open, kneeling beside it. He pulled out a Colt Commando, popped the mag, checked it and reseated it, then tossed it to Ullrich, who caught it one handed. He looked it over, then yanked back the charging handle, chambering a round, flicking the safety/fire selector to single shot. Hooker pulled out a squat Franchi SPAS 12 automatic shotgun, jacked a shell into the breech, laid it aside, then removed a Beretta M3 automatic shotgun, rammed home a box magazine and cocked it, laying it beside him. He pulled out two flak jackets, sliding one across to Ullrich who removed his jacket and pulled it on over his dark polo shirt. Hooker pulled his flak jacket on over the white T-shirt moulded over his huge torso, then passed some grenades over to Ullrich, keeping some for himself. Both strung the grenades from their vests. Finally the Sergeant pulled out a M4 carbine with a M203 grenade launcher slung under the barrel. He loaded two taped together 30 round magazines and cocked the rifle, then slung a belt of ammo for the M203 across his chest, then stood.

Steiner looked from one to the other, slurping up the last of his malt. “You boys ready now?” he crushed the paper cup and tossed it into the nearby wastebasket, without looking. “Good!” he headed across the open room, between the couch and TV, sauntering casually, hands in pockets. He reached the tall bay windows that dominated the room,

sunlight spilling across the floor. A chair was set by the windows, in front of it a HK MSG90 automatic sniping rifle, its bipod resting on the sill, butt on the seat. Steiner gazed aimlessly out the window.

“There it is,” he said.

Ullrich trudged over, “What?” he grunted, reaching the window.

Steiner bent, lifting high-powered binoculars from the windowsill, handing them across to the Colonel without looking at him. He pulled a hand from his pocket and pointed casually. “There.”

Ullrich raised the binoculars and focused. The gleaming white marble of the Lincoln Memorial leapt into sharp focus. “I see it.”

“About a 1000 metres, maybe a little less. Difficult shot, not impossible. Scopes zeroed. Rifle’s loaded with 7.62mm matchplay hollow point, 20 round magazine, though I expect you’ll need no more than one, two shots.”

“I’m not really a sniper, Larsen would have been a better choice, but you killed him.” Ullrich lowered the binoculars, glancing at the rifle.

Steiner shrugged.

“The target is due in just over two minutes. I suggest you prepare.”

“Why don’t you take the shot, you’re the sniper?” Ullrich reached out, fingers brushing the MSG90.

“I’m not in the best shape, one thing and another,” he waved his damaged hands.

“You could have got someone, a pro to take the shot, just set us up a patsies?”

Ullrich called.

Steiner reached the front door, turned, a grin on his face, “I could,” he pulled open the door. “You get clear, meet me at Arlington, by Kennedy’s grave. I’ll wait,” he headed out, letting the door shut softly behind him.

“This is all fucked up.” Hooker growled.

Ullrich grunted, laying aside his assault rifle and slipping into the chair, lifting the rifle's butt to his shoulder, lowering his eye to the 10x scope and squinting. He settled comfortably.

"This is all fucked up." Hooker growled.

Ullrich ignored him, drawing in the rifle butt, snug against his shoulder, cheek flush against the frame. Slowly he pivoted the weapon on its bipod, tracking an invisible target. Hooker began to pace impatiently.

Outside, a dark van swept up. Steiner pulled open the passenger door and swung inside. He glanced back over his shoulder at Sherilyn trussed in the back. He turned back to Hans behind the wheel, nodded once and the van moved off.

The battered taxi rolled along the curb, watching the van head down the hill. Behind the wheel, Paulus, face obscured by a baseball cap and sunglasses, waited, then shifted into gear and pushed off. He kept the van in sight, but hung back. He reached over, raised his radio, pressing send.

"He's on the move, dark GM van, heading south towards the river. At least one man with him, driving."

Hooker answered, "Stick with him, he should be heading towards Arlington. Try to confirm Sherilyn is with him. Keep apprised."

"Roger, out." Paulus signed off, tossing the walkie-talkie onto the passenger seat. His eyes never left the van.

The two men in the black sedan watched Paulus move off. The passenger keyed his radio. "It's Paulus. He's with you. Hanging back."

"Understood. Go to work." Steiner replied, glancing at Hans and grinned.

The sedan rolled up, pulling in across the street from Ullrich's parked Cherokee. The passenger slipped out, a small package in his hand. He moved quickly across the street, glancing surreptitiously up and down the block. Reaching the Jeep, he dropped down, rolling

beneath the vehicle. Less than a minute later he emerged. The sedan swung across to him, he opened the door, jumped in and the car peeled away.

“Package delivered,” he radioed in.

“Understood, out.” Steiner replied, signing off.

The Presidential motorcade swept up to the Lincoln Memorial. Secret Service Agents spilled from the lead vehicles. Other armed agents swept across the vast marble monument. Others moved among the thronging crowd gathered to hear the President speak. Park Police, Secret Service and FBI had the area surrounded. Teams manned observation posts throughout the gardens and perched atop surrounding buildings. The President emerged from his armoured limousine, waving to the crowds. A great roar rose up. He grinned broadly and began moving up the steps, agents flanking him.

Harker emerged from the second limousine. He paused and watched the President ascend the gleaming monument. A trace of a smile crossed his lips.

“This ain’t right. Something’s wrong.” Hooker muttered over and over like a mantra, pacing.

Ullrich ignored him. The bay window stood open, a cool breeze caressed his face. The rifle was drawn in tight. He tracked his target as he climbed, finger resting on the trigger. His breathing was soft, deep, regular. He willed himself into utter stillness, relaxing himself body and mind, focussing only on the reticule of his scope, locked on the slowly moving head of his target. Everything was right, locked in. He drew in a deep breath, letting it fill his lungs. He finger squeezed the trigger gently, drawing it slowly back.

* * *

Vansen had the HK MSG90 tucked comfortably into her shoulder. She stood, the rifle aimed downward at a slight angle, bipod anchored on the sill, the window open. Completely

relaxed, she tracked the target, sweeping easily as he moved. She inhaled, exhaled, drawing the trigger back, locked in total stillness, waiting for the blast and the delicious thump of the recoil. She smiled.

* * *

Ullrich heard the whip-crack of the rifle shot. He started, discharging his weapon simultaneously with the rifle firing from above his head. He watched helplessly through his scope.

The first hollow-tipped round tore through the air at 820 metres per second, its lethal nose burning white-hot.

The bullet slammed into the upper rear quadrant of the President's head. His skull exploded, blood and gore spraying the stunned agents around him, the top of his head sheared off, the remains seeming to deflate. A second round slammed into his shattered head, obliterating it, only a pink mist swirling above his shoulders. Agents dived in too late, knocking the President's corpse to the ground. Ullrich's round ripped into one agent's back, shattering his spine, tumbling through his kidneys, shredding them. He fell dead, knotted together with his President, both bodies buried beneath the avalanche of heavily armed men.

Harker bolted forward, ripping a SIG automatic from a concealed holster beneath his jacket, shaking off the restraining hands of his bodyguards. He dashed up the gore-splattered steps, leading his Secret Service team, weapons drawn. He reached the agents piled atop the President, slowly picking themselves up. All around was pandemonium. The crowd was screaming, scattering in panic. Agents and Police, many armed with sub-machine guns and automatic rifles took up station across the Monument and surrounding grounds, vainly searching for the shooter.

"Please, Mr Vice President!" one of Harker's bodyguards pleaded.

Harker ignored him, waving his arms, directing the dazed agents. “Get the President to his car, get him to the hospital!” he shouted. The agents looked down to the two bloody corpses sprawled on the once white steps. “Do it!” he barked. The agents swept up the President’s body, carrying it down to his waiting limo, gently laying him inside. The vehicle sped away. The dead agent was carried to a sedan and driven away. Harker remained on the steps, taking charge of the scene, barking orders, directing the armed men. A press photographer stuck his head up from among his cowering colleagues, spotted the General and began shooting film. A TV cameraman next to him, heard him, sat up and began filming the heroic figure standing exposed on the gleaming marble monument, pistol in hand, directing the Secret Service men without a thought for his own safety.

Ullrich sat behind his rifle, gazing dumbly through his scope, stunned, seemingly unable to process the scene before him.

“Fuck it!” Hooker’s howl snapped him out of his reverie.

“Upstairs!” Ullrich spat over his shoulder, before lowering his eye to the sight again. Hooker’s heavy steps thundered up the stairs. Ullrich sighted, sweeping the barrel of the rifle round, fixing on his target. Harker’s animated face was caught dead centre of the scope, cross-hairs transfixing his head. He debated going for an easier body-shot, but the risk of body-armour and the desire to obliterate the face of his enemy was overwhelming.

“Die, you fuck!” he whispered, locking on, drawing in the trigger. He braced the rifle for the recoil, the sharp crack of the discharge.

The rifle snapped dry. Nothing. He cursed, working the cocking handle, ejecting the round. He resighted, trying to settle himself. He fired again. Nothing again, another dry fire. He worked the bolt, sending the round spinning clear. Fighting to control himself, his breathing came fast and shallow. He switched his aim from Harker’s head to his torso. He fired again, nothing, then again and again and again. Nothing, each round was a dud. He ejected one after the other, but all misfired. Ullrich finally realised. Only the first round was a

live one, the others had been doctored. He'd been set up, only one bullet. Harker seemed to smile knowingly, taunting, magnified through the lens of the 10x scope.

He stood, roaring with rage, snatched the rifle up and hurled it across the room, sending it smashing against the wall. He snatched up his Colt Commando, snapping it up to his shoulder, raising his head to aim, but all he saw was a distant blur. He lowered his weapon and screamed, "Fuck!" his anguished cry echoing through the house.

Hooker swept through the rooms on the first floor, but found nothing. Heading back down the hall, he noticed a narrow staircase rising to another floor. He headed up it, his footsteps soft, M4 aimed from his shoulder.

Vansen removed the rifle from the small attic window, carrying it back across the dusty room. She laid it against the wall near the door and knelt pulling black leather gloves over the latex surgical gloves she already wore. She pulled a black ski mask over her head and lifted her MP5, ducking behind the makeshift barricade erected inside the door, an old mattress propped against the wall, the inside lined with sandbags. She lay down, tucked between the wall and the barricade, drawing the M57 firing trigger closer, its wires snaking across the room to the exterior wall. Carefully placed C4 shaped charges ringed the window, all linked by intricate wiring. She drew the green plastic clapper to her chest.

Hooker reached the top of the stairs, coming face to face with a single wooden door at the end of a short landing. "Fucker!" he muttered, a quick smile crossing his lips. He raised the M4 to his shoulder, flicking the fire selector to full auto and opened up.

Steel jacketed 5.56mm rounds ripped through the door, shredding it, wood exploding and flying through the air, showering Hooker as he emptied the 30 round magazine, popped it, flipped it over and rammed home the second inverted clip. He moved forward, rifle braced against his shoulder. He paused, then raised his booted foot and stabbed out, slamming it into the door. Shredded wood crumbled and fell, but he staggered back, his foot having collided with a seemingly immovable barrier. Fucking reinforced, he thought, steel plate probably. He

stepped back, loaded the M203 beneath his rifle, but reconsidered, a blast in this enclosed space could be dangerous. He slung the weapon, ripped off his Beretta automatic shotgun, popped the mag, stripped another from his webbing and rammed that home. He advanced.

Positioning himself in front of the door, he raised the shotgun, aimed at the top hinge and fired. The shotgun cartridge was loaded with a single solid shot, inaccurate at range, but capable of delivering a devastating blow. The round slammed into the hinge, destroying it, wood and metal exploding. He lowered the muzzle and fired again, blasting away the lower hinge. He stepped back, slinging the shotgun, swinging the M4 carbine around. He kicked out, smashing the door from its frame, sending it spinning inwards, crashing down onto the floor. Dust and debris swirled. As it cleared Hooker made out the loft room; battered furniture, covered with dust cloths, sunlight swirling in from a single window at the far end.

Hooker edged into the room, M4 extended before him.

Vansen slammed down hard twice on the M57 trigger, the explosives ringing the window exploding in a nanosecond.

The blast ripped through the room, debris hurled like shrapnel through the air. Hooker was torn off his feet and blasted back out of the doorway and hurled across the hallway, slamming him into the far wall. Covered in broken rubble, he lay dazed, blood streaming from his nose and ears.

Vansen wriggled out from beneath the mattress. The far wall had been obliterated; a huge gaping hole lay exposed, around six feet across, surrounded by ragged edges. She glanced back, then quickly unfurled the rope anchored to the overhead beam and tossed it out of the opening, turned and rappelled down to the ground below.

Ullrich dashed up to the top of the stairs to the attic and found Hooker struggling to sit up, debris falling from his chest, blood smearing the dust on his face. He gestured dumbly towards the attic room. Ullrich raised his rifle to his shoulder and moved forward, edging through the doorway.

A cool breeze blew through the ragged hole in the exterior wall. He swept the room and moved to the opening. At the edge he paused and peered over.

A dark-dressed figure dashed across the rear garden. Ullrich squeezed off a burst from his Commando, gouts of dirt ripped up around the figure's feet, before they dove into cover behind a tree. He fired into the trunk of the tree, bullets ripping into the wood, shredding it, splinters blown off.

Vansen hugged the tree and the rounds thudded into the other side, the trunk reverberating under the impact. The gunfire ceased, she sucked in a breath and lunged out of cover, her MP5 jammed into her shoulder. She opened up on full automatic, flame leaping a foot from the weapon's muzzle. Ullrich, standing in the opening, dived back into cover as the bullets ripped into the house around him. She moved sideways, firing as she moved. Emptying the 30 round magazine she dropped behind a rain barrel, popped the clip, flipped it and rammed home the fresh one tape inverted to its side. She flicked the fire selector to three round burst, rose and opened up.

Ullrich lay prone in the opening, rifle squeezed to his cheek. The shooter rose, firing as she backed off. He returned fire, both weapons rattling noisily, spent casings spinning free. Ullrich continued to fire, bullets thudding around him. Vansen backed off, rounds whipping by her, one winging her, ripping open her sleeve, gashing her upper arm. A second slammed into her heavy body armour. She stumbled, but kept firing until she vanished behind the far corner of the house.

“Shit!” Ullrich rolled over, wiping the blood from his face. Flying debris had peppered his face with small cuts; his thigh was also gashed open by a ricochet. Hooker was behind him. “Get downstairs, get to the vehicle. If you see our friend, kill them. I’ll be right behind you!”

Hooker nodded and turned.

“Sergeant!” Ullrich called, Hooker turned. “Watch your ass, they will be coming!”

Hooker nodded again and almost smiled, then hurried away.

Ullrich levered himself up and headed from the room. He spotted the MSG90 lying on the floor, half covered with debris. “Fuckers!” he muttered, heading out.

Vansen headed around the front of the house, vaulted over the low picket fence and ducked down behind her parked sedan, tucked in hard against the curb. She noticed nearby curtains twitching. Panicked neighbours had probably called the cops. Good. But she still had to play her part. She pulled off her ski mask and snatched the radio from her webbing. She switched to the Secret Service/Police band. A babble of voices crackled from the handset. She keyed the mike.

“Calling all units, this is Special Agent Vansen, FBI, I am pinned down, under hostile fire. I have engaged possible shooters; suspects identified as fugitive John Ullrich and known associate Floyd Hooker. Am attempting to contain situation, but likely suspects will attempt to flee.”

A stern voice broke in from the suddenly stilled radio, “This is Senior Agent Miller, Secret Service, state your location!”

“117 Brookner Street, above the Gardens. I can’t hold them for long!” she feigned growing panic.

“Understood, units are en route, do your best Agent Vansen, but watch your ass!” the stern voice softened.

“Understood, sir,” she affected a quaver in her voice.

“Hold tight, we’re on our way.”

She signed off, stashed her radio, checked her weapon and waited.

The front door of the house crashed open. The huge, muscular figure of Hooker emerged, M4 raised to his shoulder, sweeping as he moved forward, edging towards the road and the parked Jeep. Vansen flicked her MP5 to full auto and edged along the car. She jammed the barrel of her weapon over the hood and squeezed off an ill-aimed burst. Hooker

pivoted, opening up with his rifle. Steel-jacketed bullets stitched the other side of the car, the metal pinging and glass exploding. She edged back as the rounds pounded the vehicle and it collapsed on exploded tyres. Bent low she moved down to the next parked car, tucking herself down by its nose. Overhead she heard the pounding of approaching choppers.

Hooker dropped low, reloaded, then moved fast to the Jeep. He reached up, popped the driver's door and slipped inside the cab. Keeping low, he tucked the M4 between the seats and inserted the key into the ignition. He glanced back to the house. The sound of approaching sirens grew, the air vibrated as the choppers neared. Ullrich appeared on the porch. Hooker turned the key.

Vansen watched as the Jeep exploded, leaping more than three feet clear of the ground, a fireball engulfing it. It crashed back down, windows and doors blown out and collapsed in on itself. The flames leapt heavenwards, spreading into a thick black pall.

Ullrich was driven back against the wall by the force of the blast. The heat of the flames seemed to sear his skin. He couldn't compute it, what had happened. His eyes stung, but more from tears than the smoke.

Flames washed over the wreck. Then something moved inside the flames. The figure fell from the burning wreck, his clothes alight, hair burnt away. He collapsed on the sidewalk, then heaved himself up and staggering onto the front lawn, falling to the ground. Hooker rolled back and forth, extinguishing the flames. He flopped onto the blackened grass, smoke drifting from his body.

Ullrich dashed across the lawn and dropped down on one knee beside his friend. Hooker lay flat on his back, staring at the sky. His clothes hung off him, now just blackened, tattered rags. His exposed skin was burnt, scalded and reddened by flash-burn. All his hair, including his eyebrows and lashes, was burnt off. As well as soot, his body seemed smeared with blood. He blinked once. Ullrich made as if to touch him, but drew back. Hooker turned his head and looked at the Colonel. His cracked, blistered lips drew back, his white teeth

shining out of his blackened face in a horrible grin. His mouth moved silently. Ullrich leant closer, trying to hear.

A helicopter thundered by overhead, the scream of sirens tore through the air.

“FBI!” Vansen popped up over the roof of the bullet riddled parked car. “Thrown down your weapon!” she watched as the fleet of approaching police and federal vehicles screeched up on either end of the street, sealing off all exits. Heavily armed men spilled from the cars, quickly moving forward down either side of the street, closing from both directions. The chopper hovered overhead, rotors pounding, downdraft ripping at her. Her eyes snapped back to Ullrich. Her eyes locked with his. Do it, she willed. She could wait no longer. She squeezed the trigger.

Ullrich began to bring up his rifle, but the woman fired first. Bullets ripped across the top of his vest, throwing him back on the grass, weapon thrown just out of reach. Vansen came around the car and moved in, MP5 up. She edged closer, eyes fixed on Ullrich, lying flat on his back, gasping, clawing at the earth. She heard the law enforcement officers fanning out behind.

Hooker shot bolt upright, ripping his automatic shotgun round, and fired. Vansen saw him too late, her focus on Ullrich. The solid slug blasted out of the muzzle with a deafening roar, and slammed into Vansen’s chest, less than twenty feet away, lifting her clean off her feet and blowing her back fifteen feet. She crashed through the fence and rolled unconscious into the road.

The cops and feds watched her go down and swarmed.

Hooker popped the clip and reloaded the shotgun with a triple-ought, three-inch magnum load cartridges, each holding nine pellets the size of pistol bullets. He raised the weapon and fired. The shot ripped through the fence, tearing through the bodies of the nearest men. Those wearing vests mostly escaped with limb injuries, but one was hit in the face and killed instantly. Unfortunately a few overzealous cops and agents were without body

armour and were ripped apart, disembowelled or dismembered by the first salvo. Hooker fired again, wiping out the men on one flank. He pivoted as those on the other side opened up. He got off two shots, cutting a swathe through the shooters, before he was hit, two in the vest, but one in the neck, through and through. Another round ripped through his right cheek, passing across the inside of his mouth as he screamed, then exited through the left, without even chipping a tooth.

Hooker rolled, shots ripping into the ground around him, firing as he came up. He emptied the shotgun magazine into the flanking attackers, ripping them apart, cutting down even those sheltering behind the parked vehicles, shot ripping through metal, zinging off the asphalt. Hooker ditched the shotgun and grabbed Ullrich's rifle, bringing it round, opening up on automatic, swinging in an arc, blasting through any approaching cops. He reloaded, noticing Ullrich by his side, the Colonel with P7 in his right hand, USP in his left.

"We gotta move!" Ullrich shouted, firing off a couple of shots. Hooker nodded, rising up, weapon up at his shoulder, firing off short bursts as he moved. Ullrich followed, pistols blazing in each hand. Law enforcement officers scattered, cut down as they fled. Hooker led, firing as he moved, cutting down anyone who crossed his path, putting a volley even into the wounded crawling away. Ullrich on the rear, backed off, firing into any pursuers, trying to keep any sharpshooters heads down. But, still incoming fire blasted around them.

"Car!" Hooker croaked in an unearthly voice.

Ullrich barely heard him. He turned as he jammed his empty USP into his waistband and reloaded the P7 and saw Hooker gesturing to a nearby car. He nodded. They reached the vehicle, Ullrich shooting down one man zigzagging between the parked cars.

"Get her going, I'll cover!" he shouted. Hooker checked the door. Locked. He raised the butt of the Colt Commando and smashed it through the side window. He handed the

weapon to Ullrich and jerked open the door and climbed inside. Ripping open the steering column, he proceeded to fiddle with the wires beneath the dashboard.

Ullrich stood guard, rifle at his shoulder. He squinted through the smoke drifting across the street, sighting down the barrel of the Commando. Spotting movement, he fired a short burst, pivoted, saw a muzzle flash and returned fire. It fell still through the thickening smoke; he let rip with a long suppressing burst, then reloaded. He heard the rattle of footsteps in the distance, nearer the sound of someone dragging themselves painfully to cover. Ullrich ripped a fragmentation grenade from his vest, pulled the pin and tossed it. The grenade flew through the swirling haze, hit the road, bounced once and detonated flatly. Shrapnel blasted out, killing everyone within a ten-metre radius, ripping through flesh and slamming into the surrounding vehicles.

Screams for help echoed through the air. Ullrich fired into the smoke, choking off the nearer cries. He lowered his weapon and pulled a smoke grenade free and pulled the pin.

The car's engine coughed into life, "Ready!" Hooker rasped, twisting in the front seat, one foot on the ground.

"Colonel!" Vansen stepped through the choking smoke, SMG raised, a crooked smile on her face.

"No!" Hooker lunged from the car, diving between Ullrich and Vansen, grabbing the Colonel, knocking him down. Vansen fired. The long burst ripped into Hooker's back as he crossed in front of her, climbing higher as he fell. Both men hit the ground, the smoke grenade rolling from Ullrich's fingers and going off, just feet away. The red smoke billowed up from the hissing canister, swirling around them, engulfing the two men.

Vansen coughed and squinted through the smoke, trying to find a target. She fired two short bursts, probing. "Shit!" she muttered.

Ullrich stepped through the blood red smoke, off to her left, pistol raised, arm extended. Vansen saw him too late. He fired three times, hitting her in the neck and face. She collapsed with a short cry, swallowed up by the smoke.

Ullrich grabbed Hooker and dragged him to the car. He tossed him across the rear seats and climbed behind the wheel. He gunned the engine, shifted into gear and took off with a screech. He weaved through the smoke. Figures emerged out of the haze; the car mowed them down. Gunfire rattled around them. Side-swiping a car half-blocking the road, they emerged from the smoke. Ullrich ripped the steering wheel round and tore around the corner.

“We made it, Hooker, we made it!” he glanced back into the rear seat.

Hooker lay sprawling across the length of the seat, staring dumbly back at him. His hand was clasped to a gaping neck wound, blood pumping between his fingers. Two bullets had hit him in the head, once merely creasing his skull, the other shattering bone and ripping into his brain. Two other rounds had penetrated his vest, puncturing a lung and shattering his ribs. Blood poured from him, covering the interior of the vehicle. He blinked innocently and gazed back at Ullrich uncomprehendingly.

Ullrich turned back, eyes fixed on the road. “We’re going to make it, we’re going to make it!” he repeated blankly like a mantra as the car reached Arlington Memorial Bridge.

Vansen struggled to sit upright, hand pressed to her neck, trying to staunch the flow of the blood. She keyed her radio, struggling through the pain of her broken jaw to speak.

“He’s coming.”

Chapter 41

Steiner stripped off his jacket and began pulling a flak jacket over his shirt.

“Ullrich’s coming,” he said quietly. Hans nodded.

Steiner withdrew his Walther P99, worked the slide, chambering a round, popped the magazine and inserted a fresh round so it was carrying 17 bullets. He slid it back into his belt holster, checked his subcompact Glock 26 and reseated it in his concealed ankle holster. Hans handed him his Colt Commando. He popped the magazine, checked it and slammed it back home and yanked back the cocking handle.

A warm breeze picked up, washing down over Arlington National Cemetery, caressing the trees above the parked van.

“Is this wise?” Hans asked softly. “He knows we set him up. He won’t be happy.”

Steiner shrugged, “He always knew he was being set up.”

“But he came?”

“Maybe he thought he could play the angles, he certainly tried. Who knows, maybe this was all he had left to do. The game’s played out.” Steiner smiled, “He’s nowhere else left to go.” He slung the rifle across his shoulder and pulled out a cigarette and lit it. As he smoked he looked idly around.

“What do you want me to do?” Hans asked.

“Get Sherilyn out of the van. Take off the blindfold and gag, leave the cuffs on. If neither me or Ullrich show up, let her go.”

“What if Ullrich shows up?”

“Kill him, then let her go.”

“Are you sure?”

Steiner nodded. Hans turned towards the van. “Hans,” he called, the German turned. “Watch out for Paulus, he’ll show up.”

Hans nodded and smiled wanly to his friend, then yanked open the tail doors of the van. He helped Sherilyn out. He gently peeled the tape from her lips and removed her blindfold. She blinked, squinting as her eyes adjusted to the sunlight. She looked around, her eyes finally settling on Steiner. He returned her stare. He took one last drag of his cigarette, then let it fall and ground it out with the toe of his boot.

He unslung his rifle and unsafed it. He nodded once to Hans, then turned and began to trudge up the grassy slope. Reaching the top, he gazed out over the sea of marble gravestones stretching further than the eye could see. He paused as if he might look back, but moved on.

Paulus watched as Steiner slipped into the distance, disappearing amongst the trees. He switched his binoculars back to Sherilyn and the other man by the van. He smiled crookedly, laid the binoculars aside and retrieved his rifle.

* * *

Ullrich cleared the Boundary Channel and sped across the Jefferson Davis Highway. Overhead two choppers zipped by. He glanced back at Hooker, lying silently in the back. Only the occasional flicker of his eyelids and the pulse of the blood from his neck that pumped between the fingers gave any indication of life.

“Not long, buddy!” Ullrich forced a pained smile.

Hooker’s lips twitched, drawing back over his blood smeared teeth. He coughed once, blood spurting from his mouth and dribbling down his chin.

Ullrich turned his eyes back to the road. He knew he was lying. Getting to Arlington meant nothing. Hooker was dying, slowly bleeding to death, while he drove them both into the mouth of an inescapable trap. But there was nowhere else left to go.

He carried on driving, foot hard down on the gas, and tore through the gates of Arlington Cemetery, feeling the jaws snap shut behind him.

* * *

The choppers pounded overhead, swooping low over the Cemetery. FBI and Secret Service Units erected a ring of steel around the grounds, sealing everyone inside, while the DC and Virginian Police argued about jurisdiction. A Secret Service SWAT team took charge of the perimeter, co-ordinating the disparate groups. The FBI HRT was inbound from Quantico and the military had activated SEAL Team Six, favouring it above Delta, the army unit seen as too close to Ullrich. But the commander on the scene could not wait for either. Summoning the commander of the DC Field Office SWAT team, he ordered him and his men in immediately.

The twelve-man team, all heavily armed, clad from head to toe in black and dressed in heavy body armour moved in. Separating into three groups, the first entered through the main gate, the other two scaled the perimeter fence on either flank. On foot, the armed men moved in, closing the net.

* * *

Ullrich parked the car in the shade of a small copse. He retrieved the Colt Commando and loaded it with a fresh magazine. He opened the door and climbed out. He stood for a moment, feeling the fingers of the sun reaching through the leafy canopy, breathing in the sweet air. He turned and looked back inside the car.

Hooker lay lifelessly on the rear seat, bathed in his own blood, gore smeared over the interior of the vehicle. Ullrich could just make out the rasping of his friend's breath. He leant over the back of the seat, placing his face close to Hooker's.

"I've got to go now," he said softly.

Hooker nodded, his eyes swimming in and out of focus.

"I'll be back."

"Sir." Hooker whispered, his burnt battered face breaking into an unexpected grin.

Ullrich couldn't help but return the smile. He reached out and laid his hand on his friend's shoulder. They stayed like that for a moment, silence between them.

"Go." Hooker finally rasped painfully.

Ullrich nodded and stood, looked one last time at his friend and turned and walked away.

Hooker lay alone in the car. He removed his hand from his gaping neck wound and felt the blood stream out, warm and comforting. He reached down and drew his Colt .45 automatic and brought it up to his chest, cradling it there.

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Hans handed Sherilyn a cool bottle of mineral water as she sat perched on the tail of the van. She raised it to her lips with her cuffed hands, gulping it down. She handed it back, smiling gratefully. Hans returned the smile awkwardly. She wiped her lips with the back of her hand.

"It'll be over soon," he said softly, in what he hoped was a soothing tone.

"One way or another," she said coldly.

Hans shrugged helplessly. To break the awkward moment, he raised the bottle to take a drink.

The report of the rifle cracked dryly. The round slammed into Hans' right shoulder, shattering it, blood splattering Sherilyn's face.

Hans stumbled, then grabbed Sherilyn and knocked her to the ground. He fell upon her, shielding her with his body as three more rounds slammed into the side of the van.

Rolling off her, he barked, "Under the van!" Sherilyn obeyed without hesitation, scrabbling silently beneath the vehicle. Hans reached across his body and drew his SIG automatic pistol with his left hand. Luckily a round was already chambered and he thumbed back the hammer. Tucked up against the side of the van, he gasped for breath, blotting out the pain, trying to calm himself. He held the pistol awkwardly in his unfamiliar left hand and edged along the side of the van. He jabbed his head around the corner quickly. Nothing. Rising to his feet, but keeping low, he slid around the van.

His eyes darted, but he could see nothing. He waited, expecting a bullet at any minute. It didn't come. He backed off, retreating around the van. Cold metal touched the rear of his neck. He froze.

"Don't move!" a voice whispered. "Okay, get that good hand in the air and slowly turn."

Hans raised his left hand and slowly turned around.

Paulus smiled, keeping the Commando levelled, butt tucked in hard to his shoulder.

"Where's Steiner?" he asked.

"Gone to meet Ullrich."

Paulus nodded, "Okay, loose the SIG!" he waved the barrel of his rifle for emphasis. Hans tossed the pistol off to the side. Paulus grin widened, "Good!" He flicked the muzzle of his weapon, ripping open the German's cheek. Instinctively he ducked, turning away. Paulus brought round his rifle and slammed the butt down hard on the base of his skull, knocking Hans to the ground. He lay groaning, struggling to rise, face buried in the leaves. Paulus placed the sole of his boot on the rear of his head and brought round the muzzle of the rifle.

“Paulus!” a voice snapped from behind. He turned, seeing Sherilyn slither from beneath the van.

Hans flipped over, his left arm coming round, a short-bladed knife gripped in his hand. He drove the knife deep into the other man’s thigh. Paulus screamed with rage, squeezing the trigger of his weapon as his head snapped back around. Hans released the knife, leaving it buried in Paulus’ leg and knocked the muzzle of the rifle away as it discharged harmlessly into the ground. He kept hold of the weapon, wrestling with Paulus for a moment. Then Paulus suddenly let the rifle go, stepping away. He reached for his HK pistol and whipped it out. Hans swung round his leg; knocking Paulus’ feet from beneath him, sending him crashing down, head slamming into the side of the van.

Hans jumped up, glanced at the rifle on the ground, then his nearby pistol. No time. Paulus dragged himself round, swinging round his HK automatic. Hans stabbed out with his foot, knocking the pistol out of his hand. He kicked again, snapping Paulus’ head back. Before the other man could recover, Hans dived on top of him. They fought for a moment. Hans grabbed the knife in the other man’s thigh and ripped it free. Paulus shrieked, but dug his fingers into Hans’ shattered shoulder. The German screamed, rolling away.

Both men came up onto their feet, only a foot apart. They circled, then Paulus lunged. Hans stepped sideways, moving past him and whipped the knife through the air, slicing open Paulus’ face, across the bridge of his nose and cheekbone, blood spurting through the air. He stumbled, falling for a moment, but quickly rearing back up.

“Go!” Hans shouted to the stunned Sherilyn. “Get out of here!” he screamed. She froze as if torn for a moment, then bent and snatched up Hans’ fallen SIG and ran, climbing the slope and vanishing from view.

Paulus stepped in close, slamming his fist into Hans’ throat, crushing his windpipe. The German staggered back, staring into the other man’s face. Paulus’ cheek lay sliced open down to the bone, the gash gaping in an ugly grin.

“You and me now!” Paulus whispered. He stabbed out with his foot, slamming it into Hans’ knee, snapping the leg back on itself. As the German fell, Paulus drove the heel of his hand into his jaw, shattering it. Hans grabbed Paulus as he fell, dragging him down with him, the American crashing down on top of him.

Face to face, gasping, they wrestled, their bodies locked together. Hans brought up the knife; Paulus snapped his hand around his wrist, fighting him. Growling he drove it back, twisting the German’s wrist, turning the knife round on itself. Blood fell from Paulus’ gashed cheek, dripping into Hans’ eyes. Slowly the American forced the point of the knife back down. Hans cried out, fighting with his last ounce of strength. The tip of the blade dug into Hans’ chest, ripping through his clothes, slicing deep into his flesh. The knife drove into his heart. Hans bucked, Paulus twisted the blade. The German’s eyelids fluttered, he gasped once, then lay still.

Paulus rolled off the body and sat up. He looked around himself, searching, but Sherilyn was gone. He stood unsteadily and retrieved his pistol. As he paused, trying to catch his breath, he heard movement in the nearby trees. He dropped low and moved off fast.

Four heavily armed SWAT officers emerged from the treeline and approached the van. They checked it out and searched Hans’ body.

Paulus watched from cover.

They radioed in, then moved off.

Paulus watched them disappear, then gathered himself and headed out.

* * *

Four dark figures moved through the trees, slipping from cover to cover. The leader of the four-man SWAT squad raised his hand and the team halted. He pointed ahead to a clearing

beneath a small copse. Tucked in the shadows lay a battered Ford sedan, bodywork pocked by bullet holes. It matched the description of Ullrich's escape vehicle.

The squad leader directed his men via silent hand signals. The three officers nodded their understanding. The leader hung back, Colt Commando raised to his shoulder, covering the approach as the three men moved forward, zigzagging through the trees. The two men on the flanks hung back, training their MP5 sub-machine guns on the lifeless car. The remaining agent on point edged forward, carefully laying each foot in front of the other, moving side on, SMG aimed from his shoulder.

The SWAT agent edged closer to the vehicle, feeling hot beneath his black overalls and ski mask, all topped off with body-armour and a Kevlar helmet. He paused, sweeping his weapon over the vehicle. The driver's door stood open, blood was smeared over the paintwork, but there was no movement, no sign of life. The agent raised his left hand, right gripping his weapon, and signalled his intention to move in. His three buddies covered him, automatic weapons trained on the car.

Inside ten feet from the vehicle, the SWAT man still saw nothing. He consciously fought to calm himself, slowing his breathing, clearing his racing mind. He sucked in a deep breath and stepped in close, finger taking up the slack in the trigger. Inside the car nothing moved. The front was empty. He stepped carefully sideways, craning his neck. A bloodied, burnt body lay sprawling across the rear seat bathed in its own gore. The agent froze, almost recoiling at the gruesome sight. He fought his rising bile and looked away just for a split second, his muzzle dropping slightly. Hooker's eyes snapped open, transfixing the SWAT man. His hand came up, .45 automatic cocked. He fired twice before the agent could respond, both heavy slugs slamming into the man's masked face, head exploding, gore back-spraying on the car. The agent crumpled.

The remaining SWAT officers opened up on full automatic, bullets ripping into the car, shredding it from end to end. They hosed it down, glass exploding, tires bursting, metal

screeching as it was rent, twisted and torn. They reloaded and continued firing into the wreck as it collapsed in on itself.

The gunfire finally died, all three men reloading.

The gnarled ruin of the vehicle lay smoking, but miraculously the fuel tank had not exploded.

The SWAT team kept the vehicle covered for a minute, but nothing stirred in the eerie calm. The squad leader indicated for them to advance. He took point, the two others hanging just back on his flanks. They reached the car, stepping over their fallen comrade. The leader snapped his weapon down on the rear seat. He stood frozen. The other two closed, reaching his shoulder.

The back seat was empty, the far rear door stood ajar.

“Spread out, find him!” the leader hissed.

The three men swept through the treeline, quickly finding the blood-trail where Hooker had dragged himself clear. They tracked him, moving silently through the undergrowth.

They eventually found him, lying sprawled, face down in the fallen leaves, pistol hand lying twisted out to the side. They encircled him, then lowered the weapons as they looked down at the lifeless body.

* * *

Steiner stood at JFK’s grave, the eternal flame guttering in the breeze. He stared down as if lost in thought, rifle slung across his shoulder. He reached into his pocket for his cigarettes.

“Hands where I can see them!” the steely voice snapped from behind.

“You took your time.” Steiner held his hands out to the side, palms spread.

“Turn around, slowly.”

He turned. Ullrich stood off around fifteen feet; Colt Commando aimed from his shoulder, cold eyes sighting down the barrel.

“One hand, unsling the rifle, let it fall.” Ullrich ordered, Steiner complied. “Now step forward, two paces, keep your hands visible.” Steiner stepped forward, closing the gap separating the two men to around ten feet.

“What you going to do, shoot me?” Steiner smiled amiably.

“I should. You fucking set me up!” Ullrich snarled.

“Like you thought I wouldn’t?” he snorted.

“A second shooter? Rifle magazine loaded with blanks?”

“Couldn’t be sure you’d take the shot, had to have back-up. One live round, maybe you’d give it try?”

“I could have capped Harker!” Ullrich snapped.

“You could. A calculated guess. The magazine loaded with blanks after the first round was insurance.” Steiner shrugged, “It worked. You went for Harker when you realised what had happened, didn’t you?”

Ullrich’s lips twitched, “You or your shooter gave our position to the cops, they were all over us. The rifles were a match, I’m sure my prints will end up on the appropriate weapon?”

“Sure. You always knew you were playing the patsy!”

“And the car-bomb in my Jeep that fried Hooker?”

“Electrics?” Steiner shrugged, lying half-heartedly.

“And now I played my part, I suppose you’re going to hand over Sherilyn and let me go on my way?”

Steiner smiled thinly, “Why not?”

Ullrich shook his head. “Where is she?” he snapped.

“Nearby.” Steiner said softly.

“Move!” Ullrich waved the barrel of his weapon.

Steiner headed off; hands still out to his side, leading Ullrich away from the van.

They walked in silence; Ullrich a few feet behind Steiner, rifle aimed at the back of his head.

“So is this how it was always going to end then?” Ullrich snapped tersely.

“More or less. You going to kill me when you get her back?” he replied, in an almost disinterested voice.

“Yes.”

Silence hung between them.

“You know you won’t get away.” Steiner said.

“Yes.”

“So why?”

“Why?” Ullrich answered, voice lazy.

“Why’d you come?”

There was a pause as both men kept walking.

“You know why.” Ullrich said softly.

Steiner nodded. “We all do what we do.”

Steiner halted by the grave of the Unknown Soldier.

“Where is she?” Ullrich snapped.

“You know she is free to go, whatever happens to either of us.” Steiner said.

“Like I believe you!” Ullrich snorted.

“This is between you and me now. One way or another, you’re not walking out of here alive, you know that as well as I do. Right now things aren’t looking too good for me either. Either way, sure as shit neither of us is walking off into the sunset with her.”

“Your point?” Ullrich snapped, glancing around.

“It’s over.” Steiner let his hands fall to his sides.

They stood silent before the grave, the wind washing over them. Ullrich lowered his rifle, a look of sad resignation slipping across his face.

“I would have liked to have seen her before the end.” Ullrich said sadly.

Steiner nodded.

“So what now?” Ullrich suddenly felt tired and terribly old.

Steiner turned. The two men faced each other.

“Just you and me, here.” Steiner said softly, a sad smile on his lips.

Ullrich stared back and finally nodded. Slowly a smile spread across his face. He sucked in a breath and looked around.

“Time, I guess,” he said to no one in particular.

He looked away into the distance and sighed. “Go!” he whispered.

Steiner turned and moved off, his steps hurrying to be run. As he moved he drew his pistol, but never looked back. He reached the edge of the cold stone monuments to the dead and vanished.

Ullrich finally turned and squared his shoulders. He felt the wind on his face and gave an almost wistful smile.

“Time to hunt.”

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Steiner moved from tombstone to tombstone, keeping low, pistol held two handed. He crouched behind a white marble cross, breathing in quick, shallow breaths, wiping the sweat from his eyes with the back of his left hand. He looked up over the grave marker. The sunlit cemetery was silent and still, bathed in warm sunshine. He saw nothing. Dropping down, he moved at a crouch, crossing to the next grave, took another glance then moved again. A sudden gunshot cracked and the tombstone above his head exploded, broken marble

showering him. He moved quickly to fresh cover, an automatic burst tracking him, ripping up the soil at his feet. He dived behind a tall stone monument, jamming his back up against it, pistol held to his chest. Bullets thudded into the reverse side, chewing up the stone. Finally the firing ceased.

Steiner sucked in breaths, listening intently for movement. He knew he was hopelessly outmatched, Ullrich had a rifle, he had only a handgun. Somehow he had to even things up, draw Ullrich in close to negate his advantage, maybe even disarm him. At the moment, Ullrich was the hunter, he the quarry.

He closed his eyes, taking in a deep breath. He lunged from cover and took off at a sprint. He hadn't gone five paces before Ullrich opened up, firing short bursts, the surrounding gravestones exploding in showers of broken masonry, the ground shredded about his feet. Steiner zigzagged, winding through the stones, heading towards the nearby copse. Bullets snapped through the air around him, one ripping past his thigh, tearing open his trousers and gashing his flesh. He threw himself through the air, crashing into the undergrowth, gunfire ripping into the surrounding vegetation. He rolled, coming up behind a tree. Bullets slammed in the other side of the trunk, the tree swaying, groaning under the impacts. The firing dropped off to short staccato bursts, then single, probing shots, until it finally died out.

Steiner dropped onto his belly and began crawling through the undergrowth, edging forward to the open ground. As he slithered through the damp vegetation, his hand ran over a fallen branch. He gripped it and dragged it along with him. Reaching the edge of the copse, he lay tucked in the tall grass. His eyes searched, but found nothing. He continued to scan, ignoring the pain and bleeding from his leg, blotting out the sting of insects feasting on him. He slowly drew up the long branch, almost five feet long, gnarled and twisted. Bringing it up to his side, he extended his arm away from his body. The tip of the branch reached a distance

bush, standing above the grass. He drove the branch into the bush and stabbing viciously, his eyes remaining fixed on the horizon. The bush shook and bucked, swaying above the grass.

A burst of gunfire ripped out, shredding the bush. Steiner released the branch, his eyes fixing on the muzzle flash in the trees on the opposite side of the cemetery.

The gunfire died, nothing stirred from either man's position. Moving slowly, Steiner began to backtrack through the grass, wriggling on his belly, mud and sweat covering his face. Overhead he could hear the dull thud of circling choppers, just audible above the chatter of the insects around him.

* * *

Steiner slowly circled around, slipping silently from cover to cover, eventually returning to the Unknown Soldier's grave. He crouched down, the cool of the marble against his damp cheek. He silently checked his Walther P99, then unsheathed the subcompact Glock from his ankle holster. He gripped the small, black, plastic pistol in his left hand, the P99 in his right. He advanced through the marble-sided maze, weaving through the memorial's walls, emerging into blazing sunlight. He hung back for a minute, then stepped out, moving quickly through the open, feet silent on the stone floor beneath his feet.

He closed quickly on Ullrich's position. His paced increased. He thought he was going to make it, he was only feet away.

Ullrich opened up, rising out of cover, firing as he rose, the flash of his muzzle illuminating his face in the shadow of the trees. He moved forward, firing, flame leaping a foot from his muzzle, the chatter of his rifle reverberating around the closed environs of the memorial, echoing back off the cold walls.

Steiner kept running, dashing headlong towards Ullrich, bullets whipping around him. One gashed open his right upper arm, two more thudded into his vest. He stumbled,

winded for a second, but kept moving forward. He opened up with both pistols, bullets snapping around Ullrich, ripping into the surrounding vegetation. Steiner closed, unaware of the blood seeping from below his vest, one round having penetrated the Kevlar. Ullrich seemed to stagger, as if hit, then his rifle chattered dry. He made as if to reload, but Steiner was too close. He dropped the Commando and snatched out his pistol, raising it to fire.

Steiner launched himself through the air with a scream, crashing into Ullrich, both men falling, tangled together.

Steiner came up first, rising to one knee, Ullrich close behind him, bringing round his pistol. Steiner swung his P99, snapping the pistol across Ullrich's cheek, ripping it open, blood spraying. Ullrich howled, tumbling backward, but as he fell, he stabbed out with his foot, the sole of his boot driving into Steiner's chest, throwing him backwards, sending him crashing through the dense undergrowth.

Winded, fighting for breath, Steiner sat up. He felt a terrible, searing pain in his chest; he looked down and saw the blood pooling in his lap. He cursed and tore off his vest, tossing it away, exposing the ragged hole in his lower chest. He put his hand to it; blood welled between his fingers.

"Fuck!" he shook his head. He stood unsteadily, reloading both pistols. He reholstered the Glock and braced the P99 two handed. Keeping low, he moved through bushes. He reached the clearing, but save for the fallen Colt Commando and blood smeared on the surrounding foliage, there was nothing, Ullrich was gone.

With difficulty, Steiner dropped to one knee. He found a blood trail, then checked the fallen rifle, but it was empty. He left it and moved off weapon steadied before him in a two handed combat grip.

He followed the trail, blinking away the blood and sweat filling his eyes. He moved through the gore smeared white marble of the memorial. His shoes felt like they were full of

water. He stumbled across Ullrich's discarded vest and webbing, smeared with the Colonel's blood. He kept moving.

The trail finally seemed to peter out; it was near impossible to track it through the clipped grass. Steiner dropped to his knee, fingers running over the turf. A flicker of movement on the left caught his eye, he turned, but it was gone. He moved forward towards it, pistol extended before, moving quickly at the crouch.

He wound through the gravestones, searching, eyes sweeping. Something caught his eye. Blood smeared on a nearby stone. Steiner dropped and waited, head cocked, as if sniffing the air. Nearby he heard the rustle of movement, he searched with his eyes but saw nothing. Closing them, he tried to focus. There it was, the faint sound of motion. He rose, moving around the stone.

Steiner moved carefully now, one foot gently in front of the other, pistol aimed before him, sweeping ahead with eyes and weapon.

Ullrich broke from cover, running fast for a wounded man. Steiner fired fast. Ullrich turned and returned fire as he moved. The exchange of gunfire rattled, burnt cordite swirling in the air. Ullrich ducked down behind a tombstone, Steiner did likewise, quickly reloading, and then he was up again, running fast.

Ullrich spun around the stone, keeping low, firing one handed. Steiner returned fire, but Ullrich hit first. The first round tore into Steiner's right hand, ripping the pistol from his grip as the bullets shattered bone and chewed up the flesh. Steiner stumbled and the second round snapped past his face, ripping open his right cheekbone, blazing on, slicing off the top of his ear. Screaming in pain, he crumpled, toppling behind a gravestone splattered with his own blood.

Falling hard, Steiner still had the presence of mind to draw his legs in, curling up in the shelter of the tombstone above his head. Half-deafened, he looked down at his mangled right hand, skin ripped open down to the bone, his little finger torn off, the ring finger only

semi-attached. He gazed at it with almost clinical detachment, turning the wrecked hand slowly over as he examined it. He was oblivious to the pain now, only vaguely aware of the torrent of blood streaming down the side of his face. He felt oddly removed, in a dreamlike state. The crack of bullets slamming into the reverse of the gravestone seemed muted. His own breathing was steady, calm, filling his ears. He seemed utterly removed from himself. A feeling of warmth and complete stillness came over him. He smiled. Maybe this is what it feels like to die, he thought, it ain't so bad.

Ullrich ceased fire, probably reloading. Steiner rose onto one knee, reaching across with his left hand and drawing the subcompact Glock 26 from his ankle holster. He could hear the metallic click and ratchet of Ullrich slamming home a fresh magazine and yanking back the slide. He swore he could even hear Ullrich's soft breathing. Steiner felt a peace he had never known, all physical sensations softened.

He heard Ullrich moving in to finish it. He smiled, shaking his head, a soft ringing in his right ear. He raised his pistol and took in one last deep breath.

Steiner reared up from behind the gravestone; small pistol gripped one handed, body side on. Ullrich was less than ten feet away, P7 held in a combat grip, body square on. Both men fired together.

The crackle of gunfire merged into one, both firing rapidly. Bullets whipped round Steiner, but he no longer cared, squeezing the trigger of his pistol again and again. Ullrich returned the fire just as quickly, the buzz of bullets filling the smoky air. Ullrich was hit three times in the chest. He staggered, weapon wavering, and Steiner emptied his remaining rounds into him. Ullrich stumbled and fell backwards, hitting the ground hard, his back coming to rest against the white marble of some soldier's gravestone.

Steiner popped his empty magazine, letting it fall to the ground, clumsily reloading and pulling back the slide. He shuffled forward, but as he reached Ullrich, he let his pistol fall. Ullrich lay slumped on the ground, legs bent, back against the gravestone, blood pouring

from his ravaged chest. He looked down at the ruin, studying it. He slowly looked back up, his unfocused eyes fixing on Steiner above him. He smiled, blood trickling from his mouth.

“It’s over,” he croaked.

Steiner nodded.

He tried to look around, but his head just fell back. He sighed. His hand groped for his pistol, tossed just out of reach. He clawed vainly at the soil.

“It was always going to end this way.” Ullrich muttered.

Steiner nodded and raised his pistol.

Ullrich gazed at him and laughed dryly.

Overhead a chopper thundered by.

“Do it.” He whispered.

Steiner fired once, hitting Ullrich in the head, killing him instantly.

Slowly, he lowered his weapon and looked down on the silent body, waiting, as if for something.

“Steiner!” a voice called out.

A pistol cracked, the bullet slamming into Steiner’s neck, twisting him round, knocking him to his knees. He looked up. The shooter’s figure stood some way off, backlit by the blazing sun. Steiner left hand came up and he fired, squeezing off three shots. The shooter crumpled.

Steiner struggled to his feet. Blood poured from the gaping wound in his neck. He stuck his pistol in his belt and clamped his good hand over it, blood welling up between his fingers.

He stumbled forward, crossing to the shooter's body. He reached it and looked down at the crumpled form.

Sherilyn lay face up, staring blindly up at the brilliant blue sky, a sad smile on her lips. Three bullet holes clustered around her left breast.

A sob rose up from deep within Steiner and his knees buckled. He fell beside Sherilyn's dead body. His body retched and shook as the sobs tore from him, a wail rising up from within him. He crawled to her, lifting her and cradling her in his arms, tears streaking down his face.

Paulus watched from cover. A chopper thundered overhead. A Pave Hawk landed, disgorging its SEAL team, the heavily armed men fanning out, checking Ullrich's body, heading towards Steiner.

Paulus muttered to himself, then turned and slipped away.

Steiner cradled Sherilyn in his arms, drawing her tight to his chest, rocking her gently. Whispering softly, he stared out into the distance, bloody tears covering his face.

Chapter 42

Dark clouds raced across the night sky, twisting and knotting, a low rumble rolling overhead. Lightning flashed in the distance, forking down, stabbing the swirling waters of the Chesapeake Bay. Dafoe sat in the wheelhouse, gripping the handrail to steady himself as the motor-yacht pitched and yawed violently, waves slapping against the hull. His shoulder throbbed painfully, the ache creeping up into a migraine. He checked his watch again.

Headlights flashed in the distance. Dafoe grabbed the Mini Uzi from the counter and headed out on deck. A light drizzle was falling, whipped by the wind into his face as he looked towards the bank. The sound of a car engine could be heard approaching, the headlights flashed across the sky, then fell behind the trees, illuminating them for an instant. Then suddenly engine and lights died. All Dafoe could hear was the patter of the rain, the slap off the waves and the distant rumble of thunder. He waited, ducking down by the railings, training his SMG on the rain-soaked wooden jetty between him and the shore. The rain grew heavier.

Time passed slowly, but nothing came. He lowered his weapon. The kiss of cold metal touched behind his right ear.

“Sloppy.” a voice whispered.

“Paulus?” Dafoe muttered.

The muzzle of the pistol was removed and Dafoe turned.

Paulus stood behind him, pistol hanging by his side. He was soaked from head to toe, water pooling around his feet. His pale, skeletal, face was half obscured by a sodden, blood-soaked dressing.

“Jesus! What the fuck happened to you?”

“I need the medical kit.” Paulus grunted, turning and shambling into the wheelhouse. Dafoe hurried after him, but the other man had already headed below deck. Dafoe waited nervously, listening to the crashes and muttered curses emanating from below.

Paulus eventually reappeared, first aid kit and a shaving mirror tucked under one arm, swinging from the other an open bottle of vodka. Paulus took a long swig and banged the bottle down on the side and slumped on the bench. He placed the mirror on the counter before him and opened the medical box. He popped a couple of Pethadin tablets and washed them down with another drink from the vodka bottle.

“Where’s the Colonel and Hooker? Where’s Sherilyn?” Dafoe finally summoned up the courage to speak.

Paulus ignored him. He ripped the dressing from his face.

“Jesus!” Dafoe gasped.

A huge gash ran from across Paulus’ nose and down his cheek, laying the flesh open to the bone. He held the sagging, loose flap of skin up and in place as he dabbed at it with iodine, not even wincing. He tossed the used swab and took another long pull at the vodka, then tipped the bottle over his hands, pouring the alcohol all over them, front and back. He drunk down the last of the vodka and tossed the bottle out of the wheelhouse and into the water. Slowly and steadily, Paulus began to thread a curved surgical needle with suture.

“They’re coming along later, right, the Colonel and the rest of them?” Dafoe asked again, desperation creeping into his voice.

Paulus didn’t look at him. “Get this boat moving, we’re leaving now.”

He drove the needle through the iodine stained skin of his cheek and began sowing up the long ugly gash. Blood welled up each time he sunk the needle, but he did not waver, adding one uneven stitch after the other.

“But the Colonel, Hooker...” Dafoe interrupted.

Paulus paused, fixing the Corporal with an icy stare. “They’re all dead. Now are you going to shut the fuck up and get this boat moving, or am I going to have to kill you and do it myself?”

Dafoe stared back aghast. “Are you sure?” he asked after a pause.

“Yes.” Paulus returned to his handiwork, driving the last few stitches through his cheek and across his nose. Finished, he laid aside the needle and thread with blood soaked hands and admired his handiwork in the mirror, turning his face first this way, then that.

The first rays of the rising sun stabbed up above the horizon, illuminating the livid, twisted purple and red clouds streaking across the sky, blasted by an unforgiving wind. The yacht sliced through the choppy grey waters, slipping through the mouth of the Chesapeake, disappearing into the cold, grey expanse of the Atlantic Ocean.

* * *

Six months later.

Lightning flashed over Lake Farber Maximum Security Federal Penitentiary, illuminating its stark concrete walls and electrified fences. The facility was a newly opened ‘super-max’ jail built to house America’s most dangerous criminals. The inmates, hair shorn, dressed in identical white overalls, were locked down for 23 hours a day, with only an hour for exercise and visits to the showers. Meals were served in their individual cells, where the inmate would spend his days alone. The prisoners did not work and were forbidden to interact with each other. Each cell was soundproofed, whitewashed and sterile. The inmates were sealed in behind a heavy door, and the cells like the rest of the prison had no windows on the outside world. A security camera monitored each prisoner in his cell and the rest of the facility was covered with remote control close circuit TV, the guards keeping watch over the bank of monitors in a central command post. The guards interacted as little as possible with the prisoners, escorting them in silence during their exercise periods, then returning them to the cells. The inmates were known only by their numbers, names were irrelevant.

Prisoner 1152 sat alone in his silent cell, the fluorescent lights burning overhead as they did 24 hours a day. The prisoner sat on the cold, bare floor before the door, clutching his

knees rocking back and forth, a low hum emanating from deep inside his chest. A latticework of scar tissue criss-crossed his broad face, stretching over his shaven skull. Black eyes blazed out of his blank face.

Hooker rocked more and more violently, the moan rising up from within him, the anguish in his eyes bleeding into his plaintive wail. The howl became a shriek of pure animal rage; his head tilted back, his teeth bared. The guards in their control booth sat and watched his silent scream, sipping coffee and chewing gum.

The baying rolled on and on into an uncontrollable shriek of total abandon. The noise seemed to pierce the soundproofed rooms, echoing down the long, lifeless corridors. The other prisoners, like on so many other nights, covered their ears or buried their heads beneath their pillows.

Hooker's scream echoed through the cold prison, racing down barred passageways, clawing through the walls and bleeding away into the burning night sky.

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“Now our nation is once again a safe place to live, the envy of the world, strong, prosperous, the perfected ideal of democracy. Word has gone out to the fanatics and malcontents who would undermine our government, justice, the very will of the American people, that they will not be tolerated, that we will not be cowed and quake before them.

No, we will stand up and fight for our nation and our freedom and we will defeat those who threaten us and our cherished way of life. We will show no fear, no favour, we will strike with sure and righteous vengeance.

Once again we are respected around the world, feared and revered, by friends and foes alike, and it is as it should be, for we are the leaders not just of the free world, but the champion that all peoples of the world look to, their hope and their ideal. We will not

disappoint them. We will be steadfast and resolute, a friend to be cherished, but an enemy that is indeed to be feared.

There has been much talk as to whether I will stand in next years presidential elections. Well, after much consideration and after the unflagging support of the American people, I have decided to undertake this burden, and with your support I will fight to defend this nation of ours as I have done my entire life, honestly, fairly but with fierce and unflinching dedication.”

Harker’s words, greeted by the roars of approval by the crowd at the rally still echoed in Hobson’s ears as he arrived home. Before the speech, the President had taken him aside and assured him that he would announce that Hobson would be his running mate in next year’s election. Still elated he climbed from his chauffeur driven limousine and headed inside his respectable Georgetown house, trailed by his two Secret Service bodyguards.

Once inside, he dismissed the agents and headed into his study and poured himself a large brandy. Breathing in its warm aroma, he took a drink before slumping into a leather armchair. He sighed as he adjusted his bulky frame, stretching his legs out before him. He reached to the humidior on the table and withdrew a Cuban cigar. Snipping off the end, he clamped it between his teeth and lit it with his gold lighter. He puffed heavily on the Havana, thick blue smoke shrouding him. He took another swig of brandy and lounged back, closing his eyes and allowing his mind to drift.

He would enjoy these last moments of peace. His new, reinforced Secret Service detachment would arrive tomorrow; to set up before the announcement of Hobson role as Harker’s running mate. At present, he just had the two agents inside the house and four more covering the exterior. But Hobson wasn’t worried. All his enemies had been dealt with. After Ullrich’s death and the subsequent furore had began to die down, Harker, now America’s number one hero, and Hobson had set about eliminating not just their enemies, but all those privy to the details of the plot who had outlived their usefulness. Within three months, those

enemies not neutralised by removal from positions of power within the government, law enforcement, military or judiciary, had all perished either in tragic accidents or from opportune natural causes. Golden boy and media-darling, Harker had manipulated the press and TV coverage, diverting and eliminating any nascent suspicions. Blinded by idolatry, or carefully ruled with an iron hand, the media was now the President's obedient lap dog. Poll ratings showed Harker's Presidency winning record approval ratings, both personally and politically, up in the 85-90% area, an all time high in the history of the republic. Harker was riding a crest of a wave, he was unstoppable. He would cruise into office next year, and Hobson would be with him.

He sighed and smiled contentedly.

A figure stepped out of the darkness clinging to the edges of the room. Hobson looked into the heavily scarred face, the pale skin drawn tight over the bones. Dead eyes stared out of sunken hollows. He smiled, his scarred lips twitching horribly. He levelled the silenced Ruger .22 on Hobson. The right hand holding the gun was gnarled by scar tissue, the left, hanging by his side was similarly marked, the little finger missing.

"Steiner?" Hobson gasped, almost relieved. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Steiner did not reply. The terrible smile remained on his lips; his flat, lifeless eyes showed no recognition.

Hobson swallowed heavily and felt his bowels knotting. "Just put down the gun, we can discuss this!" Desperation bled into his voice.

Steiner remained silent, the barrel of the pistol unwavering.

"What's this about? Is this personal?" Hobson shifted in his seat. "Is it about you and me? The woman?"

Steiner just looked back at him.

"We can sort this out, come on!" Sweat beaded Hobson's forehead. "Jesus, Steiner, you can't do this, Harker won't allow it!"

Steiner cocked his head. His smile widened, but there was no mirth in eyes.

“Oh, Christ!” Hobson gasped. “Harker sent you!”

Steiner fired twice, both shot mere coughs. The two subsonic rounds slammed into Hobson’s thick chest, ripping open his left breast. He bucked in the chair, arching his back, a low hissing groan escaping between his lips. His eyes widened, fixing on Steiner’s lifeless face. His lips moved in a silent plea.

Steiner fired twice into Hobson’s face, blood spraying the leather headrest.

He watched as the last quiver of life passed through Hobson’s body. The spasm passed as he bled out in the glow of the firelight. Steiner turned and moved away. Silently he melted away into the shadows.