

WILLIAM W. JOHNSTONE Crisis in the Ashes (#29)

Crisis in the Ashes (#29)

Crisis in the Ashes (#29)

NOTICES REQUIRED FOR COPYRIGHT WORKS DISTRIBUTED IN THE UNITED STATES
UNDER 17 U.S.C. Sec. 121

The information which follows is important since it describes the copyright ownership and legal restrictions on the use of this Bookshare.org digital material which govern your lawful use of it.

Copyright Notices

The owner of the copyright on this digital material is William W. Johnstone and this edition was published during 2000. The title of this material is 'Crisis in the Ashes (#29)', and the author is 'WILLIAM W. JOHNSTONE'.

This material may only be lawfully used and possessed in this form by Bookshare.org individual or institutional members who have previously signed a Member Agreement and provided Bookshare.org with satisfactory written proof of a print disability, within the meaning of 17 U.S.C. Sec. 121, and who qualify to receive books and other publications produced in specialized formats in compliance with the relevant copyright laws of the United States. If you are not in this class of persons, you are not authorized to access or use this material and should destroy this copy at once since possession or use of it is a violation of copyright law. Copyright owners agreed to this special exception to assist the blind and reading disabled, and their rights should be respected in return for this important exception.

This material is made available under 17 U.S.C. Sec. 121, which provides that: "it is not an infringement of copyright for an authorized entity to reproduce or to distribute copies of a previously published, nondramatic literary work if such copies are reproduced or distributed in specialized formats exclusively for use by blind or other persons with disabilities."

Bookshare.org is an authorized entity under this law. This exception applies only to distribution within the United States, whether over the Internet or otherwise.

Your use of this special digital form of the material is subject to the Member Agreement you previously signed. For the full text of the current version of this Member Agreement, please visit www.bookshare.org/Agreements. This information does not in any way change the terms of your Agreement with Bookshare.org; it is placed here to remind you of your obligations and those of persons who might subsequently obtain a copy of this digital form of the material.

Limitation of Liability; Indemnity by User

By downloading and using this material, you agree that neither Bookshare.org nor the authors or original publishers of the materials shall be financially responsible for any loss or damage to you or any third parties caused by the failure or malfunction of the Bookshare.org

Web Site (www.bookshare.org) or because of any inaccuracy or lack of completeness of any content that you download from the Web Site, including this material. Similarly, neither Bookshare.org nor the authors and publishers of the content make any representations as to the accuracy, completeness, etc., of the materials available on the Web Site. The authors and publishers have no editorial control over this Web Site.

BOOKSHARE.ORG, AND THE AUTHORS, PUBLISHERS AND COPYRIGHT OWNERS OF THE MATERIALS, SHALL NOT IN ANY CASE BE LIABLE FOR DIRECT, INDIRECT, SPECIAL, INCIDENTAL OR CONSEQUENTIAL DAMAGES, WHETHER BASED ON CONTRACT, TORT OR ANY OTHER LEGAL THEORY, IN CONNECTION WITH OR ARISING OUT OF THE FURNISHING OF CONTENT, THE FUNCTIONING OF THE WEB SITE, OR ANY OTHER ASPECT OF YOUR USE OF THE WEB SITE AND THE CONTENTS PROVIDED HEREUNDER.

You agree to indemnify and hold Bookshare.org and Benetech, the Web Site provider, harmless from any liability, loss, cost, damage or expense, including reasonable attorney's fees, that result from any claim made by any author, publisher or copyright owner that you, or any one acquiring copies of copyrighted materials downloaded from the Web Site through you, is not visually impaired, disabled or otherwise entitled to download and use the digital materials from the Bookshare.org Web Site under the provisions of 17 U.S.C. Sec. 121 and related laws. This indemnity includes any claims arising out of any breach of your obligations under your Member Agreement, whether by reason of misuse, negligence or otherwise.

Permitted Use; Limited Waiver of Privacy Principles and Laws

You are permitted under the "Fair Use" principles of the copyright laws to use this digital copy for your own personal use. However, any further reproduction, distribution, or any commercial usage requires the express, prior consent of the copyright holder.

This material contains digital watermarks and fingerprints designed to identify this material as a Bookshare.org digital material that was specifically downloaded by you. It is illegal to delete or modify these watermarks and fingerprints under the terms of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. Bookshare.org has an active monitoring system in place to protect against this, which includes maintaining records of the identity of the persons downloading books and materials from the Web Site. We do so to protect this valuable exception in the copyright law that permits the Bookshare.org and similar services. Your Member Agreement expressly authorizes us to include these security devices, solely for this use, as an express exception to current and future privacy laws relating to protection of personal information data. Should any future privacy law or regulation preclude the use of this personal data for purposes of tracking the downloading and use of these materials and enforcing the limitations of 17 U.S.C. Sec. 121, your right to use these materials will terminate on the effective date of any such law or regulation.

The Bookshare.org id of this book is Bookshare-33555-1-1. This material was downloaded by Robert Riddle (captinlogic@hotmail.com) and is digitally fingerprinted in the manner described above.

Begin Content

NOT JONES NOT SMITH

Someone behind Enger spoke. "You looking for anyone in particular?"

Enger froze, then risked a glance over his shoulder. "Is that you, Jones?" he asked.

"I've been called Jones. Smith is one of my favorites, too."

A cold chill ran down Enger's spine.

"Nice shirt you're wearing," the voice said, coming from a dark stand of trees only a few feet behind him. "Not one of my favorite colors, black, but it's a nice shirt."

Enger tensed, ready to make his move with his AK 47. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Ben. Ben Raines. I'm sure I'm the one you've been sent here to kill."

How the hell had Raines gotten behind him? "There must be some mistake. We came here to join up with the Rebels."

"No mistake," the voice said. "Unless you count letting me get behind you. That was a helluva mistake."

"Would you shoot a man in the back?"

"I'd shoot a sorry son of a bitch like you in the balls if the light was better. But just for the hell of it, I'm gonna give you a chance to turn around before I pull the trigger."

Gerald Enger wheeled, sweeping his AK 47 barrel toward the trees as his finger tightened on the trigger.

He was lifted off his feet by a hail of lead tearing through his body.

Raines squatted and looked at his wounds close up. "You've only got a few minutes, soldier. Any last words?" he asked.

"Yeah," Enger groaned through bloodstained lips. "I'll see you in hell, Raines."

"Maybe," Raines answered, not unkindly, "but don't wait up for me. It may be a while."

3 BOOK YOUR PLACE ON OUR WEBSITE

AND MAKE THE READING CONNECTION!

We've created a customized website just for our very special readers, where you can get the inside scoop on everything that's going on with Zebra, Pinnacle and Kensington books.

When you come online, you'll have the exciting opportunity to:

View covers of upcoming books

Read sample chapters

Learn about our future publishing schedule (listed by publication month and author)

Find out when your favorite authors will be visiting a city near you

Search for and order backlist books from our online catalog

Check out author bios and background information

Send e-mail to your favorite authors

Meet the Kensington staff online

Join us in weekly chats with authors, readers and other guests

Get writing guidelines

AND MUCH MORE!

Visit our website at <http://www.pinnaclebooks.com>

4

William W. Johnstone

Pinnacle Books Kensington Publishing Corp.

<http://www.pinnaclebooks.com>

5 PINNACLE BOOKS are published by

Kensington Publishing Corp. 850 Third Avenue New York, NY 10022

Copyright © 2000 by William W. Johnstone

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior written consent of the Publisher, excepting brief quotes used in reviews.

If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the Publisher and neither the Author nor the Publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

Pinnacle and the P logo Reg. U.S. Pat. & TM Off.

First Printing: January, 2000 10 987654321

Printed in the United States of America

6 "This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it, or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it."

-Abraham Lincoln

7

If a war had not engulfed the entire world, plunging every nation into bloody chaos, the government of the United States would probably have collapsed anyway. Personal income taxes had been going up for years, and the hardworking, law-abiding citizens were paying well over half their

incomes to the government. The left wing of the Democratic Party had taken over and passed massive gun-grab legislation, effectively disarming American citizens-except for the criminals, of course, and about three-quarters of a million tough-minded Americans who didn't give a big rat's ass what liberals said, thought, or did. Those Americans carefully sealed up their guns and buried them, along with cases of ammunition. When the collapse came, those Americans were able to defend themselves against the roaming gangs of punks and thugs that popped up all over what had once been called the United States of America. The great nation would never again be accurately referred to as the United States.

Slowly, a growing group of people began calling for a man named Ben Raines to lead them. But Ben didn't want any part of leadership. He disregarded the increasing calls from people all over the nation until finally he could no longer ignore the pleas.

Months later, thousands of people made the journey to the northwest part of the nation and formed their own

8

nation out of three states. It was called the Tri-States, and those who chose to live there based many of their laws on the Constitution of the United States: the original interpretation of that most revered document. Basically, it was a common sense approach to government, something that had been sadly lacking for years with liberals in control of the old United States of America. After only a few months in their new nation, Ben knew that only about two out of every ten Americans could-would, more to the point-live under a common sense form of government. Under this form of government, everyone, to a very large degree, controlled their own destiny. The Rebels, as the residents of the Tri-States were named by the press, took care of the very old, the young, and those unable to care for themselves. But if a person was able to work, they worked . . . whether they liked it or not. There were no free handouts for able-bodied people. If they didn't want to work, they got the hell out of the Tri-States. Very quickly.

The first attempt at building a nation within a nation failed when the federal government grew powerful enough to launch a major campaign. The original Tri-States was destroyed, and the Rebel army was decimated and scattered.

But the federal government made one major mistake: they didn't kill Ben Raines.

Ben and the few Rebels left alive began rebuilding their army and then launched a very nasty guerrilla war against the federal government that lasted for months: hit hard, destroy, and run. It worked.

But before any type of settlement could be reached, a deadly plague struck the earth: a rat-borne outbreak, the Black Death revisited.

When the deadly disease finally ran its course, anarchy reigned over what had once been America. Gangs of punks and warlords ruled from border to border, coast to

9

coast. Ben and his Rebels began the long, slow job of clearing the

nation of human slime and setting up a new Tri-States. This time they settled in the south, first in Louisiana in an area they called Base Camp One, then spreading out in all directions as more and more people wanted to become citizens of the new nation called the Southern United States of America: SUSA.

Ben and the Rebels fought for several years, clearing the cities of vicious gangs and growing larger and stronger while the SUSA spread out.

In only a few years, the Rebel army became the largest and most powerful army on the face of the earth ... with the possible exception of China's. No one knew what was going on in China, for that nation had sealed its borders and cut off nearly all communication with the outside world.

A few more years drifted by while the Rebels roamed the world at the request of the newly formed United Nations, kicking ass and stabilizing nations as best they could in the time allotted them.

Back home, the situation was worsening: outside the SUSA, the nation was turning socialistic with sickening speed. The old FBI was gone. In its place was the FPPS: Federal Prevention and Protective Service, a fancy title that fooled no one. The FPPS was the nation's secret police, and they were everywhere, bully boys and thugs. Day-to-day activities of those living in the USA were highly restricted. The new Socialist Democratic government of President-for-life Claire Osterman and her second in command, Harlan Millard, was now firmly in control.

There were border guards stationed all along major crossings in every state. Now many of them had been moved south, to patrol along the several-thousand-mile border of the SUSA.

A bloody civil war was shaping up between the USA and the SUSA. A bounty had been placed on the head of

10

Ben Raines: a million dollars for his capture, dead or alive. Ben was accustomed to that: he'd had bounties-of one kind or another, from one group or another-on his head for years.

Anna, Ben's adopted daughter, had been kidnapped by the FPPS. She was to be tried as a traitor to the Socialist Democrat government, and executed. A highly irritated Ben knew the taking of Anna was to draw him out, for the FPPS was certain Ben would come after her... which he damn sure did, with blood in his eyes. That abortive move cost the FPPS several dozen agents, and accomplished nothing else for Osterman and her henchman. It further heightened the already monumental legend of Ben Raines . . . and made Claire Osterman and her government look like a pack of incompetent screwups ... which they certainly were.

After Claire completely lost her temper and what little rational judgment she had, she started a civil war with SUSA, using hired mercenaries when half of her own USA troops refused to fight their neighbors. All along a battle line that stretched for thousands of miles, from Texas to Georgia in the old south, federal troops faced Rebel forces across no-man's lands.

Once again SUSA, led by Ben Raines and his team, kicked her federal troops' butts in battle after battle, driving her into a fury which knew

no bounds.

When Sugar Babe Osterman got word from her field commanders that Raines had killed Commanding General Walter Berman, head of her army, in hand-to-hand combat, she almost had a stroke. She notified Cecil Jeffreys, President of SUSA, that if he and his leaders, especially that bastard Ben Raines, didn't surrender, she was going to launch an all-out missile attack against SUSA at 0600 hours. Cecil Jeffreys called his Commanding General Ben Raines to his office. . . .

11 One

Ben Raines was awakened by the ringing of his telephone. He fumbled for the receiver and swung his legs out of bed, almost stepping on the Malamute he'd adopted-rather, who'd adopted him-last week.

"Yeah?" Ben said, glancing at the clock on the night-stand. 0200 hours.

"Ben?" Cecil Jeffreys said, sounding tired. "Get down to the command center's war room. We've got a building situation."

"On my way." Ben didn't waste time asking what the situation was. That would be explained when he got to the war room.

Ben took a quick shower and dressed in BDUs. Fifteen minutes after Cecil's call, he was pulling out of his driveway. Mai sat in the front seat of the Hummer beside him, looking out at the night.

"Something big is brewing, Mai," Ben said. "Osterman has pulled something. You can bet on that."

The Malamute woowoowood her deep-voiced reply.

"I'm still working on a name for you, girl," Ben told the big dog. "Don't worry. I'll come up with something."

" Woowoowoowoo! "

"Right. I know we're being followed. Better get used to it." There were several Rebel security vehicles trailing Ben through the quiet early morning hours.

12

Ben's team met him in the parking lot of the command center. Ben handed Mai's leash to Anna. "Take care of her, kiddo."

"Will do, Pops. Come on, Jodie."

Ben stopped and turned around. " What'd you call her?"

"Jodie. You like it?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I do. OK. Jodie it is."

Ben passed through several checkpoints, then was admitted to the elevator that would take him down to the war room of the presidential command center. There he passed through another checkpoint and was admitted to the war room.

Cecil smiled at him. "I just hung up the phone after speaking with Madame President Osterman, Ben. She has given us an ultimatum."

Ben poured a mug of coffee. He glanced up at the Defense Posture Board. The top light was slowly blinking a dull red-the next to highest defense alert. When it changed to a constant bright red, the SUSA would be on a full alert and on a war status for possible missiles coming at them.

"What is the ultimatum, Cec?"

"Immediate surrender."

"And if we don't comply, which of course we won't?"

"She will order the launch of missiles against us."

"Nuclear?"

"She didn't say."

"I doubt they'll be nukes. Probably germ warheads. Kill all the nasty ole conservatives and keep the buildings for use by the occupying troops." Ben laughed. "Socialist carpetbaggers. Now that's funny, Cec."

"I truly wish I could find something amusing about this situation."

"What's her deadline for launch?"

"0600. I have our air defenses on alert."

Ben walked over to a red telephone and picked it up.

13

"This is General Raines. All air defenses are to go on full alert nationwide . . . immediately. We're going to have missiles to intercept, and we don't want any to strike SUSA soil. OK. Good shooting."

Ben slowly hung up the phone just as Cec was opening his mouth to object. He managed a, "Ben-"

Ben shook his head. "My show now, Cec. You know our constitution better than I."

"You're right, of course. Do we warn our citizens about the possibility of a strike?"

"Not just yet. An hour's time is all many will need. A few minutes' time is all most will need."

"I've told Osterman that her demands are ridiculous."

"I would've told her a lot more than that," Ben replied very seriously.

"Oh?" Cec managed a smile.

"Yeah. Like where to shove her demands. Sideways and with great force."

"They would probably fit," Cec replied, equally drily.

"I'm sure."

The men drank coffee and chatted for a half hour until Ben told Cecil to go take a nap, get some rest. He would man the command center until Cec woke up.

Ben told the security people to get his team into the war room. While that was going on, he got Ike on the horn.

"I think you should be here, Ike."

"I'll stay with my troops," the former Navy SEAL said.

"I thought you'd say that, Ike, but I wanted to try. Intel says they're ninety-nine percent certain the warheads are germ, BW of some sort. But they aren't sure what type of bugs they contain."

"We have the vaccines for every type of bug we know Osterman has," Ike replied. "The troops are ready."

"You know that some of the missiles are going to get through."

14

"I know, Ben."

"We're probably going to lose several hundred thousand civilians."

"If only they'd taken the vaccines we offered," Ike said, his voice full of frustration. He was referring to the fact that only about fifty percent of the citizens of SUSA had complied with Jeffrey's recommendation to take the free vaccines their scientists had cooked up against BW, Biological Warfare.

"That's the problem with having a populace that believes in individual freedom, Ike, and with having a constitution that prohibits us from forcing them to do something we think is in their best interests. They made their choice, after being informed of our best guesses about the consequences. Now, those who decided not to take the vaccines will have to live, or die, with their decisions."

"I know, but if that rotten bitch uncorks those missiles, Ben . . ." Ike let that trail off.

"There will be precious little left of the USA. That is a promise."

"Will you use our missiles, Ben?"

"Will I have a choice?"

Another long moment of silence. "No, I reckon not. God help us all."

"Osterman and her followers don't believe in God, Ike."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot. They're too intelligent to believe in God. Then God help SUSA."

"That's more like it."

"Keep your head down and your ass covered, Ben."

"I will, Ike. Luck to you, ole buddy."

"OK, partner."

Ben spent the next few minutes in a conference hookup, talking with all his brigade commanders. They were as ready as they could possibly be. Cecil had ordered addi-

15

15

tional vaccines flown in to all Rebel locations as soon as Osterman had issued her threat. But, as General Georgi Striginov pointed out, if the missiles carried nuclear warheads there was very little the Rebels could do except ask for heavenly intervention.

Ben sat at a desk in the war room, talking with his team and petting Jodie.

And waiting.

Corrie was handling the communications now. Every so often Ben looked over at her and she shook her head.

Nothing.

At 0500 hours Corrie stiffened in her chair. Ben heard her say, "Are you sure?"

Ben smiled knowingly. "Goddamn Socialist Democrats. I knew it. You can't trust those two-faced bastards."

"Birds are in the air!" Corrie said. "Just launched."

"Cooper, get President Jeffrey's, please."

But Cec had awakened a few minutes before, and had been washing his face in cold water. He walked in the door just as Ben was speaking to Coop.

"It's only 0500," Cecil said, glancing at the clock on the wall.

"President Osterman gave us until 0600. What the hell happened?"

"I warned you about trusting that bitch, Cec. She jumped the gun on us."

"Our missiles have intercepted most of the first wave, Corrie said. "Two got through. First one carried a germ warhead and struck in North Texas."

"Goddamnit!" Cecil flared.

"Right on the border with New Mexico, just north of Interstate Twenty."

"Very lightly populated," Cecil said. "Thank God."

"Second bird struck in Eastern Tennessee. In the mountains."

"Ready all silos and surface-based facilities," Ben said

16

quietly. "Prepare to launch on my orders. Repeat-on my orders!"

"Right, boss."

"Miserable no-good lying bunch of assholes!" Ben said.

"I will certainly agree with that," Cecil said, pouring himself a mug of coffee.

"Second wave of federal missiles launched and on the way," Corrie said.

"Any ground troops taking part in this so far?" Ben asked.

"Negative, Boss."

Anna had filled a container with water and was sitting on the floor beside Jodie while the dog drank. Big Mala-mutes are not the most delicate animals when they drink, and Anna got water all over her.

"I should have warned you about that," Ben said with a smile.

"Shit!" Ben's daughter muttered, wiping her pants leg with a handkerchief.

"One got through, Boss," Corrie called. "It struck in Central Arkansas."

"Damn! Which way are the winds blowing?" Cecil asked.

"West to east," Beth told him. She was handling secondary communications.

Ben walked over to Corrie and motioned for her to give him the mic.

"This is General Raines speaking from the war room of Base Camp One. Launch the first wave of our missiles. Wait ten minutes and launch the second wave. Ten minutes later, launch the third wave."

He paused for a few seconds. "And may God look with mercy on our souls."

17 Two

After Ben gave the order to loose the missiles, he sat on the edge of the desk, tasting of dust. He had just convicted hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of civilians to a horrible death. Unbidden, pictures formed in his mind of Africa, and the hundreds of square miles where the only living creatures were reptiles, all the mammals having been slain by BW in the previous war.

"Damnit!" he said, slamming his hand down on the desktop. He just couldn't do it-no matter what the provocation. Though most of the civilians chose freely to live in the USA and gave their allegiance to President Oster-man and her Socialist Democrat party and its ideas of something for everyone without the pain of having to earn it, Ben couldn't bring himself to kill them for their choices ... true, they were stupid and lazy, but those had never been capital crimes, even in SUSAs.

He whirled around and grabbed the mic. "Belay that order ... belay the order to launch the missiles!" he said.

"Come again?" the voice from the speaker asked.

"Do not, I repeat, do not launch a missile attack," Ben repeated. "This

is General Raines, and I'm canceling that order. Over and out."

He put the mic down and looked at his team, and found them to be smiling with relief.

"What're you guys grinning at?" he asked gruffly.

"Nothing, Pops," Anna replied, stroking Jodie's fur.

18

"Good, 'cause we've got some work to do, and pronto." He pointed at Corrie. "Get on the horn. I want a squadron of bombers airborne immediately. And set up some tankers to rendezvous with them for refueling later."

"Right, Boss. What's the target?"

"Primary targets are the missile launch sites. We should have them pretty well-documented on our radar since the launch."

"Secondary targets?"

"Downtown Indianapolis, the seat of the government of the USA. Specifically, Osterman's homes, the penthouse apartment in town, and her vacation home on the Mississinewa Lake--the one that looks like a castle up on a bluff overlooking the water. I want them flattened and burning before noon."

Corrie grinned. "Yes, sir. Anything else?"

"Yeah, if there are any bombs left over, dump them on the congressional buildings there in Fort Benjamin Harrison. It won't hurt to let the legislators know what the cost is of supporting that crazy bitch's orders."

Corrie nodded and walked out of the war room toward the communications room.

President Jeffrey's smiled. "You made the right choice, Ben."

Ben didn't answer. He was deep in thought about what he had to do next. "Cec, you'd better get hold of Jean-Francois Chapelle over at the UN and let them know what Claire's done."

Cecil shook his head. "There's not much they can do."

"No, but they can at least put diplomatic pressure on Sugar Babe. It won't stop her, but it may distract her a bit, and that'll help. Besides, I want the UN to know why we're taking the steps I'm about to take."

Cecil's eyebrows raised. "Which are?"

"We're going into the USA, going on the attack all

19

along the border. Plus, I'm going to drop Scout teams all over the USA."

"With what purpose?" Cecil asked, knowing the Scout teams were the equivalent of the Army's Ranger/Special Forces. They were small forces,

very highly trained in the art of stealth and killing, and were used both as assassination squads and advance forces for any Rebel column.

"I and D mostly-infiltrate and destroy. I'm going to sabotage the USA back into the dark ages. Every television station and relay tower, every power plant or sewage treatment plant, everything that makes life comfortable to the average citizen, is going to be systematically destroyed,"

"But thousands will die if we do that," Cecil argued.

Ben's face was hard. "Better thousands than millions, Cec. They supported a woman crazy enough to declare war on us, so now they'll have to pay the price, albeit a lower one."

"What else are you going to do?" Cecil asked.

"The Scout teams will also have a secondary purpose- to assassinate every politician they can find, especially those from Indiana. I want Osterman to know she can run, but she can't hide. Eventually, we'll get to her and make her pay for what she's done."

Ben walked to the door of the war room, closely followed by his team members. "Now, I'm going to talk to my brigade commanders. Mike Post, my chief of Intel, is going to take over and run things around here for the time being."

"Ben, what are you going to do?" Cecil asked.

He didn't like the look on Ben's face.

"My team and I are going to be dropped behind enemy lines. I started a few resistance cells up there a few weeks ago, and I'm going to see if we can't make them a little more active."

"But you'll be taking a terrible risk."

20

"Cec, you've got to get it through your head, I'm no armchair general. It's just not my style. Ike is more than capable of taking over if something happens to me, as are almost any of my brigade commanders."

He walked out of the room before Cecil could muster any more arguments against his plans. He wanted to get moving before the team of babysitters Cecil had assigned to him were able to track him down and get in his way.

"Mike," Ben said to Mike Post as he and his team were donning their black night ops gear, "you know what we have to do. Push Osterman and her mere troops hard all along the front. Advance slow and steady, without outrunning our lines of supply, and keep the pressure on."

"Will do, Ben. Of course, you know this may cause the fifty percent of the regular USA forces that refused to fight us to join in the fracas, now that we're invading their territory."

"Can't be helped. We've got to make Osterman pay for the missile attack, and her use of BW."

"Dr. Lamar Chase says we're in good shape as far as our military force is concerned. All of our men and women are inoculated against every bug Osterman's scientists have at their disposal."

"What about the civilians?" Ben asked, strapping a K-Bar knife to the inside of his left leg.

Mike shook his head. "We're going to lose some, probably in the neighborhood of twenty-five percent."

"Damn!"

"Yeah, exactly. However, Doc Chase says the other thing that's bound to happen is that the plague will spread northward as people try to flee the areas hardest hit."

Ben looked up. "So, Osterman's going to have to live with the plague killing her own people, too?"

21

Mike snorted. "Yes, but the crazy bitch will probably try to blame us by claiming we used BW, too."

"You're right, Mike. Better get Cecil on that right away. Tell him to let the UN know what Doc Chase said, and that we won't be to blame for the spread of the plague when it occurs."

Mike glanced at Ben and his team. They were dressed all in black from head to toe, and had at least one sidearm on their belts, a short automatic carbine slung over their shoulders, and K-Bar assault knives on their legs.

"You guys look mean as hell," Mike said, grinning.

"We are mean as hell, General," Jersey snarled, her hand on the butt of a .45 pistol on her belt.

"We're counting on your intel to keep us informed about the situation as it changes in the USA, Mike," Ben said.

"I know. We've got pretty good resources in most of the areas, so it should be fairly up to date. You can bump me periodically and I'll let you know what we've got."

"Good."

"Where are you going to have them drop you?"

"Upstate New York. I started a resistance squad up there a while back. I heard most all of them were killed, so I'd like to see if anything can be salvaged of the group."

Behind Ben's back, Anna and Jersey gave each other knowing glances. All of Ben's team knew of his shortlived romance with Lara Walden, and of her and her team's death at the hands of the USA Black Shirt squads. It looked as if Ben wanted to get some personal revenge on the men who'd killed his lover.

Anna smiled at the thought. Probably be good for him. He'd been alone

for so long, and then to find someone and have her taken away ... if he needed to kick some ass to get over it, then his team would be more than happy to help him do it.

22

Jersey tapped Ben on the shoulder. "We've got to get a move on if you want to follow the bombers in."

Cooper grunted. "Hell, we'd already be on the plane if you hadn't taken so much time fixing your hair and putting on your makeup," he said to Jersey.

She glanced at him, fire in her eyes. Rubbing a hand on his cheek, she murmured, "Coop, feels like you forgot to shave." She pulled her K-Bar out and held it up in front of his face. "Want me to do it for you?" she asked sweetly.

"Come on, guys, let's saddle up," Ben said as he walked out the door, smiling.

23 Three

General Maxwell listened attentively to the report being given by Harlan Millard, second in command to the president, Claire Osterman.

"Ben Raines and his Rebel forces are about to counterattack with a wave of missiles. We suspect their missiles carry nuclear warheads, though our spy says they also have ones containing anthrax, like those they used in Africa, and like the ones President Osterman just launched against SUSA."

"His troops have been inoculated, as they were before," Maxwell remembered. "Quite frankly, I'm surprised. Raines has always shown reluctance to harm innocent civilians. An attack by nuclear missiles or anthrax-loaded missiles will kill tens of thousands who have no immunity. This is a side of Ben Raines and his SUSA Rebels we've never seen."

"Perhaps Madam President has made a mistake in launching BW weapons against Raines and his rebel forces," Millard said. His eyes were wild with fear, and he was sweating profusely. "He would never have considered this if we hadn't struck first," he added, his voice a full octave higher than usual.

General Maxwell fixed Osterman's second in command with a stare. "You want to be the one to tell Madam President she's opened Pandora's box, and that her actions most

24

certainly have caused the imminent death of millions of her own followers . . . perhaps even all of the USA?"

"Uh, not really, General. I'm sure she never thought Raines would be crazy enough to retaliate in this manner. But our intelligence reports have almost always been accurate before. We have an operative inside his high command, and the information we've gotten has always been good."

Maxwell glanced down at the three stars on the shirt collars of his

uniform, reminded of his rank and how quickly he'd risen to the top during Claire Osterman's presidency. "It has indeed. Our survival has depended upon the accuracy of those reports. Far too often, I fear. Raines is an enigma. He makes all the wrong tactical military moves, and yet he defeats us at every turn. His Rebel army seems to have the capacity to disappear into thin air, and he hits us with weaponry we believed no longer existed after the Final War. We have no way to stop them other than anti-aircraft guns and a few ground-to-air rockets. Raines has scientists who can make modern weapons out of plowshares." He shook his head. "Our death toll is going to be unimaginable, while SUSA's will only be minimal since most of the rebels have been inoculated against our BW." He looked up into Millard's eyes. "Madam President's miscalculation of Raines's resolve may have cost us the war."

Captain Broadhurst burst through the door. "General, we've just received another message from Intel. It seems Raines has called off the missile attack. The word from our spy is that he's going to counterattack with conventional bombs instead."

Millard sat up straighter in his seat and sleeveed sweat off his forehead. "Thank God . . . someone has finally shown some sense in this war."

Maxwell gave Millard a flat look. "I'll be sure to pass along your sentiments to Madam President."

25

"Uh . . . I didn't mean to criticize--"

Maxwell held up a hand. "Don't start crawfishing on me, Harlan. I was just kidding." He paused and glanced at a map laid out on his desk. "Although, our position is really not much better. The plague we're sending to SUSA will cause them only relatively minor problems, mainly among the civilians. And when the sick ones try to flee they're gonna come north, bringing the plague right back to us, where we have no defenses against it."

He turned weary eyes on Millard. "Hell, less than ten percent of our troops have been vaccinated, and virtually none of our civilians."

Millard suddenly got a crafty look on his face. He licked his lips and stared back at Maxwell. "I have an idea," Millard said. "I want you to hear me out, sir."

"I hope it doesn't cost money. Our treasury is in bad shape. President Osterman has spent money recklessly on strategies that did not work. She listens to the wrong counsel, in my opinion. Too many of the wrong people can bend her ear."

"By that you mean Otis Warner, of course."

"Yes, and that blithering idiot, Andy Schumberger. In my opinion, Schumberger is totally incapable of tying his own shoes. I don't see why she trusts him, or why she would listen to anything he has to say."

"I agree," Harlan said quietly, after a glance around to look for hidden microphones or camera lenses.

Maxwell fixed Harlan with a chilly stare. "So, tell me about your

solution to the Rebels' sick civilians bringing our plague home to roost, and to their troops' immunity to our own BW. What the hell can we do?"

"Bring in Yiro Ishi. Listen to what he has to say, and his germ warfare proposals."

"That crazy little Jap? He's out of his goddamn mind. He couldn't help us. I've heard him talk to the president before, and he didn't make any sense. He rambles on about

26

nothing, and our top advisers insist he's crazy. Why the hell should I listen to him?"

"With all due respect, General, you may be wrong. Ishi is brilliant, in an intellectual way. And he has a background in things that might help us. You could be mistaken about him and his ideas."

"And how is that?" Maxwell demanded, scowling. There were times when Harlan championed lost causes and old-fashioned ideas having to do with the past, before the Final War.

Harlan glanced down at his hands. For a moment the silence was heavy in Maxwell's office. When he looked up again, his face had lost some of its color. "I take it you've never heard of his grandfather? The famous Japanese scientist from World War II who pioneered many of their secret weapons?"

"Why the hell should I know anything about his grandfather? Get to the point, Harlan!"

"Have you ever heard of Unit 731 that was operational during World War II?"

"Can't say as I have. That was before my time."

"Unit 731 was a very primitive biological weapons research facility in Japan. They experimented with all manner of organisms, including anthrax and bubonic plague. Nerve agents, the whole works. History records that General Ishi was decades ahead of his time, in many respects. What he lacked was the technology to implement his ideas, or the delivery systems to put them to use during World War II."

"What does that have to do with our perilous situation now, Millard?"

"As I said, Yiro Ishi is the grandson of the Japanese General who conducted and supervised all the experiments at Unit 731. He has most of his grandfather's notes, and another very important item we may need."

27

"Please get on with it," Maxwell snapped, growing weary of Harlan's tendency to beat around the bush.

"Yiro contacted me in secret a few days ago," Harlan continued. "We talked for hours. The problem the Japanese had during World War II was a way to deploy their somewhat primitive biological weapons. In particular, a bacterium. Bubonic plague. At the time, they had no practical method for distribution of the disease. Exposed to the

elements, the bacteria died too quickly, rendering their application useless."

"That's old hat. The Rebels have inoculations against it now, protecting them from bubonic plague just as they do against our anthrax weapons."

Harlan wagged his head. "Not an older form of the bacteria, one that was developed in the nineteen thirties. At the present time, there is no vaccine to prevent the spread of this variant strain of bubonic plague. Ishi assured me of it. He has kept the bacteria alive in test tubes all these years."

"You've been paying too damn much attention to that crazy Jap. A disease is a disease. Raines and his scientists would only find a vaccine against it."

"Not necessarily, sir. Older forms have different growth patterns. Ishi explained it to me. The one used by his grandfather in China during World War II acts differently, causing a number of different symptoms. By the time the Rebels realize what has hit them, it will be too late, according to Ishi. This was what the Japanese were working on while the United States developed the atom bomb."

"Yiro Ishi is a fool. We can't gamble on his being right about this. President Osterman would never approve of any idea put forth by Ishi. She regards him-properly, in my opinion-as a lunatic."

"I wish you'd look at his data. During World War II, the Japanese, led by General Ishi, dropped bombs filled

28

with infected fleas on a city in China. Haifa million Chinese died within a matter of weeks."

"Harlan, have you been drinking? Are you asking me to listen to ideas about dropping fleas on Ben Raines and his armies? Have you lost your mind?"

"No, sir. The fleas were taken from infected rats developed in laboratories at Unit 731, after the rats were injected with the bubonic bacteria. They were packed in canister bombs that could be dropped from high levels, to avoid anti-aircraft guns. The infected fleas were kept in a medium of flour. When the bombs landed, thousands of Chinese in one of the remote provinces reported seeing snow falling from the sky. Along with the flour were millions of plague-carrying fleas. A single flea lays a million eggs when it feeds on a blood meal. You can do the math for yourself."

"This sounds idiotic."

"It's all true. Haifa million Chinese died from bubonic plague as a result of the fleas dropped on one village. It's a matter of record, sir. I can get you copies of the records if you like."

"I'd sure as hell like to see them."

"It was all classified. When the war crimes trials were being conducted in the old United States, a deal was cut. None of the researchers from Unit 731 were charged with war crimes, in return for information dealing with biological weapons. The United States wanted to develop their own

biological weapons arsenal, and they thought General Ishi and his staff might have the formulas which had eluded American scientists for years."

Maxwell sighed, leaning back in his swivel chair. "President Osterman will put me before a firing squad if I go into her office suggesting that we drop bombs full of sick fleas on Ben Raines and his Rebels. Or she'll laugh me out of her office."

29

"She won't. . . if you have the scientific data to substantiate the result, sir."

"I'd have to be outta my goddamn mind to go to her with a plan like that."

"With all respect due our president, General, all she wants is to rid this continent of Ben Raines and his Rebel army, as you well know."

"She'll have me shot."

"Just listen to Ishi. Hear what he has to say. Don't come to any conclusions until you've heard the facts. Half a million Chinese villagers died from these plague-infected flea bombs that Ishi's grandfather designed. That alone should get the president's attention."

Maxwell rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "It would damn sure be the cheapest weapon we ever deployed against Ben Raines . . . if it'll work. But how's it gonna look when I ask the President of the United States to drop millions of bugs on the southern part of this country?"

"I know the treasury is depleted," Harlan continued. "This is a very cost-effective way to halt their advances and bring them to bear. What difference does it make if the host for this destructive bacterial weapon happens to be the common flea?"

"All right, Harlan. Bring Yiro Ishi to my office. All I'll agree to do is listen. But if the goofy son of a bitch can't convince me this isn't some sick joke, I'll have him shot before sunrise tomorrow."

Harlan stood up. "He will expect to be rewarded for his efforts, I'm sure."

"If dropping bugs on Ben Raines can stop him from blowing us off the face of the earth, I'm quite sure President Osterman will pay him handsomely. The first thing he's gotta do is convince me and the president that this will work."

"I'll send for him at once, General. You won't regret hearing what he has to say. At first I was a doubter, as

30

you are. But when you see the data his grandfather left him, I think you'll change your mind. Ishi is an odd little man, but he most certainly is not crazy."

"It still sounds mighty stupid to me. Dropping fleas on an enemy just doesn't have the right ring to it. It isn't the old-fashioned way to win a war, in my mind. I can see it now . . . all the newspaper headlines. The SUSA Rebel army died scratching themselves to death on account of an executive order from President Osterman. That part will be mighty damn

hard to explain."

Harlan shrugged. "Who will care, sir, if it works? All the president cares about is ridding this planet of Ben Raines and his Rebels."

Maxwell scowled. "That's the trouble with you, Millard. Too damn many times, you've turned out to be right. Send for the crazy Jap. I'll listen."

"I'll contact him at once, sir. He should be here within a few hours."

Maxwell waited until Harlan was through the door before he let out an impatient sigh. Millard wasn't a military man, so how could he understand the humiliation a general of the armies would face if he won a war using sick fleas?

Of course, on the other hand, if the strategy worked he'd be a hero, and President Osterman would have no choice but to make him Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. And, he chuckled as he thought about it, only a short step away from being president himself if something should happen to Madam President... an occurrence he'd make sure didn't take too long to take place.

31 Four

General Maxwell sat at his desk for several minutes after Harlan Millard left, thinking deep thoughts. All this bullshit about fleas was hard to digest, even harder to believe. Max knew Yiro Ishi, a wimpy little Jap, a scientist type who probably carried a slide rule in his undershorts. It would take big balls to ask for an appointment with President Osterman to tell her that his latest military strategy for crushing Ben Raines's Rebel army involved dropping fleas on Rebel units.

But Harlan was the president's confidante, and she trusted him. Max secretly believed Harlan had to be screwing her to acquire so much influence. That notion had made the gossip rounds lately. "Sugar Babe" didn't seem to care what the press had to say about her. She had absolute power, and nothing Max could foresee would stand in her way until she controlled all the major countries in the world . . . what few remained after the Final War.

He made up his mind to call Captain Broadhurst about this Ishi business. As soon as Broadhurst stopped laughing, maybe he could tell Max what to do. Broadhurst had extensive knowledge of biological weapons. He could be trusted.

And the simple fact was the USA would gain very little with its present course of action. All of SUSA's military and a great proportion of its populace was inoculated

32

against their current BW weapons. It wasn't going to help them a whole lot to kill a few civilians if the SUSA army could still fight.

He dialed the captain's private number, drumming his fingers on his desktop, wondering where to begin with such a preposterous proposal. Broadhurst was in charge of the USA's biological warfare program. He would know if Yiro Ishi was nothing more than a crazy Nip, or if there might be a grain of truth to what Harlan said about him. There were hardly any records of what took place before the Final War, thus no easy

way to prove whether Ishi was out of his mind or inventing the entire story to save his Japanese ass-now that President Osterman's policy of ethnic cleansing had begun . . . albeit very quietly, for the time being.

"Hello?"

"This is Max. Got a minute?"

"Certainly, General."

"Tell me what you know about that little Jap goofball, Yiro Ishi."

"Ishi? He's a lab freak, but a smart one. Why the hell are you askin' me about him? He's an outcast. Nobody listens to him anymore. He's from the old school. He believes in all that prewar crap having to do with the transmission of viral and bacterial disease. I think he's also a Buddhist, and as you know that makes him a marked man. Quite frankly, I'm surprised he hasn't already been 'taken out.' "

"Harlan just left my office. He says Ishi's got some secret biological weapon that was developed by his grandfather over in Japan during World War II. It's the dumbest thing I ever heard, but I wanted to run it by you. Ishi's grandfather was in charge of a program the Japs were working on when the atom bombs blew them off the face of the earth. It was called Unit 731. Harlan insists there's

33

something to what Ishi says. He claims Ishi knows what he's talking about."

"It's possible. What is it?"

"You're gonna die laughing."

"I need a good laugh. Those damn Rebels have pushed one of my top commando units out of northern Georgia. They killed all but seven of my crack troops. No one can figure out how Raines knows where we are . . . where we plan our next offensive. I'm of the opinion we've got a mole in our midst, and whoever it is, he or she has to be pretty high up-unless Raines is simply lucky."

"Raines has got guts. The trouble is, he doesn't act like a soldier. He makes the dumbest mistakes, if you look at 'em on paper, but they work most of the time. We should have been able to flank him on the Mississippi River last month. The son of a bitch vanished overnight. Not a goddamn trace of him when we closed the circle around him . . . around where he should have been when we got there. We had good intelligence on his position, and the bastard wasn't there when we showed up."

"Tell me more about Ishi's idea. I know all I care to know about Ben Raines."

"Let's start with fleas."

"You mean the kind a dog has? Maybe I didn't hear you right?"

"Harlan said Ishi has a bomb we can drop on SUSA filled with fleas carrying some strain of bubonic plague the rebels won't be inoculated against. Something from World War II. I know it sounds screwy as hell, but Harlan usually has his facts straight."

A silence.

"When are you gonna start laughing?" Max asked. "How come you didn't even chuckle?"

"I'm not laughing. It might work. Bubonic plague is a type of bacteria. The big problem with it in the past has been its fragility. If you don't deliver it just right, it dies

34

off. But with fleas as the host insect, it just might work. Have you ever tried to kill fleas in your carpet, Max? You damn near can't do it. They lay millions of eggs in an hour or two. I drowned my wife's cat in the bathtub because we couldn't get rid of its goddamn fleas. I told Bernice it must have run away because she didn't love it enough. Shift the blame . . . that's my motto."

"You're telling me Ishi's bomb might be a plausible weapon against Raines?"

"It's possible. I'd have to hear all the details, and I'd want some top men from our biological warfare unit to listen in on it."

"Son of a bitch."

"You sound unhappy, Max."

"I'm just thinking about what it'll be like, trying to explain this to the president. How the hell am I gonna convince her we need to spend what little money we have left in the defense budget to build flea bombs? She could strip me of my rank . . . even have me committed to an asylum. It sounds like a stupid idea."

"C'mon, Max. You know it's more than that, if what Ishi says is true. We'd be delivering fatal doses of bubonic plague to SUSA troops and thousands of civilians living in the territory controlled by Ben Raines."

"It's gonna look real bad on my military record."

"How's that?"

"If it says I was the general in charge of an army that won a war using fleas, I'll look like a damn fool. It doesn't sound like workable military strategy to me."

Another silence.

"I doubt if anyone will care how you do it, Max. The main thing is to get rid of those Rebels. Despite all our efforts, they seem to get stronger every day."

"I'd rather use napalm, or damn near anything besides a bomb full of fleas."

"Max, they are incredibly resilient insects. Every time

35

35

someone develops a spray, or any form of chemical to eradicate them, they come back with an immunity to it. They may be the world's most perfect example of adaptation to a hostile environment."

"You aren't telling me what I wanted to hear, Broad-hurst."

"What did you want to hear, Max?"

"That the idea is crazy. We could have the little Jap executed for treason. Who the hell is gonna listen to such a plan?"

A longer silence.

"But what if it worked, Max? It would make you look good in high places. And if it failed, you could blame Ishi and have him put before a firing squad as a traitor to the United States of America. Sugar Babe would love it. Think of the public relations value. And remember this ... Harlan brought you the idea. If anything goes wrong, blame him."

"Maybe you're right. I could always point a finger at Millard if it backfired."

"Now you're using your head. Let Ishi build his bombs, and we'll drop them on Raines and his Rebels. If it works, you get all the glory. Forget Yiro Ishi's name, and claim the idea was your own. It's a winning situation either way. If the damn fleas don't kill anybody, then execute Ishi in front of all the news cameras in the USA. Label him a subversive with bugs on his brain, and blame Harlan for the whole thing."

"It does have a certain amount of public relations value to it. If Ishi screws this up, we can hang him from the Washington Monument. And Harlan would have to explain to the president why he thought it would work."

"Of course! That's what I've been trying to make you understand. Ishi loses and you win, no matter how it turns out. You'll be a national hero, and Ishi will be as dead as

36

his ancestors. Harlan will be in deep shit up to his eyebrows, and you come out clean as a whistle."

"Harlan is bringing Ishi over in a couple of hours. Why don't you sit in on the meeting? I'd like to hear what you have to say."

"Call me the minute he shows up."

"I'll do it, although I've got plenty of misgivings about this whole idea."

"Forget 'em. If Ishi is crazy-and he probably is-and if the flea bombs don't work, then I'll back you up when you make a public statement that you knew it would fail all along. You can say you were tricked."

"I could say he lied to us about how the bombs were gonna kill Rebels."

"Right. And who the hell is gonna believe some Nip over the word of a three-star General?"

"It's the president I'm worried about. How can I convince her to give us the money to build these bombs? She's sure to ask questions."

Broadhurst hesitated for some time. "Here's the best way. Tell her that Yiro Ishi has a biological weapon his grandfather developed back in World War II. Don't mention the fleas. Say bubonic plague will be dropped on key cities inside SUSA. There's no reason to tell Sugar Babe the rest. . . unless the bombs work."

"I like that. It won't make me sound so goddamn stupid."

"It's an old axiom in the military, Max. Protect your ass at all costs. If you have to kill a meaningless Japanese scientist in order to do it, it's a small price to be paid for coming out smelling like a rose. Hell, it's like throwing a bowl of stale egg rolls out a window. Who's gonna miss him? The only way he helps you is if his bombs kill Rebel soldiers . . . maybe even Ben Raines himself."

"Gotcha. I like the way your mind works, Broadhurst."

37

I figured you'd have the right angle on this, so I didn't get my ass in a sling."

"Look at Yiro Ishi as a sort of sacrificial lamb. Lead him to slaughter. If his plan works like he says it will, then take all the credit and have someone on your top execution squad feed him to the fishes."

"Kill him either way?"

"Of course. You don't want him credited with the success, do you?"

"I'm not all that damn sure it'll work."

"Try it. Call me when Ishi gets there. If his science is sound, give it a shot."

"The way you put it, I really don't have anything to lose, if I do it right."

"Precisely. Call me when the meeting is arranged, so I can be there with a couple of experts."

"We have experts on fleas?"

"Not exactly, but they'll be able to tell us if the bombs will work."

"I'll call you. This has got to be the strangest thing I've ever done in my entire military career."

"The thing to remember, Max, is that in order to have any kind of military career, you do whatever is necessary in order to win."

"I'll call you. Thanks, Broadhurst. I'm sure I don't need to say it, but not a word of this to anyone."

"Only the scientists I intend to bring to the meeting, and I'll only give them a few details."

Max hung up, wondering. Would history regard him as the first and only military leader to successfully use a bomb full of fleas to win a war?

He had serious doubts. But as a backup plan, if things went wrong, he would point an accusing finger at Harlan Millard and let the chips fall wherever they may. If he ordered Ishi's death there would be no one left alive to say otherwise. Harlan could stew in his own juices over

38 38 William W. Johnstone

ways to explain such a dumb idea to the president. Max would take an oath he had been against the plan all along . . . unless it worked.

39 Five

The Big Bird, as the C-130 Transport plane was called, flew through the darkness-lumbered would be a better word-staying just above cloud level to help ward off any attempts by USA SAM batteries to bring her down. It was following the wave of bombers and attack jets which had been sent to teach the USA a lesson about the rules of civilized combat, and to show Sugar Babe Osterman there was nowhere in the world where she was safe from retaliation.

Ben and his team sat on hard metal benches along the walls, each with his or her own thoughts about the upcoming drop behind enemy lines.

Ben was wondering if they'd be able to make contact with the New York militia groups before the Black Shirts of the USA found them.

Jersey's eyes were like flint in the darkness as she sat slowly sharpening her K-Bar assault knife on a soapstone from her backpack. She wanted to kick some USA ass. She hated BW, and thought anyone who used it deserved no quarter. None would be given.

Cooper, relaxed as always, sat with his eyes closed, wondering if the women in the militia in New York were as beautiful as the women in the Rebel movement in the south. He was too young to remember New York City before the big war, before it was destroyed, but he'd seen plenty of old videos and films, and in those it seemed as

40

if every female was unbearably lovely. Perhaps the girls in rural New York state were just as pretty. A man couldn't think of war all the time.

Anna cast worried looks at her dad. Ben had been through so much, and as the commanding general of the Rebel forces, he would lean on no one. Men! Sometimes they could be so damned stupid and macho. A woman who'd lost her lover would have a good cry on a friend's shoulder and get over it. Men, on the other hand, would hold the grief inside, letting it eat on them like a cancer until they made themselves sick. She hoped Ben wasn't harboring any delusions about Lara. Dead was dead . . . he must move on.

Beth, whose hobby was collecting old travel brochures from before the big war, was wondering if the land looked like the pictures she'd seen of upstate New York-green, forest-covered, beautiful country. She hoped the fighting hadn't destroyed too many of the quaint old towns of the area, and that she'd have time to poke around in them looking for relics from before the great war. Ben had told her most of them were deserted, so perhaps she'd get her chance at them.

Ben glanced at the ready light over the door to the pilot's cockpit. It was still red. Just before time to jump, it would begin to blink. When it turned green, it was ass over elbows out the door and into the night.

It'd been some hours since the C-130 had separated from the main bomber and fighter group, making a long slow turn to the right to head for the northeast. Several other Ranger teams had already exited the bird. Soon it'd be their turn to get up close and personal with the enemy.

He stood up and addressed his team. "You guys all got your headsets on?"

Heads nodded. The earpieces and speaker bars were all fitted to the head so Corrie could bump any of the team

41

41

who might get separated in the drop-not unusual in a night ops.

"Weapons locked and loaded?"

Again the nods.

Dressed all in black with camouflage black greasepaint on their faces, the team would be invisible from more than a few feet away. Their chutes were made of black silk to minimize reflection against the night sky. Unless they landed right in the middle of an enemy squad, they'd be okay.

The ready light began to blink, and Ben felt the Big Bird go into a slight decline as the pilot eased the stick forward into a shallow dive. He was risking his plane to let the team jump from as low an altitude as possible, to minimize drift and help keep them bunched tight.

"Hook 'em up," Ben said, attaching his parachute strap to the rail running the length of the plane.

The jumpmaster opened the door and stood next to it, watching the ready light. When it turned green he gave a thumbs up, and Ben leaned out into the darkness, his stomach doing flip-flops as he tumbled downward into the blackness below.

President-for-Life Claire Osterman looked up from the papers she was reading, her brow furrowed. "What's that sound?" she asked. She'd heard a loud crump off in the distance and felt a vibration go through the room.

Harlan Millard glanced up from a chair in front of her desk, where he'd been cleaning his fingernails. He had no real duties as Claire's second in command, other than to agree with her wholeheartedly every time she opened her mouth and to keep her satisfied physically when she desired intimacy. Claire was not one to share the reins of leadership, or anything else, for that matter. Once, when she'd heard that a woman from the secretarial pool was

42

interested in Harlan, she'd managed to get the woman transferred to a fighting unit. Claire had yawned on hearing of the woman's death shortly thereafter.

"I didn't hear anything," he answered. Just then another loud explosion blew the windows out of the room, sending glass like shrapnel bulleting through the air.

Millard took a large splinter in the left arm, and was literally lifted out of his chair and thrown against a far wall by the blast concussion.

Claire, protected from most of the glass and splinters by her desk, was knocked backward out of her chair onto the floor. She scrambled on her knees to crawl under her desk, her face bowed and her hands on top of her head.

Another blast came-so loud it was felt rather than heard-and the ceiling collapsed, sending rubble cascading down to completely bury Millard and Claire.

By mid-evening, the bombing had ceased. Claire and Harlan had been dug out of the rubble, and Harlan sent to a nearby hospital for treatment of his wound, which was not serious except to him. He thought he was dying, and was spending a lot of time wailing about the injustice of it all.

Claire sat in a room in one of the rare buildings still left standing on the Harrison base. In attendance were Otis Warner, her old friend and most trusted (and most unheeded) adviser; Andy Schumberger, another adviser, though Claire realized he was dumb as a post and used him mainly as a yes man to back up her ideas and plans on the rare occasions there was resistance to what she wanted to do; Captain Broadhurst, a true believer in the liberal causes of the Socialist Democrats. His military acumen wasn't the greatest, but he could kiss ass with the best of them, and it had served to move him steadily upward in the ranks of the USA military establishment,

43

43

which tended to reward political correctness far more than ability. General Maxwell, leader of the USA forces, was not on the base and would not be there until the next morning.

Claire was furious about the attack. Her hair was mussed and still full of debris and she had a scratch on one cheek that the army doctor had assured her would leave no scar. On top of it all, she was starting her period.

She was not a happy camper, and she intended to take it out on everyone around her, as usual.

"Goddamnit, Captain Broadhurst, how could you allow a squadron of Rebel bombers to attack my office?" Claire asked, fixing him with a baleful stare.

"I assure you, Madam President, those responsible for this grievous oversight will be ferreted out and summarily executed."

"But, how could they get this far into our territory without being blown out of the sky?" she asked again.

"Most of our air force was involved in the missile launch against SUSA. We were expecting a missile attack in response, not one by aircraft."

She slammed her hand down on the desk. "Ben Raines doesn't have the balls to fire missiles," she growled. "A true leader does what is necessary, no matter the personal feelings. I'm personally devastated that I was forced by circumstances to fire those missiles, knowing it would mean the death of many innocent civilians. But, I did it, because I know the meaning of responsibility."

The men sitting in front of her nodded in agreement. They didn't dare do otherwise. Men who didn't show the proper respect for the president had been known to find themselves cleaning urinals from dawn to dusk in stink-holes in the desert.

Claire glanced at Otis Warner. He had just finished talking with her Intel officers. "Otis, what's the extent of the damage?"

44

He frowned. He knew she wasn't going to like his report. "Most of the base here is destroyed. Certainly all of the above ground facilities are flattened. The building in downtown Indianapolis where the legislature meets has been completely blown apart. Luckily, only a handful of senators and representatives were working at the time."

Claire snorted. "Hell, those bastards spend more time sucking on the taxpayers' tits or playing golf than working."

Otis had to restrain himself from mentioning perhaps it was because Madam President ignored most of what they did and managed the country pretty much on her own whims. Though Otis was an independent thinker, he was not suicidal, so he kept his mouth shut.

"There is some more bad news, Claire," he added, glancing down at the clipboard in his lap.

"What could be worse than having my offices and the offices of the legislature destroyed?"

"I'm afraid the building that houses your personal residence was also targeted, as was your estate on Lake Mis-sissinewa."

"What?" she screamed, coming straight up out of her chair. "You mean that bastard Raines has destroyed my houses, too?"

Otis nodded, not wanting to risk speaking when she was in one of her moods.

She began to rant and rave and pace around the room, calling Raines and his Rebel cohorts every name she could think of. "That son of a bitch is going to pay for this!" she yelled.

Otis started to ask what more she could do than she'd already done, but thought better of it and clamped his lips tight together, hoping to ride out her rage.

"Somebody get Harlan in here. He ought to have a Band-aid on his wound by now. He has to get busy finding me a new place to live."

45

45

Otis breathed a sigh of relief. He'd been afraid she was going to call for a rain of nuclear missiles on SUSA. Thank God even she was not so stupid as to do that. . . at least not yet.

He made a mental note to have someone find General Maxwell and get him here as soon as possible. Though he was every bit as bloodthirsty as the president, at least he knew the rudiments of military policy, and perhaps he could keep her from doing something monumentally stupid, like escalating the war with nuclear missiles. If only she'd listened to him when he'd advised her not to use the biological weapons against the Rebel forces. It was a good thing Raines hadn't retaliated in kind . . . and he could only hope someone in charge of this war would eventually come to their senses!

46 Six

The jumpmaster and his helpers shoved large wooden crates out the door, alternating equipment drops with the jumps of Ben's team so the materiel would land within easy reach of the rebel forces. Finally, only Coop and Jersey were left in the big C-130.

Coop gave a low bow, sweeping his hand to the side. "After you, my pet," he said with a sardonic leer, glancing at the way Jersey's battle fatigues fit snugly over her buttocks.

"Pervert," she said, noticing where his eyes were fixed. "Have a good look, 'cause that's all you'll ever get!"

She hooked her chute cord on the overhead line and bent to step out of the doorway. Just before she jumped, the Big Bird hit an air pocket, suddenly lurched, and dropped fifty feet straight down.

Jersey was thrown out the door, tumbling uncontrollably in the updraft as the plane plummeted earthward. Her chute deployed, and was immediately snagged on the tail fin of the airplane, ripping to shreds and streaming behind her as she fell.

"Shit!" screamed the jumpmaster, leaning out to watch her fall. He turned an ashen face to Coop. "She's a goner."

Coop whipped out his K-Bar and slashed his chute line. "Uh-uh, pardner, nobody dies tonight," he yelled, and dove out of the door after her.

He tucked his chin onto his chest and put his hands tight against his sides to minimize drag and blinked his

47

eyes against the hundred mile an hour wind as he arrowed downward, desperately trying to catch sight of Jersey's black silk against the darkness.

Jersey tumbled, her arms loose and flopping like a rag doll's, unconscious from the jolt she'd received when her chute was ripped apart.

This saved her life, as she fell much more slowly than Coop did, and he caught up with her in a matter of seconds. When he came up to her, he spread his arms and legs to slow his fall, and grabbed the tangled shreds of her chute, wrapping his hands around the silk.

He took a deep breath, grabbed the D ring of his chute release, and jerked. When his parachute opened, the jolt nearly took his arms off, and he felt as if both his shoulders were dislocated by the force of the sudden slowdown.

Even though the Ranger parachutes were specially made for low level drops, they weren't designed to hold two people at once, and Coop and Jersey fell with alarming speed through the night.

Coop gritted his teeth and bent his knees slightly, hoping he'd be able to hit and roll without breaking a leg, or even worse, his neck. "Mama always said there'd be days like this," he muttered to himself.

In a stroke of great good fortune, Jersey and Coop plummeted into the outer branches of a giant sugar maple tree, its limbs slowing their fall enough to cause them to suffer only minor bruises and cuts.

As soon as he could untangle himself from the lines of his chute, Coop took a quick inventory of his body. No major bones seemed to be broken and other than a deep gash on his left thigh, which he wrapped with a piece of silk from his chute-he seemed in fair condition.

When he was satisfied that the bleeding from his leg was controlled, he scrambled through the darkness to where Jersey lay, still unconscious.

He gently unwrapped her from the shroud of silk cov-

48

ering her and spread her out on the ground. He was running his hands over her limbs and body, checking for major wounds or broken bones, when she opened her eyes and stared angrily at him.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing?" she asked, propping herself up on her elbows.

Coop sat back on his haunches. "Just coppin' a quick feel, darlin'," he answered, more relieved that she was all right than he cared to show.

"Well, unless you want to pull back a nub, keep your hands to yourself. Coop."

He grinned. "Yes, ma'am," he said, holding his hands out palm up. "Whatever you say, Jersey."

"What happened?" she asked, and tried to stand up, collapsing when she put her weight on her right ankle, which was already swollen to almost twice normal size.

He leaned forward and took her leg in his hand, untied her combat boot and pulled it off, causing her to shout in pain.

"Hold on there, big boy," she said. "What're you trying to do, pull my foot off?"

He gave a low whistle when he saw her ankle. It was black and blue and grossly misshapen. Slowly, he moved it through a complete range of motion, again bringing tears of pain to her eyes.

"I don't think it's broken, but you're not going to be walking on it any

time soon," he said.

As she stared at him, her eyes glistening with moisture in the half moonlight, he explained what had happened, and how her chute had fowled on the tail fin of the C-130.

"Damn!" she exclaimed, looking heavenward.

"What is it?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Now I owe you my life, and I can't think of a worse thing to have happen."

"Oh, things could be worse."

"How?"

49

"I could be scraping your body up with a spatula about now," he answered.

She snorted. "I don't know if that would be worse or not."

He leered at her. "Oh, don't make such a big thing of it," he said. "I figure you did this on purpose, so we'd be marooned alone out here in the woods, like we were in Africa."*

He shook his head. "Hell, you didn't have to go to all this trouble to be alone with me ... all you had to do was ask."

She kicked at him with her injured ankle, then moaned in pain. "Don't flatter yourself, pervert. I'd sooner be alone with a snake than with a lecher like you."

"Speaking of being alone, why don't you try to bump Corrie on your headset? Mine got ripped off when I sky dove to catch up with you."

Jersey reached up to trigger the speaker on her headset, only to find it smashed to pieces, hanging uselessly around her neck. ;

"Damn. No can do, Coop. Looks like we really are alone. Do you have any idea where we are, or where the rest of the team is?"

"Don't have a clue. After the plane hit the air pocket, we could have turned in any direction. There is no way of telling where we are, at least not until daylight."

Jersey glanced at the chronometer on her wrist. "It's about one A.M. now, so that gives us at least five hours until dawn."

Coop got to his feet and dusted his pants off. "I'll cut some branches and make us some sort of shelter against the cold. We can use the silk from the chutes to form a windbreak, and maybe we won't freeze to death before the sun comes up."

50

After he'd fashioned a lean-to from maple branches and strung pieces of their parachutes around them, he scraped together a mound of pine needles into a makeshift bed underneath, out of the wind.

He helped Jersey to her feet, putting his arm around her to support her weight.

She took his hand where it lay against the side of her breast and moved it down on her rib cage. "And don't try that old standby about using our body heat to stay warm," she said.

He shrugged. "It worked in the jungle, didn't it?"

She glared at him. "I seem to remember you promised never to mention that night again," she said with some heat.

"That was before I knew what lengths you'd go to in order to spend another night with me," he answered as he lowered her into the lean-to.

She lay on the pine needles, her back to him as he gently covered her with a piece of parachute silk. "Wake me when it's dawn," she mumbled, already almost asleep.

"Women," he whispered as he lay next to her, "can't live with 'em, and can't kill 'em."

Later, just as he was dozing off, he felt her turn and wrap her arms around him, spooning against him to get warm, her breath stirring the hairs on the back of his neck and causing thoughts he knew he'd never dare mention to her.

She moaned once, and her breathing slowed as she fell asleep, leaving him wide awake and acutely aware of her breasts pressing against his back.

Ben gathered his team together at the drop site. As they wrapped their parachutes into tight balls so no trace of their presence would be visible, he noticed Coop and Jersey were not present.

51

"Anyone seen Coop or Jersey?" he asked.

The other members of the team shook their heads.

"They were the last to jump," Beth said, a worried frown on her face.

"Corrie, bump the pilot of the Big Bird and see if you can find out what happened," Ben said as the team gathered around their communications expert.

"Eagle One to Big Bird, come in," Corrie said into her microphone as she fiddled with the dials to find the agreed-upon frequency to the C-130.

A burst of static followed, followed by the faint words, "Big Bird to Eagle One, over."

"Jim, we're missing two of the team. Any news?"

"Eagle One, I must advise. They had some trouble with the exit. Two members jumped late, one with chute trouble. Doubtful in extreme they made it. Over," the pilot replied.

"Damn!" Ben exclaimed, placing his hand on Corrie's shoulder and squeezing until it hurt. "That's unacceptable."

"We need additional info," Corrie said, wincing from the pressure of Ben's grip on her arm.

"Female's chute fowled on tail fin, and she had a streamer. Boss, I've never seen anything like it. The male cut his line and went after her. I never saw his chute open. That's all we have, Eagle One. Getting busy up here," he added, as the team members watched trails of two SAM missiles streaking upward through the clouds from somewhere off to the south.

"Ten-four, Big Bird. It looks like you'd better get back to the nest. Over and out," Corrie said, regret in her voice.

"If they jumped late, they must be off to the northwest," Ben said, his eyebrows knit in thought. "Point your antenna in that direction and see if you can bump them on their headsets," he ordered.

Turning to the others, he said, "There's nothing else we can do while Corrie tries to raise them, so let's see if we

52

can gather up the equipment drops and get it all together. From the location of those SAM launches, we don't have more than an hour or so to get out of this area or we're gonna be covered up with USA troops or Black Shirts."

Beth and Anna joined Ben as they spread out to pick up the crates of materiel that'd been dropped with them. The crates contained explosives, ammunition, extra weapons, and a compact Jeep-like vehicle with a small trailer they planned to use to transport themselves and their supplies away from the drop site.

It took them a little over thirty minutes to load up what they could find. One crate of ammunition had been smashed beyond recognition when it fell on top of a large boulder. They pulled the Jeep into the clearing, where Corrie was still trying to raise Coop and Jersey on her radio. One look at her face told them what they feared most- she'd had no contact with the missing team members.

"OK, guys. Let's load 'em up and move 'em out," Ben said, casting his eyes toward the northwest. "Since it doesn't make a whole lot of difference which way we start off, let's go that way," he said, pointing toward where they figured their friends were.

Corrie slung her portable radio over her shoulder and climbed in the back of the Jeep.

Ben was in the passenger seat, with Anna driving. "See if you can find a road or trail that heads in that direction, then we'll cut the lights and use the moonlight to guide us. No need giving the USA troops any more help than we have to."

"Do you think we'll be able to find them, Daddy Ben?" Anna asked as she threw the Jeep into gear.

"Oh, we'll find them, all right," Ben answered, a grim look on his face. "I just hope they're alive when we do."

"If they're not, God help the USA," Corrie growled, jacking back the

lever on her M-16, her eyes as hard as the metal she was holding.

53 Seven

President Claire Osterman paced back and forth in the war room beneath military headquarters ... what was left of the building outside Indianapolis after a number of missile strikes and bombs from the Rebel forces. Massive layoffs due to a shortage of military funds had left the USA with precious few men qualified to effect repairs of the damage. Two-thirds of the converted warehouse were empty now, drab offices gathering dust.

Colonel Baxter interrupted her train of thought, thoughts of how the war against the Rebels was going after the debacle in Mississippi.

"Harlan Millard to see you, Madam President," Baxter said, one eye on a security screen tied to a video camera at the outer door of the war room. "He has an FPPS agent with him . . . Agent Bob Reil."

"Let them in," Claire snapped, wondering why Harlan would come here at this hour in the company of an agent of the Federal Prevention and Protective Service. Something had to be seriously wrong.

Harlan and Reil were shown in, under the careful scrutiny of Claire's personal bodyguard, Herb Knoff. With Knoff at six feet and ten inches, over four hundred pounds of muscle and sinew, trained for close-quarters combat, his marksmanship unequalled by anyone on her private staff of presidential henchmen, Claire wasn't worried

54

about her own safety. Herb had saved her skin a number of times.

"What is it, Harlan?" she asked, ignoring Bob Reil for the moment.

"I need a few minutes of your time. It won't take long, but it's of the greatest national security importance, and we should talk in private about it. I hope you can spare a minute. It's classified."

"OK. Follow me into the radar room. We'll be able to be alone there."

Harlan dutifully followed her through an armor-plated door in the basement. Claire motioned for a radar technician to leave them. The young soldier left his bank of screens quickly without saying a word, closing the heavy door behind him, leaving them alone.

When the door was shut, Claire asked, "What the hell is so damn important?"

"An idea-one I believe has strategic military value in our present situation."

"The world is full of ideas," she remarked. "Most of them are bad. This had better be a good one. I'm not in the mood to listen to bullshit today. Raines and his damn Rebels have broken through our lines again north of the Georgia border, and we haven't been able to stop them." She hesitated and looked at the rubble-strewn room around them. "Hell, we don't even seem to be able to protect our headquarters or,"-her eyes turned dark and dangerous-"my own personal houses!"

"I know, Claire. I think I have a way to halt him. I've just spoken with

General Maxwell about it."

"Go on."

"Do you remember the Japanese scientist we almost sent to a firing squad last year? Yiro Ishi is his name. A little guy who worked for Science and Development. . . until our ethnic cleansing policy went into effect."

"Why the hell should I remember him? He's just an-

55

55

other Jap science freak, isn't he? It does seem as if his name is a bit familiar."

"He had this weird idea. No one would listen to him at the time I first spoke to him."

"I've never met a damn Jap who had a good idea, except when it came to preparing sushi."

"Hear me out. Please, Claire."

"Keep talking, Harlan. This is taking way too much time for what it's probably worth. You have a way of turning anthills into mountains."

"Ishi has his grandfather's records from back before World War II. General Ishi was a Japanese biological and chemical weapons expert. He was in charge of their special weapons unit called Unit 731."

"The Nips never had an expert on anything except TVs, transistor radios and microwave ovens. They used to build decent cars, if you didn't need to pass anybody on the highway. Tell me why this Ishi is so damn important to us. And I'm warning you again, this had better be good."

"General Ishi killed half a million Chinese with a dozen cheap bombs back in nineteen thirty-five. They had perfected a weapon without the means to deploy it."

"I like hearing the word 'cheap.' We've depleted all our discretionary funds. This damn war with Ben Raines and his Rebels is costing the hell out of us, and so far we're getting almost nothing for our money."

"Ishi's plan just might work."

"Tell me about it."

"I know it will sound strange, at first. It's one of those ideas you have to think about."

"I'm thinking about having you thrown out of here, Harlan, unless you get to the point. You've already wasted five minutes of my time."

Harlan looked down at his shoes. "Bubonic plague," he said after a moment.

"That's stupid. We already know Raines and his sol-

56

diers have been inoculated against it. Where the hell have you been during our war room briefings?"

"His men aren't protected from a very old strain of the bacteria, according to Ishi. Ishi has kept his grandfather's notes, and samples of the bacterium, since General Ishi died, back in the seventies."

"Bullshit. Bubonic plague is bubonic plague. Why would you pay any attention to something a goddamn Jap said? Have him exterminated. Do it today. I'm beginning to wonder about your sanity, Harlan."

"I think we should try his idea."

"Have you been drinking, Harlan? What will the public and the press say about us if we listen to some Jap? We've employed a plan to get rid of all of them in our ethnic cleansing program. How would it look if we let some Nip tell us how to win a war against Ben Raines? That would make us all look like a pack of idiots."

"I should think, Madam President, that all we really care about is getting rid of Raines and his Rebels. If Ishi's idea works, we can have him killed and give the press information that it was Captain Broadhurst's solution. Or a program developed by our own War Science Department."

Claire sighed. This war was wearing away at her nerves and she couldn't sleep at night, with more and more reports coming in that Rebel armies were breaking down the USA's defenses all over southern regions, wiping out entire companies of her best troops in many cases. "Okay, Harlan. Tell me about his cheap and easy solution to our problem. But I'm warning you . . . it'd better make sense."

He cleared his throat. "It won't sound good at first, but if we have Ishi explain the details to General Maxwell and Captain Broadhurst, I think they'll agree it will work. I just spoke to Maxwell about it."

"You keep beating around the bush," Claire said, chew-

57

57

ing a fingernail. "Tell me what the hell this Jap has to offer us that we can't come up with on our own."

"Fleas," he said softly. "Contaminated with an ancient form of bubonic plague. They survive a bomb's blast quite well, and then they infect every individual they come in contact with. A blood meal sets the bacteria in motion, and within a few days whoever has been bitten dies a horrible death-as we've seen with more modern strains of bubonic plague bacteria."

"Now I know you've been drinking."

"It could work, Claire. We're almost out of long-range missiles and surface-to-air rockets. If Raines finds out how weak our present position is, he could launch an attack all the way to Indianapolis."

Claire watched one of the green radar screens absently, her mind on Ben

Raines. Who could have dreamed that some upstart Rebel commander would have so much success against a mechanized army of the USA?

At first she'd convinced herself Raines was only lucky . . . that geography and small pockets of public sympathy were on his side. But now, there was no denying he had some keen military savvy to go along with his luck. She'd missed her first guess. Raines was proving to be a worthy adversary . . . in fact, the bastard was winning the war on most fronts when it seemed all odds were against him.

"How much will these damn fleas cost?" she asked. "What sort of planes do we need?"

"I won't know until I hear all of Ishi's story, but the campaign isn't going to be too costly. I'm sure he'll expect to be paid handsomely, though, for his grandfather's secret weapons. If he's as smart as I think he is, he'll hold out on some detail until he has a guarantee he'll be well-paid for his secrets."

"Promise the bastard anything. When he's told us all

58

he has to tell, have someone from FPPS kill him. That should have been obvious to you."

"I've already considered that, as I'm sure General Maxwell has. We can't afford to have some Japanese scientist come out of this looking good."

"It'd make ethnic cleansing look bad," Claire agreed, her mind on the slow but steady demise of minorities being carried out by special units across the USA. Leaders of different racial groups were being targeted first, killed off by doses of nicin, a poison that couldn't be detected during an autopsy conducted within a few hours after a victim died.

"Precisely. As soon as we strike a deal with Ishi and he gives us everything, we'll rub him out."

"Be sure you do it quietly. Make damn sure his body doesn't turn up."

"I'll have him sent to the grinder in Richmond. If people in Virginia only knew what they were eating--"

"Meat is meat when it's ground up, Harlan. The main thing is to get rid of the evidence. If hungry people are eating the evidence, so much the better."

Harlan turned for the door. "I'll report back to you as soon as I know what Ishi has, and what types of airplanes we'll need to deliver the bombs."

Claire chuckled, yet there was no humor behind her eyes. "Keep a lid on this, Harlan. If anyone with the press finds out what we're spending what's left in our war budget on they'll have a field day with me. I'm relying on you to make goddamn sure this will work like the Jap says it will."

"I'll give you a full report within a few hours. Someone is picking up Yiro Ishi now, bringing him to General Maxwell's office in the basement."

"Put something . . . a hood . . . over his head so no one will be able to

recognize him."

"I hadn't thought of that, Claire."

59

She gave him a chilly stare. "That's your biggest problem, Harlan . . . you don't think of the little things, and they can make a difference."

"I'm sorry, Claire. I do the very best I can, but I'll be the first to admit I make mistakes."

"Drop by tonight . . . after you give me the report on Yiro Ishi and the bombs. I'm horny as hell. I think all this pressure is getting to me."

"I'll need to tell my wife something . . . some sort of excuse for leaving."

"Tell her it's a national emergency. Tell her the president of the USA is horny, and unless you drop by my bedroom I'll have you shot. What better reason do you need?"

"I'll see you tonight, Claire." He let himself out of the radar room, beckoning to Bob Reil for him to follow him out of the basement, hoping he'd be able to function with Claire. After all, trying to make love to a female with bigger balls than his own wasn't easy.

60

Ben put his arm on Anna's shoulder. "Slow down. I thought I saw some flashes over to the right, just beyond that hill up ahead."

Anna applied the brakes, staring off toward where Ben had indicated.

Several quick flashes of light, like camera flashbulbs going off, flickered in the darkness, followed a few seconds later by the muffled sound of gunfire.

"Someone's in a firefight over there," Ben said, jacking back the loading lever on his M-14-Thunder Lizard, as he called it.

In the back of the vehicle, Corrie and Beth sat up straighter, coming awake out of the light sleep they'd been in.

"What's goin' on, Boss?" Corrie asked, stifling a huge yawn with the back of her hand.

"Sounds like action just ahead. We're gonna take a look-see and see who's involved."

"You think there might be some Rebels this far north?" Beth asked.

"Yeah, could be," Ben answered. "Only up here, they call themselves Freedom Fighters." He hesitated, his eyes far away for a moment. "At least they did when I was with Lara," he finished, blinking himself back to alertness.

Anna pulled the Jeep over to the side of the road, behind

61

a small strand of trees where it wouldn't be seen by anyone passing by unless they were looking for it.

The team piled out of the Jeep, readying weapons, stuffing extra magazines in their BDU pockets, and generally getting ready to kick some ass if need be.

Ben led the way as they hunched over and walked to the top of the rise overlooking a small valley below.

He stuck out his arm and pointed. "There they are."

The team could see a group of vehicles—three Hum-Vees and a truck with a canvas cover over the back—parked haphazardly around a small farmhouse and old-fashioned red wooden barn.

A number of USA soldiers could be seen sprawled on their stomachs, aiming rifles and machine-guns at the dwelling. As they fired, bits and pieces of the walls and windows were pockmarked with shell holes from the fusillade of bullets.

"I wonder who's in the house," Anna whispered, though they were so far away that their voices couldn't be heard.

"Whoever it is, if they're enemies of Osterman's troops they're our friends," Ben replied, his eyes narrowed, as he tried to figure out a way for them to help the people under attack.

After examining the surrounding countryside for a few minutes, he squatted down out of sight and gave his orders.

"It looks like about forty or fifty men in the attacking force. That's only about ten to one, odds we're used to," he said with a sardonic grin.

"Anna, you and Beth circle around to the left and see if you can set up a range of fire on that small knoll over there," he said, pointing to a rise in the valley where a copse of maple trees stood. "Hunker down good, and make sure you can see all of the attackers from your position. You'll have the advantage of height on them, so they shouldn't be able to get a good bead on you until it's

too late. I'll keep Corrie with me so she can relay and coordinate my orders through your headsets."

He glanced back at the Jeep. "I'll get the Mark 19-3 auto-grenade launcher out of the car and try to set up within range of those bastards. After the Big Thumper drops a couple of 40mm grenades in the middle of them, you two open up with your CARs and give them everything you have."

He glanced back over his shoulder in time to see light flashes from the windows of the farmhouse, and the high-pitched popping of M-16s.

"Good. Whoever's in that house is returning fire. With any luck it'll be some Freedom Fighters, and they can help us get in touch with others like them."

"Ten-four, Boss," Anna said as she and Beth crouched down and disappeared in the darkness, making no sounds as they ran toward the hillock across the valley.

Ben got the Mark 19-3 out of the Jeep, grunting with the effort of lifting the seventy-six pound weapon. He handed a box of 40mm grenades to Corrie, slung his Thunder Lizard over his shoulder, and picked up the Big Thumper.

His teeth flashed in the night. "Let's go kick some ass, Corrie."

"Right on, Ben," she answered, grinning back at him in anticipation of a good fight. Corrie was second only to Jersey in appreciation of a fierce battle, and was second to no one in her ability to dance with the best of them in combat.

It took thirty minutes for Ben to get the Big Thumper set up and aimed. He nodded at Corrie, who whispered into her com mic and then stuck her thumb up, indicating Anna and Beth were in position and ready to join in.

Ben fitted a grenade over the end of the barrel of the Mark 19-3, set the angle of fire at about forty-five degrees

63

63

to give the longest shot possible, closed his eyes against the flash, and pulled the trigger.

A low-pitched thump from the Mark 19-3 was followed by a slight whistling as the grenade sailed through the night.

Ben opened his eyes and saw several of the soldiers below turn to look back to see what had made the odd sound behind them.

Ben had another grenade loaded and ready to fire by the time the first one exploded below. He saw he was about twenty yards long, so he decreased his angle of fire by five degrees and fired again.

When the second grenade exploded, only seconds after the first, it was right in the middle of the attacking force. Screams of agony pealed out as men were torn asunder by the six ounces of gunpowder and almost a pound of razor-sharp shrapnel in the grenades.

Men could be seen scrambling to get away from the blast sight as Ben loaded and fired another grenade. The men below began to jerk and wave their arms-as if engaged in some ritualistic dance-when the bullets from Beth and Anna's CARs blasted into them.

Confused shouts and screams and yells rang out as the men discovered they were surrounded and under attack from all sides. What had been an easy assignment-to assassinate the occupants of a rural farmhouse-became a rout as the soldiers were cut down before they had time to mount a defense. Some even got to their feet and ran toward the house, as if they might find shelter there.

Instead, they were met with withering fire from the windows and doors of the house, cut down before they'd gone twenty yards.

Within twenty minutes, all of the attacking soldiers were either dead or severely wounded and out of action. Ben told Corrie to radio Anna and Beth to join him at the farmhouse, and he started down the hill.

64

Just as Ben and his team arrived at the site of the battle, the door to the farmhouse opened and people began streaming out, most holding automatic rifles or pistols in their hands.

Several of the men in the group began to check on survivors among the soldiers, disarming them so they would be of no further danger.

The last person out of the door was a woman, and the sight of her made Ben stop in his tracks. He felt as if he'd been kicked in the chest by a mule.

It was Lara Walden.

Ben's mind raced. He'd been in love only a couple of times, and he wasn't at all sure what he felt for Lara was love, but it was stronger than infatuation. He was stunned. It was like looking at a ghost, a wraith that haunted his dreams and even his waking thoughts much of the time.

As she caught sight of him her hand went to her mouth, while her eyes lit up like a child's on Christmas morning.

"Ben! Oh, Ben . . ." she cried and ran toward him, throwing the M-16 she was carrying to the ground.

Beth, Anna, and Corrie looked at each other, astonishment in their eyes. "Jesus, she's alive," Corrie whispered.

"Is that her?" Anna asked, examining the lady her dad had been in mourning over.

"It must be-look at his face," Beth answered.

Ben crushed Lara in his arms, his eyes wet with unshed tears. "Lara . . . I thought. . . they told me . . ."

She stroked the back of his head with her hand as they hugged, and whispered in his ear, "I know, Ben, I know."

Finally, he held her out at arm's length and studied her. She had a fine, white, hairline scar running from her forehead down through her eyebrow and continuing on her left cheek. Her nose had a bump and curve to it that hadn't been there the last time he'd been able to see her.

He traced the scar with a fingertip. "Were they very hard on you?" he asked, his voice husky.

65

65

She shrugged. "Not as hard as they should've been. One of our men on the inside managed to get a weapon smuggled in to me. After killing two of

the bastards who were torturing me, I managed to escape-with some help."

Ben glanced over at the group of men checking the wounded soldiers and recognized several of them from the cell Lara had belonged to. "It looks like just about all of them made it out," he said.

"All except Jimmy Smathers. He died trying to keep them from taking me."

"The seventeen-year-old?"

"Yeah. What is it they say? The good die young."

Ben nodded. "I'm glad you made it, Lara. The world was a sadder place when I thought you weren't in it any longer."

She took him by the hand. "Introduce me to your friends. We need to get a move on before reinforcements get here."

Ben made the introductions, telling his team only that it was Lara. They knew the rest without his having to explain.

Chuck Harris, the leader of Lara's cell, walked over and shook Ben's hand. "Thanks, Ben. We were having a pretty rough time of it until you and your team showed up."

"Don't mention it, Chuck. Lara tells me we need to make tracks out of here pretty fast. Do you have transportation?"

Chuck inclined his head toward the barn. "Yeah. We've got an SUV parked in there. How about you?"

Ben pointed back over his shoulder. "Just over the hill there. We'll saddle up and follow you guys to a safe place."

"Okay." Chuck glanced at the few survivors lying on

66

the ground nearby. "Any message you want to send back to army headquarters?"

"You're going to leave them alive?" Ben asked.

"Sure. It takes three or four men or women to care for a wounded soldier, along with medicines and food, which are getting scarcer and scarcer in the USA. It only takes one to bury the dead ones."

Ben nodded. "Smart thinking."

Chuck grinned. "Plus, it does wonders for the other soldiers' morale to see their fine army friends brought back on stretchers after a run-in with us ragtag freedom fighters."

Ben laughed. "I see what you mean. It never hurts to let the enemy know who they're dealing with, and how tough war can be."

"Damn right," Lara said. "I hate to interrupt all this man talk, but we're burning night time, and we're gonna need all we have to get to where we're going before sunup."

"Point taken," Ben said as he hurried up the slope toward where they'd

left their Jeep.

Coop came awake without really knowing what had caused it. He lay there on the pile of pine needles he'd fashioned for their bed, blinking, trying to clear the fog from his brain. All of Ben's team was experienced in combat and used to being awakened in the middle of the night, usually to danger from some quarter. Without changing his bodily position, he slowly moved his arm to find his CAR where it was always lying when he retired, right next to his bed. He curled his fingers around the pistol-like grip, ready for immediate action.

As he moved his eyes without moving his head, looking for anything out of the ordinary, he became aware of Jersey, lightly snoring, pressed against his back.

67

67

Slowly, he slid away from her, trying not to awaken her needlessly. He crouched at the entrance to their lean-to and searched the darkness for enemies, tracking each quarter with his CAR, the safety off.

The snoring stopped and Jersey was instantly awake, evidently sensing his excitement.

"Coop, what's goin' on?" she asked in a whisper as she scrambled to her hands and knees, moaning once when she put weight on her injured right ankle.

"I don't know, Jers," he answered, doubt in his voice. "Something woke me up ... but-" Just as he was about to continue there came a flash of light and a distant booming sound, off to the southeast.

"There," he pointed, "that must have been it."

"Sounds like somebody's kicking some major league ass," Jersey mumbled, sleepy again since the battle seemed far away and of no immediate concern to them.

"Yeah," he answered, slowly, thinking about it as he watched the light display and listened to the explosions over the horizon. "And if there's an ass-kickin' going on, it means Ben Raines is probably behind it."

Jersey fluffed up a small pile of pine needles and lay back down, yawning. "You think that's the team over there?"

"Must be. Ben said there weren't any other major anti-government forces up here, so it's got to be us that's raisin' a ruckus."

"How far?"

He shook his head. "From the look of the explosions, it's got to be ten, fifteen miles."

Jersey yawned again and lay back, closing her eyes. "Too far to think about tonight. Let's get some shuteye and head that way in the A.M."

He put his CAR down and lay next to her, cuddling against her back, his arm draped over her. He was surprised when she didn't make a sarcastic

comment about

68

his hand lying on her breast, but figured she must've been already asleep.

Unseen by Coop, Jersey gave a small smile, enjoying the warmth of Coop's touch and the feel of his hard body against her as she drifted off.

69 Nine

Captain Alexi Federov was deeply concerned-worried. In all his years as a hired mercenary since leaving the former Soviet Union, he'd never encountered anything quite like this.

His men were spread out across muggy, pine-laden hills in the state known as Pennsylvania. A seek-and-destroy mission in this terrain was about as tough as it could get. He led a force of Black Shirts, the special assassination troops trained in guerilla warfare by the elite USA Subversive Corps. Black Shirts were only sent into a war zone for highly specialized assignments. Alexi commanded one of these units, made up of mercenaries from around the world. Only the toughest and most bloodthirsty of the meres were chosen to serve with the Black Shirts ... men who had little concern for the niceties of morality or compassion, who killed as easily and with as little thought as wild animals.

General Maxwell had directed him to halt an attack force of special SUSA troops reported to be in these hills. No sign of them had turned up anywhere ... not so much as a single footprint. A nuclear blast fired in years past, during the original World War, had wiped out the citizenry of this region, leaving only a few farm animals and wild creatures, all with various forms of cancers and skin growths, marking them as survivors of a nuclear attack by long-ago enemies of the old USA.

70

Federov spoke to his sergeant, Sergei Larinov, another highly skilled Soviet guerilla fighter, whispering to him in the fog of an early spring morning near a town that had been known as Hershey in the days before the war.

"Nothing. We were given bad information by General Maxwell about these Rebels. They are not here. Otherwise, we would have found something . . ."

"Why would anyone fight to hold this useless territory?" Sergeant Larinov asked. "What strategic value could it possibly have?"

"Who knows? I'm beginning to wonder about the competence of leadership under this Osterman woman. No one seems to know what they're doing."

Larinov glanced up at cloudy skies. A silence blanketed the valley below them. "No airplanes. No rockets. Not a shot has been fired."

"It may be too quiet," Federov warned. "Remember what Leonid said about silence when we went through our training in Mongolia. Silence can be a deadly thing ... a warning. I have never been in a place as quiet as this. It is far too still to suit me. Even the animals seem afraid to make a sound."

"Nor have I seen a place so quiet," Larinov agreed, sweeping the

pine-studded valley with field glasses. "If these American Rebels intended to challenge us over this place, they would surely send up aircraft in order to have our position. Even the quietest surveillance airplane flying at high altitude makes some noise."

"They may not be able to get a fix on us," Federov said. "We don't know how well-equipped this General Ben Raines and his armies are. We have ten rocket launchers, and only thirty men for them to find. If these Rebels are here, we will certainly have them overpowered by weaponry . . . and skilled guerilla fighters."

"At the very least, we have good men," Larinov said, with a glance behind him. "Our Soviet and Yugoslav as-

71

71

sault teams are the best in the world. I have absolutely no doubts about it. All we have to do is find the enemy."

Federov let out a sigh. "What good will it do us, or this cause championed by General Maxwell and President Osterman, if they have sent us to the wrong place? There are times, like now, when I question the value of their intelligence reports on enemy activities."

"General Maxwell sounded so sure. A unit of the Rebel's crack assault troops was coming north by way of this old road, to launch an attack on the USA's capitol in Indianapolis. No one had any doubts, according to the general."

"I have my doubts now," Federov said. "This is nothing but vacant farms . . . empty fields . . . a few wandering cows and some pigs beyond that hilltop. There are no enemy soldiers here. We have wasted our time on a dangerous night parachute jump, based on inaccurate information. No one . . . not even a civilian, is here now."

"We were ordered to wait."

Federov scowled. "Yes. To wait for the enemy. But as you can see, there is no enemy, unless we intend to wage war against pigs and cows."

"According to General Maxwell, we will be paid no matter what we find."

"I'm beginning to wonder," Federov added, turning the focus knob on his field glasses. "I hear rumors that the USA is going broke . . . that they have very little money left after attacks on Rebel strongholds. Most of them failed miserably, which only makes me wonder more about their leadership."

"I have heard the same thing," Larinov said. "If this is true, we will be forced to take our money from them at gunpoint."

"I was told the Bosnians have not been paid in silver or gold, as General Maxwell promised. They were given

72

paper currency that is worthless. None of the stores in any of the towns in the USA will take this paper money."

"Until General Maxwell breaks a promise to us, we have no choice but to follow his orders. If anything he has told us is not true, including the amount and type of money we will be paid, then I will kill him personally."

Larinov was watching something behind them. "I heard a noise, Captain."

Federov jerked around. "What kind of noise?" he whispered, when all seemed quiet at the rear, to the north of their present position.

"A cry . . . like the crying of a small child, but very soft and far away."

"Who the hell would be crying in this wilderness? There are no children here. We haven't seen anyone since we crossed that ridge miles behind us."

"It may be nothing," Larinov said, although he continued to keep an eye on a hilltop roughly half a mile away, north and west of them. "I could have imagined it, I suppose."

Federov went back to his field glasses, sweeping the valley again. "Nothing," he hissed, clenching his teeth. "But I have the distinct feeling that something is wrong, and my gut instincts have never failed me before."

"Look!" Larinov exclaimed, pointing to a grassy slope to their rear. "It is Yarimer! What is he doing out in the open like that?"

Federov turned his binoculars on the slope. Yarimer Hecht, an old friend from Russia, was staggering down the hill holding onto his belly. And now Alexi heard the crying sounds, too, for they were distinct in the silence surrounding them.

"What the hell is that he is dragging behind him?" Larinov wanted to know, focusing his field glasses on the man in a black shirt and black beret stumbling toward them,

73

pulling what looked like coils of rope dangling between his legs.

Alexi sighed, reaching for his AK47 automatic rifle. "He is dragging his intestines, Sergeant. Someone has cut his belly open."

Larinov tensed, reaching down for his own automatic rifle. "Then they are here," he whispered.

The sudden staccato of automatic weapons fire thundered from the hills north of them. Yarimer Hecht went down in a heap as if he'd been struck over the head by a heavy hammer, blood squirting from a number of wounds across his back and sides, his head coming apart in a spray of blood and bone and tufts of his long black hair.

"Son of a bitch!" Federov hissed, looking for the source of the bullets. "How the hell did they get behind us?"

"It is not possible," Sergeant Larinov said as more and more gunfire erupted from trees to the north and west of their position.

The endless blasts of large-bore guns echoed across the Pennsylvania valley. Men in black vests and berets tumbled out of pine thickets,

shooting at unseen targets to their rear before they were gunned down.

"They have us cornered," Federov exclaimed. "We have no choice but to pull back to the south, and that is all open country."

"To hell with this," Larinov shouted as the gunshots came closer, lead slugs whistling through the air above their heads now.

He came to a crouch and took off at a run, keeping low to make as small a target as possible.

Captain Federov had cupped his hands around his mouth to warn his sergeant against such a retreat when he felt the earth shudder beneath him.

Sergeant Larinov stepped on a landmine less than thirty yards downslope. He was blown skyward, arms windmill-ing, his AK47 flying into the air only fractions of a second

74

before his legs were severed from his body. Pulpy bits of bone and flesh swirled away from his torso, and as he met his appointment with death he let out a bloodcurdling scream.

Federov did not watch his sergeant land in pieces around a deep crater where the landmine had been planted. All he could think of now was making it out of that place with his skin intact.

Men were screaming across wooded ridges behind him, and he had proof the land south of his position had been mined ... his trusted sergeant's body decorated the dark green grass running into the valley below him.

"How the hell did they slip up behind us without any of my men knowing about it?" he wondered aloud, inching backward until he was protected from flying bullets by a ledge of rock jutting from the hill.

It was not possible, and yet the shrill cries of wounded and dying men made it all too clear his squad was in deep trouble in the pines.

Federov saw two of his men break from a stand of trees at a dead run, spraying automatic weapon fire in their wake as they ran toward safety.

A mortar thudded somewhere on a hillock west of the valley, and then an earsplitting explosion blew his Black Shirt squadmen away, leaving nothing but flying dirt and clods of grass where they had been only moments before the blast.

To hell with this, he thought, bending low to make a run to the east, where no guns riddled the slopes. He dashed across the low side of the ridge with his AK47 cocked, ready to unleash its deadly load should any target present itself before he reached the apparent safety of a pine grove nestled in a swale between two hills.

Too late, he caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure in the pines, and the glint of early morning sunlight off the barrel of a rifle.

75

75

Federov threw himself flat in the grass, bringing his rifle to bear on the shape.

The pounding of rapid fire filled his ears, and he felt a stinging sensation spread across the top of his head and his right shoulder.

The sky above him began to spin, and he lost his bearings for a moment.

"What the hell... is happening?" he groaned, feeling a wet substance flow out of his mouth when he spoke.

He looked down at the grass below his chin. A crimson stain spread between his elbows, and pain raced through his skull unlike any pain he'd ever known.

/ am shot, he thought dully as he felt himself spinning in widening circles. Tiny pinpoints of light flashed before his eyes as the world around him darkened.

How did they get behind us? he wondered again, until a deep wracking cough filled his mouth with blood.

His eyes batted shut, and the pain was gone.

Buddy Raines walked out of the woods and stood over Federov's bloody body. He cradled his CAR in his arms and glanced around at the other Scouts as they emerged from their hiding places. "Jimmy," he called to his second in command, "police the area and make sure there are no survivors."

"Yes, sir," Jimmy Gardiner said, turning and making a sweeping motion with his arms, signaling his men to check the bodies for signs of life.

Buddy sighed. Though he was in charge of Bat 508, he'd volunteered to lead this group of Scouts in a drop behind enemy lines, to carry out his father's orders to wreak as much havoc in the USA's backyard as they could.

"Hurry up, Jimmy. I want to get back under cover as soon as possible, before any reinforcements show up. We've still got that power plant to take out."

76

Jimmy grinned. "Yes, sir. I wonder how the citizens are gonna like being without electricity."

Buddy smiled back. "I imagine they're gonna raise hell with Osterman. She's going to have to do some explaining to her loyal followers about how this could happen so far from the front lines, just like Ben wants."

77 Ten

Hans Bosner gripped his SAM rocket launcher, sweeping it back and forth, certain that an attack of this magnitude was being directed from the sky. And yet the skies above them were clear. Radar reports from USA headquarters indicated there were no Rebel planes showing up on any of the screens at the command post near Indianapolis, not so much as a blip coming from radar installations across Pennsylvania.

"I don't see any airplanes," he said to Albert Zimmermann in German, in

a clipped Bavarian dialect they had both spoken since early childhood.

Zimmermann listened to the chatter of guns around them. "I do not think there are any aircraft, Herr Bosner. They are on the ground, these damn Rebels, circling us. Someone had to inform on us, to tell them we were coming. This is no accident. They know exactly where we are."

"We would have heard them ... or seen them. No one, not even those so-called Scouts of the Rebel army could move so silently. There must be a plane somewhere. This can't be ground reconnaissance, or we would have heard or seen something. They could not have known this was our objective."

"I say there is an informant on General Maxwell's staff, a man who has access to secret information," Zimmer-

78

mann said, his eyes flickering back and forth across the battlefield. "There has to be-

A mercenary stumbled out of the trees with his belly cut open, dragging his intestines like coils of purple ropes tied to his spine. He made muted sobbing sounds, following a bone-chilling cry, with noises coming from his throat like those of a wounded rabbit, hard to hear above the thunder of rifles echoing across the valley.

"Look!" Zimmermann exclaimed. "He has been gutted like a pig! Someone is behind us with a knife or a bayonet. I heard nothing, not until he screamed just now. Look at him!"

Hans watched the mere stagger, clutching loops of his organs. "Son of a bitch. How did one of those bastards get behind us?"

"I see him, the Rebel killer," Zimmermann whispered, raising his AK47 to his shoulder. "There, in the shadows below that big oak tree ... a man with a rifle."

Hans saw the shape. "Don't shoot!" he cried, just as Zimmermann let go with more than a dozen rounds of ammunition. "It is Koslov-

One of their own, wearing a black vest and black beret, was swept off his feet by a hail of lead. He danced to an unheard melody before he fell, feet flailing, landing hard on his back and neck.

"You killed one of our men, Albert." Hans said, quieter, watching the Russian collapse in a heap beneath the oak.

Zimmermann lowered his rifle. "We were told to stay in a line," he protested softly, watching Uri Koslov, a friend, go down in the grass. "What was Uri doing back there when we were given orders to stay in lateral lines?"

The thudding of heavy weapons fire distracted Hans for the moment. They were surrounded. He turned to the hill where Captain Federov and Sergeant Larinov should be at the point of their assault wing, signaling the others when to move, and when to hold their positions. "Where

79

is Alexi?" he asked, noticing a body slumped below a rocky ledge. From

this distance, he couldn't be sure who it was.

"What?" Zimmermann asked, unable to hear Hans due to the pounding of gunfire.

"Where is Captain Federov?"

"I don't see him. Could these Rebel bastards have gotten behind them, too?"

"I ... don't know," Hans replied, lowering his SAM rocket launcher with nothing to shoot at.

Then they heard the rhythmic pop of a helicopter's blades north of their position.

"At last," Hans muttered, returning the hand-held Soviet missile launcher to his shoulder. "I will blow this metal bird into a million pieces. I will light up the sky with his fuel, and his anti-tank rockets."

Zimmermann said in a high-pitched voice, "Wait until you are sure it is a Rebel ship before you fire."

Hans was in no mood to wait, not with Black Shirt squadmen dying all around him.

"But," Zimmermann reminded him, "only Captain Federov and Sergeant Larinov have radios. We are to wait for their signal."

Hans sighted the outline of an American Apache helicopter gunship-known in years past as the "tank killer"- rising over the treetops.

"Screw them," he snapped. "I won't take the chance of being turned to pulp by that craft's machine-guns."

Major Adolf Wertz prided himself on his piloting skills and his evasive tactics when under fire. The exploding guns below him could mean only one thing ... the Rebels had set a trap for his highly trained Black Shirt assault group, as impossible as it seemed.

But he could quickly turn the tide with his saddle-

80

mounted machine-guns, he thought, strafing the area with a heavy concentration of .50 caliber slugs.

He knew some of his own men would surely die when he unleashed his airborne firepower, but a few lives would be lost in a pitched battle, anyway, a calculated risk, the sad fortunes of fighting a war. Most of his men were Soviet mercenaries, anyway, and as a German he had no love for Russian soldiers, even if they were on the same side in this conflict. They were only here because of the money.

Above all else, he hated Ben Raines, the self-styled general of SUSAs, and everything he stood for-a senseless conglomeration based on old-fashioned ideas in which men were not required to follow orders or mandates from the government if it didn't suit them. The entire concept was a stupid one, one that could breed insurrection and rebellion among the masses if it went unchecked. President Osterman and General Maxwell understood the dangers of allowing every man and woman to think and act

on their own in a society where free choice was allowed.

He pushed his radio transmit button, to let his ground crew know what was going on. "Alpha Red One," he said into the mouthpiece.

"Go ahead, Alpha One."

"A Rebel attack on our Pennsylvania objective. I'm going in with rockets and machine-guns."

"Ten-four, Alpha One. We will relay this information back to base."

The whirring of his chopper's blades was a drone in his ears, and he liked the sound. It was a noise befitting an all-out war machine like the Apache.

A crackle of static. Someone from Command Central was being patched in.

"Alpha One. How could a Rebel force be there without any detection?"

"I have no idea," Wertz said, his teeth clenched in bitter

81

anger. "Someone erred. We have our share of idiots in Security and Intelligence."

A pause, and Wertz knew that higher-ups would not like what he said. He didn't give a damn.

"How heavy is the fire?" the same voice inquired over the headset.

"It sounds very heavy . . . but nothing I can't handle in this Apache."

"Are there other aircraft in the vicinity?"

"No. Nothing shows on my screens."

"Be careful, Major. The Apache you are flying is very important to the president."

"I'm always careful, you damn fool. You didn't give me your rank, but I am a major. Identify yourself!"

"This is General Leland Maxwell."

Now it was Wertz's turn to pause. "Sorry, sir, but I am under fire at the moment."

"Let our ground troops handle it. Isn't Captain Federov in charge?"

"Yes . . . but--"

"Don't fly into any risk areas. See what Federov and his men can do with the situation."

"It sounds like they're being blown to bits, General. I'll be very careful with this tank killer. As you know, I am an experienced helicopter gunship pilot."

"I'm well aware of your qualifications, Major. However, I need to impress upon you how valuable the Apache you are flying is to our war effort."

"I am aware of its value, sir."

"Ground troops, especially these . . . Russian mercenaries, are in so many words, expendable. Let them fight it out with the Rebels first."

Wertz ignored the order, sending his gunship over a wooded ridge, moving closer to the battle. "Of course, sir. I have been well-trained to follow orders."

82

"Good. Just don't put that Apache at risk. We need it, in case Raines gets too close to the capitol."

"I understand, sir."

Wertz glimpsed a wisp of white smoke rising from a thicket of oaks, moving toward him.

"No!" he cried, sweeping the Apache's controls to the left for an evasive maneuver at full throttle.

"What is it, Major Wertz?" a voice over the radio demanded. He'd forgotten to turn off his mike.

"A SAM," he said, as the heavy armor-plated Apache tilted to the east.

"You should have known they would have rocket launchers!" General Maxwell shouted into the earpiece. "Whatever the hell you do, Wertz, don't lose that goddamn Apache!"

Wertz saw the missile coming, his mouth went dry, and he heard a strange ringing in his ears. The gunship was turning too slowly to avoid the SAM, and he knew it.

"Shit," he breathed in his native tongue, his feet trembling on the control pedals. "This is Alpha One. I'm going down. No way to-"

The explosion sent Adolf Wertz tumbling through the windshield, his helmet ripped from his head by the blast. He fell toward the ground, wishing he could be back in Bavaria on his grandfather's dairy farm, doing nothing more dangerous than milking a surly Holstein trying to kick over the milk bucket.

Back at headquarters, General Maxwell turned to Captain Broadhurst, who was standing behind him at the radio console. Maxwell's face was beet red. "I hope that stupid bastard is dead, 'cause if he isn't, he will be when I get through with him!" he growled.

"Max, do you think Wertz lost the gunship?" asked Broadhurst.

83

83

Maxwell gave him a look, his eyes flat. Where does Osterman come up with

these idiots? he thought.

"Of course he lost the ship, you fool. Have you ever seen a SAM miss at such close range?"

"Uh . . . no, sir. I was just hoping-"

"Hope in one hand and shit in the other, and see which one fills up first, Broadhurst," Maxwell said, suddenly tiring of the conversation. Damn! If he had men only half as good as Raines did, he'd have this war over within a month.

"Are you going to tell Madam President about the loss of another of her helicopters?" Broadhurst asked.

Maxwell gave him a pitying look. "Of course not. Do I look stupid, Captain?"

Broadhurst shook his head. It seemed no one wanted to be the one to give Sugar Babe bad news. It was a surefire way to end your career, if not your life.

84

Ben and his team followed Lara and her Freedom Fighters on roads that seemed to be little more than overgrown cow paths winding through dense forest and brushy overgrowth for more than two hours. Finally, they pulled into a cleared area which contained a dilapidated farmhouse and a barn which looked about to fall down.

Lara bounded out of the lead vehicle and trotted back to Ben's SUV. She leaned her head in the driver's side window and smiled. "Don't let the appearance fool you. The walls are reinforced oak, and the doors have a solid sheet metal backing."

Ben glanced around. "What is this place?"

"It's one of our safe houses. We keep it looking like this so the Black Shirts and the locals who are in the pay of the USA won't give it a second look if they happen upon it."

She stepped back. "Come on in. We'll put some grub on the fire and see how hungry you folks are."

"Myself, I could eat a horse," Anna said as she scrambled out of the car.

"I second that," Corrie said. "Nothing like a good fire-fight to improve the appetite."

Within a few minutes, Lara's comrades had steaks grilling on a portable barbecue pit with potatoes baking in the coals.

85

"Looks like your people are pretty well-supplied," Beth observed.

Lara shrugged. "We take what we can from the Black Shirt squadrons after our battles. They eat better than most of the citizens who pay their salaries," she said.

"How are the locals making out?" Ben asked. "We've had reports the USA

is short on funds, and have increased taxes to a point where many of the citizens are in open revolt."

Chuck Harris looked at Ben over the pit. "You're not far from correct," he said, "though not many have the courage to be openly rebellious. President Osterman and her cronies take a dim view of anyone expressing doubt about her leadership abilities. There have been some public hangings just for griping about the amount of taxation."

"Of course, they call it treason, and claim the protesters are aiding and abetting the rebels in the war," the man named Dave added as he passed out paper plates to everyone.

"It never seems to change," Ben said. "The Socialist Democrats claim to be the party of the little man, the average Joe, but it always seems to be the little people who get it in the ear. The fat cats who support the president always make out OK."

As Chuck passed out meat and potatoes for everyone, Beth asked, "Lara, how is it you and your friends are still alive? The last we heard, you'd all been captured and were being tortured and killed."

Lara's face fell. "We were captured, and most of us were in the process of being tortured."

"How in the world did you manage to escape?" Beth asked, slicing her steak with her K-Bar assault knife and spearing a chunk and popping it in her mouth.

Chuck pulled up a chair next to Beth and put his plate

86

on his knees as he ate. "You remember Jimmy Smathers, Ben?"

Ben nodded. "Yeah, the skinny teenager with acne who was undergoing his early training last time I was up here."

"That's the one. Well, he pretended to go to the other side. Cried a lot and said he'd be willing to go on TV and testify about the rest of us and how we were traitors to the USA."

Lara's eyes filled with tears. "It was just a ruse. Once they took his shackles off, he attacked the two men who were taking him back to headquarters, stole their weapons, and broke the rest of us out."

"In the process, he took almost a full clip from an AK47 in the chest before blowing the rest of the jailers to hell with a grenade," Harris finished.

Ben nodded. "Seems he passed his training with flying colors."

"Yeah," Lara said. "Every one of us owes Jimmy our lives."

"We didn't hear anything about the escape on the news," Corrie said, "or from any of our spies in the USA."

"You wouldn't," Harris observed drily. "Osterman doesn't like to advertise her mistakes, or our victories."

One of the other women, who'd been silent up until now, chimed in. "Guess she's afraid any news of how many times we've kicked the Black Shirts' asses would only encourage other locals to join us in our fight," she said, fire in her eyes.

"And she's right to fear that," Ben said, stuffing the last of his potato into his mouth. "A tyrant's greatest fear is a free and informed public. Most people are of good heart, and most wouldn't tolerate Osterman's excesses for a moment if they knew the truth about them, or if they thought they stood a chance of resisting."

"Is that why you've come back, Ben?" Lara asked. "To spread the word about us?"

87

"In part, but only in part. As I told you before, Lara, I want to help establish teams like yours all across the USA. And while doing that, I've parachuted dozens of teams of Scouts into various locales. Their mission is to sabotage any and everything that makes the USA work ... power stations, dams, telephone wires, TV cable towers, satellite dishes-in short, to do everything they can to make the average citizen clamor for peace and an end to this senseless war Osterman has created."

"Any chance of getting some training along those lines for our members?" Harris asked, excitement in his eyes.

"That's the second part of the Scouts' mission. To recruit and train Freedom Fighters just like you guys," Ben answered. "The only way this war is going to be won, without totally destroying the USA and killing millions of innocent people, is from within. By patriotic citizens like yourselves taking up arms and changing the leadership of your country."

Lara shook her head. "It won't be easy."

"Freedom has never in history] come cheap," Ben said, "but I've never heard anyone say the price was too high once they've attained it."

Jersey came awake slowly, blinking her eyes and wondering for a moment where she was. Then it came to her as she felt Coop's warm breath on her neck, punctuated by soft snoring and occasional smacking of his lips in his sleep.

She glanced down and saw his left hand gently cupping her breast. She started to move it, then realized she kind of liked the warmth of his grip on her body. With a deep sigh, she relaxed and let herself doze for a few moments more. After all, she thought, they'd be up and at 'em soon enough. In war, it was best to cherish the quiet times, 'cause there were so damn few of them.

88

As she lay there, with Coop snuggled up against her, spooning her from behind for warmth, his left arm wrapped around and over her with his hand on her breast, she realized she was beginning to like the feel of him against her. She'd never stopped to analyze her feelings for Coop. He was just so damned arrogant, and condescending toward females-probably because so many of them threw themselves at him. After all, she reasoned, what was there not to like, at least on the surface? He was good-looking in a Marlboro Man way, with craggy features,

wrinkled and tan from his many hours in the sun, and eyes so blue they could almost be sapphires. He usually sported a bemused, almost insolent, grin as if he knew some deep, dark secret only he was privy to. If not for his attitude, if he just didn't act as if he expected every female within a hundred yards of his immense charm to just fall down and spread 'em for him, he'd be almost tolerable.

Ever since they'd been marooned together, like this, in Africa she'd begun to look at him in a different light. Then, he'd been so considerate, so ... nice, that she'd almost thought her feelings for him were changing—from a brotherly, teammate type of regard and caring to ... something more. Something more like what a woman should feel for a man who excites her tremendously. Then, damnit, he'd open his mouth and spoil it all, come up with some male chauvinist remark that would just make her blood boil. And then, of course, she'd come back with one of her patented put-downs, and they'd be right back where they started.

Oh well. She sighed again. Whoever said war was hell was right, and so, too, was love.

Her sigh must have awakened Coop, for he released her breast and rolled over onto his back, coughing and coming fully awake.

"Where the hell are we?" he mumbled, his voice thick.

89

"Why, right where we landed, Coop," she answered, having to bite back the sarcastic remark that was on the tip of her tongue.

"Oh, that's right," he said, scratching his head and sitting up. "You screwed up, as usual, and I had to save your butt, and here we are."

Yeah, she thought to herself, right back where we started. Same old shit, different day.

Jersey, her face flushed with anger and chagrin at her romantic thoughts, tried to get to her feet, groaning in pain as she tried to put weight on her injured right ankle.

Coop's eyes softened when he saw her face screw up in obvious discomfort.

"Here," he said, pulling her back down on the pine needles. "Let me look at that ankle."

"Why," she asked, "so you can make some more shitty comments about my abilities?"

He straightened her leg out and pulled her pants leg up, gently feeling the swollen, black-and-blue flesh around her ankle. "Jersey, I'm sorry about what I said before. I was just . . . kidding. You know how I am."

"Yeah, Coop. Unfortunately, I do."

He tried to move her ankle, but it was stiff and extremely tender, and she cried out in pain.

He shook his head. "You're not gonna be able to walk on that, at least not for a couple of days."

She gritted her teeth, tears filling her eyes. "And just what do you propose we do, Coop? We sit here and wait for the enemy to find us?"

"No. Give me a minute, OK?"

He pulled his K-Bar from its holster and crawled out of the lean-to.

Jersey leaned back and slammed her fist into the soft earth next to her. Damn! Why did she have to go and sprain her ankle? It was going to endanger the entire mission.

90

Cooper was back in five minutes, stripping the branches off a limb he'd cut from a poplar tree. It was about two inches thick, and had two smaller limbs at the top in a V-shape.

He pulled her to her feet and placed the top of the limb under her right armpit. It made a passable crutch.

"Now, give me your pack and weapon, and you should be able to hobble along using the limb as a crutch."

She wagged her head. "No. I'll just slow you down too much. You go on ahead, and when you find Ben and the team you can come back for me."

His lips curled in a small grin. "Uh-uh. You know we never leave a teammate behind in a combat zone, Jersey. We'll go together, or not at all."

He helped her out of the lean-to and picked up her pack and her CAR, slinging them over his shoulder. "Let's go, girl. We've got a few miles to cover."

"But we don't even know which way to go," she protested, taking a few tentative steps on the makeshift crutch.

He shrugged. "We'll head northeast, toward where the drop was supposed to land. Along the way, if we're lucky, we'll find some Black Shirts and maybe they'll lend us the use of their radio."

She looked at him in disbelief. "You think I can fight like this?"

He gave a short laugh. "Hell, Jersey, even at half speed you're still twice as mean as anyone else. Let's go. We're burning daylight."

They started off, keeping to small, overgrown trails through the dense forest, going overland when the trails didn't go in the direction they needed.

By noon, after slogging along for four hours, Jersey figured they'd only covered five or six miles, and her arm and shoulder were killing her.

91

91

"Hold on, Coop. I've got to take a rest for a few minutes."

"OK. It's time for lunch, anyway. I'll break out some MREs, and we'll have a picnic."

"I've heard Meals Ready to Eat called lots of things, but never a picnic," she answered, smiling slightly.

He examined the plastic containers after she'd gotten seated, her back against a tree trunk. "You want ham and navy beans, or corned beef hash?"

"How about a filet mignon, with a side of French fries and a bottle of cabernet sauvignon to wash it down with?"

He popped open the ham and beans and handed it to her. "Close your eyes and pretend. That's the best I can do."

"Great," she said.

"However, I'll make you a promise. The next time we're in so-called civilization, I'll treat you to the steak and wine."

"That's a deal," she said, digging into the ham and beans with more gusto than she thought she'd be able to manage. / must be hungrier than I thought, she said to herself.

Just as they were finishing their lunch, they heard the sound of a vehicle nearby. Cooper threw his packet of corned beef down and grabbed his CAR.

"Sounds like company's coming," he said in a low voice.

He pulled her to her feet, and they worked their way off the trail and back into the brush out of sight. Jersey lay prone behind a fallen pine tree and pointed her CAR over the top, jacking back the loading lever and getting set.

Cooper crouched down and trotted to the other side of the trail, where they could catch the car in a crossfire.

A few minutes later, an old army issue Jeep came down the road. It was carrying four young men, dressed in army

92

fatigues. They looked to be no more than nineteen or twenty years old, and were laughing and drinking beer out of cans as they rode.

At least they 're not Black Shirts, Jersey thought, knowing the regular army men were not nearly as dangerous as the meres.

When the Jeep got abreast of her, she opened up with the CAR, raking the side of the Jeep with bullets, bringing it to a skidding halt.

The boys dropped their beer cans and grabbed for their M-16s, turning frightened eyes in her direction.

Before they could fire, Coop stepped from hiding on the other side of the trail and fired a burst over their heads.

"Drop your weapons and hold up your hands!" he yelled, lowering the barrel of his CAR until it pointed directly at them.

Caught in a trap, the young men had no choice but to obey. They threw

the M-16s to the ground and raised their hands, faces white with fear.

Once Jersey saw that Cooper had the situation under control, she slung her CAR over her shoulder and took her crutch, hobbling out into the road in front of the Jeep.

"Howdy, boys," Coop drawled. He motioned with the CAR and told them to get down out of the vehicle.

While Jersey covered them, he tied their hands behind their backs and then had them sit down while he bound their ankles together.

"\bu ain't gonna kill us, are you, mister?" the youngest of the soldiers asked.

"Shut up, Carl," said a man with corporal stripes on his sleeves. "They ain't nothin' but Rebel trash."

Cooper squatted in front of the corporal and patted his cheek. "What'd you say, boy?"

"You can't do nothin' to us. It's against the rules of war," the man said, his eyes flashing.

Coop looked over at Jersey. "This boy is quoting the

93

Geneva Convention rules to us, and after his boss broke every one of them by using BW." He shook his head and got to his feet to look in the Jeep.

There, attached to the dashboard was a radio transceiver. "Ah, we've struck gold, Jersey," he said as he sat in the driver's seat and twirled the frequency knob until he had it on the secret frequency used by the Rebel forces.

"Keep it short," Jersey advised from the front of the Jeep. "They'll be monitoring the transmissions."

Cooper nodded and said, "Eagle Two, come in Eagle Two." He used the call name of Mike Post, who was in charge at Rebel headquarters until Ben returned.

A burst of static was followed by a faint transmission. "Eagle Two here. Who is calling?"

"Baby Bird. We've fallen out of the nest. I need a patch to Eagle One, if possible," Coop answered.

"Wait one," the voice replied, followed by a loud squeal and more static.

Coop glanced at Jersey. "I think they're trying to jam us."

"Give 'em a minute back at HQ. They'll figure a way around it."

"While we're waiting, see if you can find a map on one of those characters over there. I'd ask 'em where we are, but they'd probably only lie."

Jersey bent over the loudmouthed corporal and pulled a folded map from a leather case on his belt. "Here ya go," she said, handing the paper to Coop.

After he'd studied it for a few minutes, there was another loud squeal and some static, but it gradually faded and he heard a voice say, "This is Eagle One. How many Baby Birds are you?"

Coop grinned. It was Ben.

"Four, sir," Coop replied, using the Rebel code of doubling numbers on unsecured transmissions.

"What is your twenty?"

94

Coop glanced at the map, "Looks to be about fifteen miles west of a river called the Brandywine." They were in actuality, seven and a half miles east of the river, but with the code, directions were again reversed, and numbers were doubled.

"Ten-four," the voice said. "Back to you in a couple."

"Roger," Coop said. He looked over his shoulder at the corporal, who had a smirk on his face, evidently thinking Coop was unable to read a map and had given HQ the wrong coordinates for his position. Coop wasn't about to enlighten him.

The voice came back on, was drowned out momentarily by an undulating squeal, and finally was clear again. "We are unable to come for you for four hours. Are you mobile?"

"That's a Roger," Coop said, glancing at the soldiers' Jeep.

"Good. At that time, we'll meet you six miles east of your present position."

"Ten-four," Coop said. "Over and out."

He pulled Jersey to the side and said, "Ben's coming for us in two hours, we're to meet him three miles to the west of here."

She nodded and winked. "What'll we do with these bozos?" she said in a voice loud enough for them to hear.

Coop let his eyes go flat and mean. "Kill 'em, what else?"

One of the soldiers let out a gasp, and began to cry. The corporal's face blanched, but to his credit he threw back his shoulders and said, "Take it easy, men. Whatever they do to us, don't let them see us sweat."

Coop walked over and stood before the man. "You've got more sand than I gave you credit for." He shook his head, a look of sadness on his face. "It's too bad you're fighting for a psychopath."

95

95

"Don't you dare say that about President Osterman. She's a great lady."

Jersey threw back her head and laughed. "Hell, she's neither a lady, nor great." She inclined her head at the Jeep. "Come on, we've got an appointment to keep."

"OK," Coop said, and he climbed into the driver's seat.

"What about us?" one of the soldiers said. "You can't just leave us out here to starve ... or be eaten by some wild animal."

"Don't worry, sonny," Jersey said. "After we're picked up, we'll radio your president and let her know where you are, and just how helpful you've been to us."

"Oh shit!" the corporal said, as if he'd rather be eaten by wild animals, after all.

96 Twelve

Claire relaxed in her new underground bunker below the old warehouse in Indianapolis, confident that her security measures were intact. The building had been fortified with two-inch plates of steel, firewalls made of rock, and a four feet thick layer of reinforced cement around the basement. Only a direct hit by a nuclear missile or a bomb would have any effect on her personal headquarters.

After the direct hit on her old quarters during the attack a few days ago, in which she was practically buried alive, she wanted to be certain she would survive any form of future Rebel attack. At the time, no one had believed Ben Raines had the capability to pull off a hit on the nation's new capital, with its heavy anti-aircraft defenses. And yet he had, somehow, killing thousands of people . . . most of them members of her military staff and government officials.

She poured herself a snifter of brandy, wondering where the hell Harlan was.

A pair of bodyguards stood watch outside the iron door of her new living quarters . . . trusted men who knew her likes . . . and dislikes—Robert Olson, in charge of video surveillance around the perimeter, and Herb Knoff, a born killer on the verge of being psychotic, her personal protector as he had been for a number of years, since the Final War ended.

That war had not been as final as everyone predicted.

97

The mistake was leaving Ben Raines alive to organize another military force against her. Raines and his ragtag army of Rebels had been thorns in her side ever since, and there seemed to be no way to stop them.

"Harlan Millard to see you, Madam President," a voice said over the intercom.

Good, she thought. / need a man tonight, even a man as inept and weak as Harlan. "Send him in," she said, pushing a button on a box beside her bed.

"Should I perform the usual security measures?" Knoff asked.

"Not tonight, Herbert." She'd slept with Herb any number of times, and anyone else who dared to call him Herbert was not likely to do so a

second time, at least not with all of his teeth still in his mouth.
"Just send him in. We have business to discuss and it... can't wait."

The business was the heat between her thighs. It had been worse over the past few days, and she craved satisfaction, even from a wimpy little man like Harlan Millard, who allowed his bitch of a wife to dictate to him.

At the sound of an electronic door moving back on steel rails and then footsteps, Claire felt the heat growing deep within her groin.

The door closed, making a metallic noise when its heavy locks engaged.

"Where the hell have you been?" she demanded before he came into the bedroom.

"First, I was at the infirmary, having the wound on my arm looked at, then at security headquarters. Claire, I'm afraid I have some bad news."

"What sort of bad news? I didn't order you down here to give me news of any kind. You know what I want--"

"One of General Maxwell's crack Black Shirt assault units was wiped out this morning."

"Wiped out?"

"A batch of Rebels were waiting for them in the north

98

Pennsylvania woods. They were the Soviet mercenaries Max was so damn proud of, the unit led by Captain Fed-erov, and some of the Germans."

"They cost us plenty of money, Harlan," she said, as he came around a corner into the bedroom. "Tell me what the hell happened to them."

"Raines had minefields all over the place. Some of General Maxwell's men went up in smoke when they tried to run. The Black Shirt unit was eliminated completely."

"The idiots," Claire snapped, tossing back the last of her brandy, taking only brief note of the rounding of her belly where she'd gained a considerable amount of weight. Her breasts had begun to sag from her added bulk, more than they ever had in the past, as she recalled.

Harlan stopped near the foot of the bed. "I'm afraid these Soviets were not idiots, Claire. They were some of the best European mercenaries we had."

She sighed, frustrated by news she didn't care to hear at this hour. "So, tell me the rest of it. Bad news travels in bunches. I'm sure there's more."

Harlan looked down at the floor. "The commanding officer, he was flying one of our helicopter gunships. The one we captured down in Georgia."

"So?"

"It was shot down. The ship was destroyed, according to our latest surveillance reports."

She stiffened in the bed, raising up off the pile of pillows behind her. "We lost the goddamn Apache?" she spat.

"I'm afraid so, Claire. They hit it with some sort of SAM rocket."

Claire threw her brandy snifter into a corner of the room. The tinkling of breaking glass kept Harlan silent, frozen at the foot of the bed for a time.

"Ben Raines is a bastard," she hissed, her jaw clamped

99

99

so tightly that it made the fat below her chin quiver. "A lucky bastard, at that."

"There are more problems," Harlan continued, his voice so soft she could scarcely hear him.

"What the hell else has gone wrong? I told you to come down here to make me feel good, not to give me nothing but bad news about our war with the Rebels."

"Some of Ben Raines's Rebel Scouts have been reported to be on the ground north of the compound, this compound, by less than fifty miles."

"Fifty miles? How the hell did we let them get that close without being detected?"

"Some sort of nighttime air drop."

"Why the hell didn't our radar pick up the goddamn plane when they flew in?"

"I can't explain it, Claire. I'm just sifting through the day's reports."

"You make it sound like we're getting our asses kicked on all fronts, Harlan. I goddamn sure don't want to hear that, not tonight, and not from you."

"I've always told you the truth, Claire. I've never lied to you."

She reached for the bottle of brandy and drank straight from it. "Get your clothes off!" she demanded. "I want to forget about Ben Raines and his goddamn stupid Rebels tonight. I want you to make love to me."

"Make love?"

"Call it whatever the hell you want. Get your clothes off and get in this bed with me. I'm going to hump your brains out tonight. Your wife won't have anything left for her by the time I'm done with you."

"I told Ellen I'd be working late."

"You will be, Harlan. You'll be working late keeping the president of the USA happy. And don't you dare disappoint me. I'm not in the mood for excuses. Get your

100

clothes off and get into bed. You'd better be good tonight. I need a man!"

"Please, Claire. You must understand that I have a wife at home. These repeated demands of yours-"

"Did she want you to do her before you came over to see me tonight?"

"Not exactly . . . but I did spend some time with her before I arrived."

"So did you do the bitch?"

"Ellen isn't a bitch."

"The hell she isn't."

"She's my wife. We have two children."

"I don't give a damn how many rugrats the two of you have! If I wanted children, the little curtain-climbing bastards, I have alternatives. I can order any one of my bodyguards to come in here and give me some."

"I know, Claire. It's just that I don't want Ellen to suspect anything."

"Who gives a shit what she might suspect? I could have her shot, if I wanted to."

Harlan was sweating. "I sincerely hope you won't do that, for the sake of our children."

"I don't give a good goddamn about your children. Take your clothes off. I'm rapidly losing patience with you."

He sat on the edge of her king-size mattress and began to pull off his shoes. "I'll do the best I can, Claire. I've always tried to please you."

"Shut up and get undressed, you wimpy little bastard. You make me madder every time you open your mouth. You'll live a lot longer if you don't say another damn word."

"This is hardly a sexually exciting thing, to hear you say that."

Claire scowled. "You'd better get it up for me, or I'll have it cut off."

"Cutoff?"

101

"You heard me. I'll have it amputated."

"Dear God, Claire. There are times when you can be so cold. I hardly recognize you."

"Shut up, Harlan. And don't mention God to me. God is dead. If He wasn't, He'd have let us kill Ben Raines a long time ago."

"I happen to believe there is a God, Claire. I believe it with all my heart."

"Then why would God leave Raines alive to murder citizens of the USA?"

Harlan swallowed, more sweat forming on his brow. "This is war, Claire. God has never intervened in wars made by men. Not that I'm aware of."

"You idiot!" she growled, losing the warm feeling between her legs after listening to Harlan's empty logic. "War can be made by women. I'm the Commander In Chief of the forces of the USA."

"I didn't mean to be ... gender-specific about it," he stammered. "It was a generalization."

"You've pissed me off tonight, Harlan Millard. Put your clothes back on. I'd rather sleep with an alligator than with you, you little bastard."

"I'm sorry, Claire." He glanced down at his shriveled genitals.

"Get out! Get out, or I'll have you shot! I want a real man in my bed tonight!"

Harlan dutifully put his underwear, slacks, and shirt back on, and then his socks and shoes. "I really am very sorry," he muttered as he backed away from her bed.

"Get out!" she barked again.

He bowed politely and turned to go, hesitating before he left her bedroom. "What orders do you want me to give General Maxwell regarding the assault troops north of the compound, Madam President?"

"That's a stupid damn question, Harlan. Tell Max to

102

send out enough soldiers to wipe them out. Make damn sure they don't get close to the compound."

"But our reports said they were already close . . . less than fifty miles away."

"Goddamn it, Harlan! Just tell Maxwell to get rid of the sons of bitches! I don't give a damn how he does it, but make sure he does it soon." She hesitated a moment, then held up her hand. "Just a minute. Didn't we get a report from one of our spies that Ben Raines was in upstate New York last week?"

"Yes, ma'am, but that report wasn't confirmed. We haven't had time to verify it yet."

"I don't give a shit. I'll teach that bastard Raines to bomb my houses. Tell Maxwell to send a squad of Black Shirts along with a trained assassin up to New York. I want Raines's head on a platter."

"But Madam President, there's an executive order forbidding assassination of political figures," Millard began.

Claire picked up a book from her bedside table and threw it at him, grinning as he almost fell over trying to dodge the missile. "Don't you dare quote executive orders at me, you wimp! I'm the chief executive around here, and I said send someone to kill Raines, and do it now!" Harlan bowed again without answering and hurried out of her bedroom.

Claire reached for the intercom button. She would have Herb Knoff in bed with her tonight, even though she would have preferred a slow screw. Knoff hammered her every time they made love, and she knew she would be sore in the morning. Perhaps thinking of Ben Raines's death would make the experience more enjoyable.

103

Former Navy SEAL Sergeant Gerald Enger listened to the air whisper through his black parachute, guiding it down with the aid of hand stirrups toward a starlit, vacant field near the Hudson River. Eleven highly skilled assault troops came from the inky skies above him as their cargo plane, a C-130, swept back to the north at low altitude, staying off Rebel radar as much as it could, flying just above the New York treetops at dangerously low levels after the chutists made their jump from higher altitudes.

Enger hit the ground rolling, gathering his chute cords as soon as he came to his feet. All around him, men in black shirts with blackface greasepaint hit the meadow, tumbling, making as little noise as possible despite heavy packs, automatic rifles, and explosives.

"Down safe, so far," he heard Corporal Bill Moody whisper, collecting his parachute only a few yards from where Enger landed.

"Yeah. So far, so good. Get the men in those trees at the edge of this clearing. Make sure everybody's got his chute, so there's no telltale signs of our landing. Any son of a bitch who drops so much as a hanky, I'm gonna kill him myself. Pass the word around. The Rebels may have patrols out. We can't let 'em find a goddamn thing."

"Right, Sergeant." Moody hurried off into the night to get the assault team together.

Enger gathered his black chute, dragging it from the

104

meadow to a stand of oaks. They were on a special assignment for Max, General Maxwell, to hit Ben Raines personally at his headquarters, or so the reports went. No one seemed quite sure where General Raines was, despite the best intelligence the USA could gather. They'd gotten word he was recruiting so-called Freedom Fighters in upstate New York, near some of the old national parks. Enger'd been told they had a spy in the area, and he was warned not to harm the operative if he could avoid it. He pulled a picture from his pocket and stared at it for a moment, fixing the spy's face in his memory.

Enger had only heard about Raines ... he'd never seen him in the flesh. But if all went as planned he would get his first glimpse of Raines as a dead man, a bullet-riddled corpse-or a pile of pulpy flesh and bone, if an RPG got him first. Enger's team carried enough firepower, RPGs, rocket launchers, and other explosives, to blow Raines out of a bunker dug halfway down to China. While other assault groups had failed recently to get Raines, Enger harbored no doubts he could accomplish his objective, and he'd said so to General Maxwell and the President herself-even though he harbored a lingering dislike for Claire Osterman. She was the kind of ball-busting woman any man could hate, a real bitch. But the pay was good, working for the USA.

His men were veterans of other wars, regional conflicts, some as far back as Viet Nam. Older, seasoned, experienced, they would not make the same mistakes made by the younger mercenaries President Osterman seemed to prefer. The hotshot Russians had been particularly stupid in Pennsylvania, allowing a Rebel band to close a circle around them, blowing them to bits in less than ten minutes when Black Shirts under Captain Federov walked into a deadly trap. Word was the Rebel Scouts were really good . . . good and merciless, sort of like the LURPs in Viet Nam had been—men picked to work behind enemy

105

105

lines with little or no support. Well, if all went well, he'd soon find out just how good they really were.

A figure came dashing toward him. As a reflex, Enger swung the muzzle of his AK 47 up, ready to blow the man away unless he identified himself with a code word.

"The men are in position, Sergeant," Corporal Martin Davis said, out of breath. "We're waiting for orders."

"Your forgot the goddamn code word, Davis!"

"Bluebird! Bluebird!"

"The Rebel stronghold is over that eastern ridge. Fan out in a line, Davis. Pass the word down the line, and this time, remember the goddamn code word!"

"Bluebird, Sergeant."

"A mistake like that can get you killed, Davis. Don't make it again."

"Should I leave two men back as a rear guard, Sergeant Enger?"

"Of course, you damn fool. How many times have we been through this drill? Send McKinney and Jones back. They know what to do."

"But Sergeant," Davis stammered, "Bill McKinney can't see a damn thing in the dark."

Enger turned back on Davis with his jaw clenched. "Corporal McKinney can smell an enemy at a hundred yards. Never question my orders again. I picked Bill McKinney myself, because he doesn't make dumb mistakes . . . like forgetting the goddamn password on a mission."

"Yes, Sergeant. Sorry. I'll pass the word down the line right away."

Enger forced himself to relax. Davis was right . . . McKinney's eyesight was failing some. But a soldier with experience didn't need to see like an eagle to know who to kill, or when. Davis was too young, too green, to understand. Davis had been his last choice for the Black

106

Shirt mission, when no more experienced men were available.

Corporal Moody came back with his automatic rifle slung from his shoulder on a leather strap. "The men are ready to advance, Sergeant."

"Move out. It's an abandoned-looking farmhouse, not an underground bunker, according to our intelligence reports. It'll look perfectly ordinary, except for the communications equipment. Look for radar installations, and listen for the sound of the motors. They make just enough noise when they rotate, on a quiet night like this, so we should be able to hear them moving. And tell everyone to be on the lookout for tracks on the roads. They'll be using vehicles to move back and forth, and those leave tracks."

"Do we take them out, Sergeant?"

"No. Not until the other explosives are in place. They will have perimeter guards. We don't know how many of them to expect, or how well-armed they are. Expect landmines and electronic sensors. We take out the guards first. And tell every man it has to be done quietly. No goddamn noise, unless there isn't a choice."

"I'll get the word down the line, Sergeant. But landmines are gonna be a problem. We don't have any sweepers, to keep our backpacks as light as we could. Maybe we should have brought at least one."

"We have no choice but to gamble, Corporal. If somebody steps on a mine, then all hell's gonna break loose. We will have lost the element of surprise."

"What about dogs, Sergeant?"

"They'll be our biggest problem ... if they have the right kind of dogs. Add this to the orders-if you hear a dog, kill its handler and the animal. Use the silencers. Once the shooting starts, we'll launch RPGs into the air vents and blow Raines out of his hole in the ground. I'm gonna enjoy watching him sprout wings."

107

"Right," Corporal Moody said, swinging off at a trot to deliver Enger's instructions.

The night in the upstate New York woods was as black as any Gerald Enger had ever seen. Not a breath of air moved among the trees. A man could be heard sneezing or farting at five hundred yards, an advantage for his men-and a disadvantage, if one of them made a mistake.

He waved a silent signal across the grassy meadow. In the blackness of shadows below the oak forest canopy, darker shapes began to move toward the crest of a wooded hillside, hard to see in the night, harder to hear because these men were well-trained in the art of night combat. Enger would allow no greenhorns on his hand-picked assault force. Davis had been a necessary exception.

A ripping explosion sent Martin Davis into the air like a wounded buzzard, flapping his useless arms like broken wings, his AK 47 erupting in a spray of gunfire.

Dogs began to bark. Someone shouted, "It's a goddamn pair of Dobermans! Shoot the bastards."

The chatter of an AK 47 filled the night. A dog snarled in the distance, then a man began screaming-"He's got me by the damn throat! Shoot the son of a bitch!"

Gerald Enger swore. Things had suddenly gone all wrong. Davis had stepped on a mine, and now everyone inside the farmhouse knew they were under attack.

Squatting down, he cocked an RPG and sent the grenade flying high above the roof of the compound. It was sure to be a direct hit ... until something else went wrong.

The charge detonated fifty feet in the air, blasting trees and undergrowth around the compound's roof with shrapnel. Corporal Moody's shrill scream echoed across the forest as he sank to his knees, clutching his face with both hands in the brief flash of exploding gunpowder.

108

"I'm hit! Help me, Sergeant!"

"Screw you, Moody," Enger muttered. "A paid soldier has to learn how to help himself, you idiot."

He watched the bunker for signs of movement. Other than the fleeting shadows of racing dogs released in the woods, he found nothing to shoot at.

The element of surprise was lost, all because Martin Davis had been so dumb as to step on a landmine. A voice inside Gerald Enger's head had whispered that he shouldn't take a man like Davis along on a mission this sensitive ... however, good men were getting harder and harder to find in the USA's ranks lately, and his choices had been nil on such short notice.

Enger's first priority was to assassinate Ben Raines, at any cost. But how was he to find Raines in the dark like this, with men shooting and dying all around him?

He crept away from the thick oak trunk where he'd been watching the failing assault on the Rebel stronghold, inching forward, hoping for a shot at Raines. He only knew him from an old photograph General Maxwell had shown him, taken years ago when SUSA was formed.

Staying low, listening to the hammering of automatic gunfire on all sides, he moved toward the compound with all the stealth he could muster. If Gerald Enger could manage one thing well after his years as a Navy SEAL, it was stealth before he made a kill.

He paused at the edge of a clearing less than a hundred yards from the bunker, listening, watching, craning his neck to see what was happening to his assault troops. His men were being slaughtered, from the sound of it... not that he gave a shit about anyone other than himself. One lesson he had learned over years of fighting was the value of his own life. It didn't mean a damn who else died. Staying alive was priority one.

Someone behind him spoke. "You looking for anyone in particular?"

109

Enger froze ... he did not recognize the man who spoke to him now, but it could be Private Jones, the southerner from Alabama who stayed back with McKinney.

He risked a glance over his shoulder. "Is that you, Jones?" he asked.

"I've been called Jones. Smith is one of my favorites, but I stopped using it a long time ago."

A cold chill ran down Enger's spine. The man talking to him wasn't Private Jones, or any other soldier in his company of Black Shirts.

"Nice shirt you're wearing," the man said, coming from a dark stand of trees only a few feet behind him. "Not one of my favorite colors, black, but it's a nice shirt."

Enger tensed, ready to make his move with his AK 47. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Ben Raines. I'm sure I'm the one you've been sent here to kill."

How the hell had Raines gotten behind him? "There must be some mistake. We came here to join up with the Rebels."

"No mistake," the voice said. "Unless you count letting me get behind you. That was a helluva mistake."

"Would you shoot a man in the back?"

"I'd shoot a sorry son of a bitch like you in the balls if the light was better. But just for the hell of it, I'm gonna give you a chance to turn around before I pull the trigger."

Gerald Enger wheeled, sweeping his AK 47 barrel toward the trees as his finger tightened on the trigger.

He was lifted off his feet by a hail of lead tearing through his body.

Raines squatted and looked at his wounds close up. "You've only got a few minutes, soldier. Any last words?" he asked.

"Yeah," Enger groaned through bloodstained lips. "I'll see you in hell, Raines."

110

"Maybe," Raines answered, not unkindly, "but don't wait up for me. It may be a while."

Back at the safe house, Ben told Corrie to bump Mike Post. He wanted to inform him of the attempt on his life by the assassin sent by Claire Osterman.

"Mike," Ben said once radio contact was established. "There've been some new developments." He described how Osterman had sent Enger to kill him.

"But that's against all the rules," Mike said, worry evident in his voice even over the radio.

"Yeah, it always has been up until now. Now, it seems Sugar Babe has changed the rules. I want you to get a message to Sied Sadallah for me."

"The Jackal?" Mike asked. "What in the world do you want to talk to that bastard for?"

"I have an assignment for him, Mike. Offer him what you have to, but get him to take the job."

"What job?"

"I want him to pay Sugar Babe a visit," Ben said, "to let her know there is some danger when she takes it upon herself to change the rules of combat."

"What do you want him to do?"

Ben told him, in no uncertain words.

111

Ben and Lara arrived at the rendezvous point accompanied by five of her Freedom Fighter comrades. They found Jersey and Coop sitting in their confiscated Jeep on the edge of a clearing.

Ben bounded out of the SUV they were riding in and embraced Jersey and shook hands with Cooper.

"Where's the rest of our team?" Coop asked, glancing at the strange men and women riding with Ben and Lara.

"They're back at a safe house," Ben answered. "We didn't know how much room we'd need in the SUV" He grinned, glancing at the stolen Jeep. "We didn't realize you'd managed to confiscate another vehicle."

"Yeah, well, it was the only way we knew to get our hands on a radio. Our headsets were out of service after our jump," Jersey said, holding up the pieces of her radio.

"And you suffered no injuries?" Ben asked.

"Jersey's got a banged up ankle, but otherwise nothing major," Coop answered.

Lara stepped over to the Jeep and took a quick look at Jersey's swollen leg. "Chuck back at the safe house used to be a veterinarian before the war. We'll have him take a look at it when we get back."

Coop opened his mouth to make a smart remark about a veterinarian working on her, but Jersey held up her hand, a dangerous look in her eyes. "Not a word, Coop. Don't even go there!"

112

Ben laughed. "It's good to see you two haven't changed any. Now, let's mount up and get out of here before we have uninvited guests."

"You want us to bring the Jeep?" Coop asked.

Lara nodded. "Yeah. We can always use another vehicle, especially one

with a radio tuned to the USA frequency."

"That reminds me," Jersey said. "We promised the soldiers we left tied up we'd let their headquarters know where they are so someone would come for them."

Ben raised his eyebrows. "You left them alive?"

Coop shrugged. "Yes. They weren't Black Shirts, just some kids barely old enough to shave. It seemed like the thing to do."

Ben nodded. "You're right, of course. We're not here to make war on children, especially regular USA troops. It's the meres and Black Shirts we want to eliminate."

After making the call and giving a startled sergeant the location of the captured soldiers, the Freedom Fighters piled back in their SUV and Ben rode in the Jeep with Jersey and Cooper. On the way back to the safe house, they told him what had happened, and how they'd managed to get the drop on the soldiers.

Jersey turned in the seat and glanced back at Ben. "So, that's the infamous Lara, huh?"

Ben's face reddened slightly. "Yes. What do you think of her?" he asked.

Jersey smiled. "Very pretty, and to survive what she's been through she must be pretty tough, too."

"She is. As a matter of fact, she reminds me of you when you first started out, Jersey."

Coop shook his head. "Uh-oh. Better watch out then, Ben. She's liable to stick a knife in you if you get outta line," he said, cutting his eyes at Jersey.

"If that were true, Coop, you'd've been dead meat a long time ago," Jersey said, her eyes flat.

113

113

"Like I said," Ben said with a laugh, "it's good to see you two back to normal."

"Have you and the team had any trouble since you've been here?" asked Cooper.

Ben shrugged, a tight smile on his face. "Just a tad. Osterman must've gotten word I was up here in the north country, 'cause she sent a team of assassins after me."

"Assassins?" Jersey asked.

"Yeah, a team of airborne Black Shirts parachuted in about ten clicks from one of the safe houses maintained by the Freedom Fighters. One of our spies in Osterman's headquarters managed to warn us they were coming, so we were ready for them."

Jersey's face wrinkled in amazement. "How in the world did they know so fast that you were up here?" she asked.

Ben shrugged. "Who knows?" he said, but his mind was asking the very same question.

"Any of 'em left to give us future trouble?" Coop asked.

Ben shook his head, "Not enough so's you could tell."

At the safe house, after Coop and Jersey had been introduced to the band of Freedom Fighters and were sitting down to a real meal, Ben stepped outside and walked down a path to a small clearing in the woods. He sat on the stump of a fallen tree and rolled and lit a cigarette. As he smoked and drank a cup of coffee, Lara walked up to join him.

She sat on the stump next to him and put her hand on his back, gently rubbing as she talked. "I like your team, Ben. They seem like real nice people."

He nodded. "They are. Too damn nice to spend their lives in this miserable war."

Lara looked up at the night sky, full of stars. She took a deep breath, enjoying the scent of pine and wildflowers

114

on the evening breeze. "You're right. It is a helluva way to spend your youth . . . always fighting, scrabbling just to stay alive, never sure if you'll live to see another dawn."

Ben flipped his cigarette away, watching the sparks as it tumbled into the darkness. "How about you, Lara? What was your life like . . . before?"

She hesitated, her eyes far away. "I was engaged to a nice young man, a farmer with a small family farm up in the hills. We were both loyal citizens, leading a rather dull, normal life. Then Carl made a few disparaging remarks about the mayor of the town we lived in, how he seemed to be living a shade too high on the hog." She glanced at Ben. "He wondered out loud about the exorbitant amount of taxes we were paying, and how they were being used to support people who didn't have any inclination to work. Do you realize that under the new Socialist Democrat government, no one has to work if they're too lazy, or too incompetent to earn a living?"

Ben nodded, but didn't speak. He didn't want to interrupt her train of thought.

She looked down at her hands, which were balled into fists in her lap. "The next day, he disappeared. Some men in black shirts came to the farm and said they'd heard he was talking treason." Tears formed in her eyes. "They said they were going to take him into town to answer some questions. Two days later, his farm was posted with signs saying it had been taken over by the township. Most of his farm equipment and all of his stock animals ended up on the mayor's farm."

"I'm sorry, Lara," Ben said, placing his hand over hers on her lap.

She looked into his eyes. "They never found his body, but it was general

knowledge around town that he wouldn't be coming home." She sighed. "The next day, I packed up what little belongings I had and joined the Freedom Fighters."

115

115

She brushed a tear from her cheek and tried to smile. "And the rest, as they say, is history."

"The USA is facing the same problem that brought down the Roman empire hundreds of years ago," Ben said. "When a majority of the populace is on the dole and still retains the right to vote, they're just naturally gonna elect officials who will continue the handouts. That means more and more taxes on those who are productive, until the citizens realize they're working double time to support those who have no intention of putting anything back into the system." He shook his head. "It just doesn't make sense."

"How do you handle welfare in the SUSAs?" she asked.

He grinned. "We're not heartless, as Osterman's minions would have you believe with their propaganda," he answered. "We make provisions for those who are too old or too infirm to work, and they are taken care of, but they're not allowed to vote. However, if someone is able-bodied and able to work but chooses not to, that's a different matter. They aren't allowed to starve—we make food and basic medical care available to them—but they get no extras. We don't have welfare queens in SUSAs. If someone has children and doesn't work to take care of them, the children are taken and given to people who will provide for them."

"It seems to make a whole lot more sense than the way the USA does it."

"It's a system that works, and that's what counts."

"What's going to happen if you win the war? Will you try to change the way the USA operates?"

He shook his head. "Not at all. In fact, in the SUSAs, we don't force anyone to do anything they don't want to. Anyone is free to leave at any time and move to the USA, if that's the system they want to live under. All we're trying to do with the war is to get the USA to let us live in peace,

116

to have the kind of government we want without any interference from the north."

They were silent for a moment, until Lara leaned over, her face close to Ben's. He put his hand on her cheek and pressed his lips against hers as her arms came up to embrace him.

Corrie called from the cabin, "Ben, it's Mike Post on the radio for you."

Ben pulled back, breathing heavily, his face flushed. "Damn. What a time to have to go back to work."

Lara smiled and caressed his face with her palm, "We'll have plenty of

time for that, later," she said.

"Plan on it," Ben said, and got to his feet and trotted back to the safe house. He took the microphone from Corrie, who smiled briefly at his flushed appearance.

"Is the scrambler on?" he asked. When Corrie nodded, he continued, "Eagle One, go ahead Eagle Two."

"Ben, this is Mike. I have some news for you."

"What is it, Mike?"

"You know those missiles that got through and hit Arkansas and Mississippi? Well, there were a number of SUSA citizens who'd refused our offers for vaccines. They got sick with the plague. Some others, who were sick but weren't showing symptoms yet, got scared and fled to the north, into USA territory."

"I was afraid that would happen."

"Well, you were right. Now, the plague is beginning to spread like wildfire throughout the USA cities. It seems President Osterman didn't have the money to vaccinate her own citizens against the BW bugs they were using, and now thousands of her own people are coming down sick."

"Damn. I can't believe her medical advisers would've let her use BW they weren't prepared for," Ben said.

He could hear Mike chuckle over the open microphone.

117

117

"When did you ever know Sugar Babe to listen to what her advisers tell her?"

"Never," Ben answered, "especially if it's something she doesn't want to hear. Anything else, Mike?"

"No, except that the other Scout teams are reporting good success recruiting new Freedom Fighter teams, and there are widespread reports of entire cities without potable drinking water or electricity after our sabotage teams did their work."

"Good. Then things are going according to plan?"

"So far, so good," Mike replied. "Eagle Two, over and out."

Ben put down the mic, slowly shaking his head. "The stupidity of politicians never ceases to amaze me. I'm sure Osterman's advisers warned her something like this was bound to happen, but, as usual, her hatred for me and SUSA led her down a path filled with her own destruction."

"No," Lara said, an infinitely sad look in her eyes, "not her destruction-tyrants will hang on to their power at all costs-but the death of the very people who trusted her with the most important job in the country."

"Vbu're right, of course. I fear Sugar Babe will hold onto the

presidency as long as there are mercenaries to protect it for her, no matter what the American people think."

He stood up, "I guess now is as good a time as any to start planning how we are to proceed. Lara, when I was here before I left you and your group with a plan to start taking back the smaller towns from the Black Shirts and militia. How is that going?"

"Pretty well, actually," she answered, with a glance at Harris. "Why don't you tell him?"

Harris looked up from where he was examining Jersey's ankle. As he spoke, he began to wrap a tight bandage around the joint, to give it support and reduce some of

118

the swelling. "We've managed to take back about ten or eleven of the smaller towns skirting the national park up here. We've had the most success with the smaller ones, those with populations less than two thousand. If they're much larger than that, the revolt attracts too much attention, and the army sends troops to establish martial law and retake the cities."

Ben nodded. "Good. For every town like that we're able to free from Osterman's yoke, we should be able to recruit at least ten or fifteen new Freedom Fighters."

"You're right, Ben," Harris said. "In this area alone we have almost two hundred new Freedom Fighters to help us out. Of course, not all of them are accomplished in combat, or are willing to shoot and kill USA troops, but most are at least willing to give us intelligence information and warn us if it looks like troops are planning anything in the area. It's been quite a while since they were able to surprise us with a raid we weren't expecting."

"OK, that's really good news. Now, what's the largest town or city in this area that is still under Osterman's control?"

"That'd be Buffalo," Lara said, a questioning look on her face. "Why?"

Ben grinned. "Because it's time we made our presence felt in a big way. How does Buffalo get its power supply?"

A slow grin curled Lara's lips, as if she'd guessed where he was heading. "Most of it's from a small hydroelectric plant and dam on a river north of the town. In the old days it came from New York city, but since it was nuked in the big war all of their power comes from the dam."

"Jersey, you and Coop and Beth break open that crate we brought with us, the one with the dynamite and black powder in it. I think it's time we paid a visit to the dam."

Coop grinned. "Right on, boss." He turned to Jersey. "You good to go on that ankle, partner?" he asked.

Jersey nodded. "Right as rain, Coop," she said, "as long

119

as I don't have to carry your lazy butt over any mountains."

He laughed. "That'll be the day, sweetheart, that'll be the day."

"Do you have any maps of the area?" Ben asked.

"Sure," Harris replied, pulling one from his duffel bag.

They spread it out on the kitchen table and Ben studied it for a few minutes. "Okay," he said, "here's what we'll do. I'll split up my team and send them out with your Freedom Fighters, since you know the area well."

Harris leaned over the map as Ben made small notations on it with a pencil. "Here, and also over here," he said, making Xs on the locations he was referring to, "is where we'll plant our charges. We'll attach some small radio-detonators to the explosives and blow them up after we're all clear. Is the dam heavily guarded?"

Harris shrugged. "Not to my knowledge. This is so far north there's never been any need before."

"Good, that'll make our work that much easier."

General Maxwell was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. News coming in from three fronts was all bad.

Captain Federov's assault team had been wiped out to the last man in the Pennsylvania woods.

And things were worse. Major Adolf Wertz's Black Shirts were annihilated, and a valuable captured Apache gunship was lost to a SAM rocket. A report said the helicopter was nothing but smoldering rubble now, a piece of scrap iron, rendered utterly useless.

Then came the debacle with Sergeant Gerald Enger's squad as they made an attack against what was said to be one of the Freedom Fighters' secret underground fortresses in northwestern New York, where Ben Raines had reportedly been seen. Enger had been a top gun for the USA, and it bewildered Max how any group of Rebels might have taken him, a well-schooled Navy SEAL veteran, by surprise.

This war is going worse than I expected, he thought. Raines was demonstrating an uncanny ability to know what the USA's next moves would be, and it was happening far too often to be random chance. He wondered briefly if Raines had a spy on their staff, but dismissed the idea as too improbable to consider. All of the men and women working at USA headquarters had been there for years, and had been thoroughly vetted many times over.

Finally he shook his head, concluding the man must

just be incredibly lucky. Typical of military leaders since the dawn of

time, he refused to even consider the idea that Raines might be a better strategist than he was.

Maxwell's intercom buzzed. "What is it?" he growled, putting his bottle of Jim Bean in a desk drawer. Hell, it was after midnight and he was drinking on his own time, to calm his seriously rattled nerves.

"Harlan Millard to see you, General. He has the Japanese scientist, Yiro Ishi, with him. Otis Warner and Captain Broadhurst are on their way down now."

Maxwell sighed. "Show them in as soon as Warner and Broadhurst get here."

"Yes, sir."

He leaned back in his chair, studying a map of their recent losses. President Osterman would be climbing walls, cussing a blue streak, perhaps even having men shot who were part of their military failures. He'd believed in Claire all these years and given his complete loyalty to her, but there were times lately when he began to wonder if she'd gone too far with this ethnic thing.

In secret, Maxwell sometimes wondered if Ben Raines and his SUSA policies might be closer to the true idea of a free society as it was meant to be. However, voicing anything of the kind was sure to have Maxwell executed, thus he made doubly sure he kept his opinions to himself. Even thinking such things made him break out in a cold sweat.

This whole business, the USA battling SUSA over land that was once a part of the old United States, seemed foolish. This was another concern he would never dare voice to the president or her advisers. Even with his high military rank, going against Claire's policies would get him court-martialed ... or killed.

It was one thing to have Ben Raines and his Rebel armies marching across Africa after Bruno Bottger-the Neo-Nazi movement had to be stopped. But the UN Sec-

122

retary General, Jean-Francois Chapelle, was about as spineless as any man who had ever tried to govern a world organization. Vacillating, he was said to be a friend of SUSA, and Ben Raines. During those rare times when he attempted to restore world order by reasoning with Claire Osterman, she ridiculed him and threw him out of her office.

"The UN's about as weak now as a castrated kitten," he said quietly, reaching back into the drawer for one more healthy shot of whiskey before he heard what this crazy Jap scientist had to say. The man had to be completely insane to suggest dropping sick rats-or was it sick fleas?-on SUSA territories.

"Hell, maybe it is worth a shot," he muttered, since nothing else they'd tried seemed to be working. Harlan Millard and Captain Broadhurst had sounded so sure of this man's capabilities and the knowledge he was bringing with him from back in the 1930's. Still, the whole thing sounded dumb, and in his experience, scientists' ideas about waging war were rarely useful.

"Dr. Ishi is here, General," his aide said over the speaker box. "The

others are with him."

"Send them in," Maxwell sighed, preparing himself to listen to scientific hogwash.

Yiro Ishi was barely five feet tall, with a shock of straight black hair almost covering his eyes. He bowed when he saw Maxwell's three stars and extended his hand, while Broadhurst and Millard stood on either side. He carried a leather briefcase under his arm.

"Have a seat, Dr. Ishi. I've already been given a little background on your proposal. I understand you believe that dropping bombs full of infected fleas can spread bubonic plague all over SUSA."

Ishi sat down, opening his case in his lap. "A very old form of bubonic bacteria, General. It was developed by my grandfather in Japan. Rats were injected with a most

123

123

virulent strain of bubonic plague, then introduced to a very hardy strain of flea. The fleas fed on the rats' blood, making them carriers of the deadly bacteria. They were placed in rather simple bomb canisters along with a medium of ordinary wheat flour, as a buffer.

"The bombs were dropped on a village in China ... I have all the details in my notes. Within three weeks, more than half a million Chinese died from the plague."

"We already know Ben Raines and his Rebel armies have been inoculated against bubonic plague, Dr. Ishi," Maxwell said, tenting his hands on his desktop.

"But not this particular strain, General," Ishi insisted. "My grandfather, and then my father and I, have kept the strain alive in special containers for almost a hundred years. There is no inoculation available at this time to prevent the rapid spread of this bacterial form."

"Who the hell's gonna handle it?" Maxwell asked. "Our own soldiers would be exposed." He wondered if Dr. Ishi had thought of this.

"Special protective gear," Ishi answered. "It is all here in my notes, and my proposals to build the bombs. Everything is covered in detail."

"And just what the hell do you want out of this, Ishi? I know damn well you aren't here simply because you wanted to help us . . ."

"Money," Ishi replied, clearing his throat, looking down at his briefcase. "A very modest amount of money, for the killing power my bombs will give your airplanes. If my instructions are followed, SUSA and its Rebel armies will no longer exist on this continent."

"How much damn money?" Maxwell wanted to get to the bottom of things right away.

Ishi smiled for the first time. "You have not even asked to see my notes, General. How can you determine what a superweapon such as mine is worth without seeing every detail of how it will work?"

"Let's say you've worked it all out, that the bombs will do everything you say they will. President Osterman is gonna want to know how much this will cost. She'll want the bottom line."

"I won't discuss price with you yet, General. After you read about what my grandfather's weapons did to the Chinese, I think, would be the appropriate time to discuss my price. I am sharing an old family secret with you, handed down for many generations."

"I'll need a ballpark figure."

Ishi smiled. "As I said before, General Maxwell, I am not prepared to discuss price at this time. However, you might ask President Osterman how much it would be worth to end the fighting within no more than three or four months. A great deal of money would be saved on your present military budget. And I understand the war is not going well for the USA's forces. There have been a few news reports."

Maxwell was certain of one thing ... whatever Dr. Yiro Ishi believed he would collect for his germ warfare plans, he would not live long enough to spend. Claire would have him killed at once.

"I have a few questions," Captain Broadhurst said. "Let me take a look at the construction, the type of bombs we'll need to deliver these . . . fleas."

"Of course," Ishi said, digging into a dog-eared file folder for a sheaf of papers. "It is really a simple fifty-pound bomb from the World War II era. A few modifications would have to be made."

Broadhurst took the papers, glancing down several pages while the others looked on. "It seems almost too simple," he said.

Ishi smiled. "Very often, the simplest weapons are the most effective, Captain."

Harlan came quietly into Claire's bedroom. It was past ten and she was already wearing her nightgown, ready for him, her loins throbbing with warmth. The lamps were turned down low, the sheets on her canopied bed pulled back. A decanter of brandy and two snifters sat on a night-stand. She had the front of her sheer gown open just enough to reveal the cleft between her sagging breasts, resting limply like empty waterskins across the top of her rounded belly.

"What took you so long?" she snapped. More than anything else, she hated to be kept waiting by a man-especially a weak man, like Harlan Millard.

"I was listening to what Dr. Yiro Ishi had to say, and going over some of his notes," Harlan replied, halting in the middle of the bedroom.

She sighed, sitting down on her king-sized mattress to pour each a drink. "Take your clothes off, Harlan. I suppose I'll have to listen to a bunch of shit about bombs full of fleas before we get to the real reason I sent for you. So tell me all about the goddamn fleas. But get undressed while you're at it, and get in bed. I need a man tonight. And

you'd best be ready to satisfy me."

"It just may work, Claire."

She gave him a puzzled stare. "You mean that thing hanging between your legs? It had better work."

"The bombs," Harlan muttered, taking a seat at her

126

dressing table to pull off his shoes. "Ishi is a brilliant fellow."

"There is no such thing as a brilliant Jap. They make TV sets. How smart do they have to be to make a goddamn television set that works?"

"Dr. Ishi's bombs might kill everyone in SUSA. He won't reveal all of it-the details or the organisms his grandfather developed before World War II-but I've seen enough to convince me, and so have Captain Broadhurst and General Maxwell. Otis Warner still has his doubts."

"How much does the little Jap bastard want?" Claire demanded, drinking deeply from her snifter.

"He won't say."

"Won't? He won't set a price?"

"Not yet. However, I believe it will be a substantial amount, in the millions."

She grunted. "What the hell difference will it make what he wants? As soon as we have everything he's got, I'll have Herb kill him. Herb will feed him to the sharks, and we'll have our money back."

"He hints at having an insurance policy."

"Insurance?"

"That's what he called it. It's a vaccine, to keep the same microorganisms from killing us."

"The little double-crossing Jap bastard-"

"We'll all have to be inoculated. A part of his offer is that he keeps the formula for his vaccine." Harlan tossed his shoes aside and took off his socks, then his slacks. "He's not dumb, Claire."

"Bullshit! He's a Jap. They're all stupid. They lost every war they've been in. The USA will be a better place when we're rid of all of them, and the damn Chinese, the Mexicans, and blacks. Racial purity is the key to success as a nation, Harlan. We won't be safe in our beds at night until all of them are dead, or outside the country."

"But what about Ben Raines?"

127

"What about the son of a bitch? I hate the arrogant bastard, and I intend to wipe him off the face of the earth. If I wasn't surrounded by

idiots we would know where he is, and then we'd kill him."

"We haven't done that well at killing him so far, Claire, if you'll pardon the observation."

"Shut the hell up, Harlan! The last thing I need tonight is bad news. And you'd better be damn sure you perform for me like you never have before in your life."

Harlan dutifully stood up, unbuttoning his shirt, revealing his slender, bony chest and arms. When he dropped his shorts around his ankles, Claire made a face.

"You don't even have an erection yet? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Give me time, Claire. I've been in meetings with Dr. Ishi and our staff members for several hours. A drink of that brandy might help."

She scowled, wondering why she bothered taking Harlan to bed when she had other men she could order to perform the same task. She supposed it was because Harlan was such a wimp that she liked ordering him to do her bidding, no matter what it was. He had no backbone whatsoever.

"Get it yourself," she said, leaning back against a pile of pillows. "And make it quick. Something of yours had better get hard in a hurry besides your damn head."

"I'll do the best I can, Claire."

Frustrated, she waited for Harlan to down a drink. "How many millions do you think Ishi wants?" she asked, for at the moment the USA treasury was virtually broke, and until more tax revenues came in it would probably stay that way. The war against Raines and his Rebels had been expensive, and without much result. And, it seemed damn near everyone in the country was trying to get on welfare. Doesn't anyone want to work any more? she

128

thought, recalling her last briefing when she'd been told tax revenues were down for the fifth straight year.

"He refuses to specify any amount, any range, until he has a personal meeting with you."

"With me?" she snapped. "That's out of the goddamn question. I won't meet with the little Jap bastard. You can tell him I said so."

"Without it, we've got no deal."

"Then kill the son of a bitch. Order General Maxwell to do it."

"But Claire," Harlan said timidly, sitting beside her on the bed, "that won't get us the weapon we need to stop General Raines and his armies."

She glared at him. "Do you mean to tell me we don't have a single scientist of our own who's smart enough to figure out how to build a bomb full of sick fleas?"

"There's a little bit more to it than that, and we have to have the

formula for the vaccine."

"I'd rather die than do business with one of the slant-eyed, bastards."

Harlan tried for a weak smile. "I thought the thing you cared about most was killing General Ben Raines and destroying the SUSA government."

She bit her lip angrily. Harlan was right, of course. Of all her objectives as President of the USA, getting rid of Ben Raines was at the top of her list. He'd made her look like a fool, an inept commander in chief, beginning with their meetings on talk shows before the war between SUSA and the USA began. He had embarrassed her publicly on radio and television, a humiliation from which she had never fully recovered. She wanted his balls handed to her on a platter. She'd dreamed of having his head mounted like that of a trophy deer to hang in her study, so she could look at his dead face whenever she felt the urge to savor her revenge.

"I suppose I'd sleep with the devil himself to see Raines

129

and his followers dead," she said after several moments of quiet contemplation.

"That's what I thought," Harlan said. "Listen to what Dr. Ishi has to say."

"I suppose I could," she agreed bitterly, tossing back more brandy.

"He could be the key to winning the war. Everything he has shown us appears to work."

"All right. Set up a meeting for me tomorrow. Tell the little rice-eating bastard I'll only give him five minutes of my time."

"It may take longer to explain, Claire. It's very complicated."

She bolted upright in bed. "I don't give a good goddamn what his explanation is, or how the shit works! All I want is the price ... his price . . . and when we get our hands on the formula for this vaccine that will protect the rest of us I'll have his head cut off. After that, Dr. Yiro Ishi is a dead man."

"I'll arrange the meeting for tomorrow morning," Harlan said as he emptied his snifter.

Claire lay back on her pillows. "Now get between my thighs, Harlan, and you'd better not make any excuses tonight. I want some action, and I want it now!"

"You know I've always tried to please you, Claire. I'll do my very best."

"One of these days, Harlan, when you fail me as you have in the past, I swear I'll have you executed. Or I may just have you castrated, since your balls don't seem to work when I need them. It's the very least you can do for your country. What good are balls if they don't function at the proper moment?"

Harlan glanced down at his limp dick. "I may need a little bit more time . . ." he mumbled, thinking Or a lot more brandy!

Claire Osterman was still in bed when a gentle knock came at her door. She hadn't slept well the night before, since that spineless wimp Harlan Millard hadn't been up to her demands. Men! Just let them know she needed them occasionally because of biological urges over which she had no control, and they let her down every time. Perhaps next time she'd try a cattle prod up his ass. Maybe that'd get his useless equipment performing like it ought to.

The knock came again, a little more urgently this time.

"What is it, goddamnit? I'm trying to sleep in here!"

The door opened and Herb Knoff stuck his head in. "A phone call for you, Madam President. It's General Maxwell, and he says it's urgent."

She sat up in bed, letting the sheets fall and exposing her breasts to Knoff's view. Watching him closely to see his reaction, she leaned over and picked up the phone next to her bed. Knoff's face remained expressionless, though she thought she detected a slight red flush on his cheeks. Perhaps it was desire, she hoped as she spoke into the phone. "Yes. This is Claire Osterman speaking."

"Madam President, this is Max."

"Go on," she said, glancing back at Knoff in time to see him try to hide a sneer.

"I've just gotten some rather disturbing news. One of our spies in SUSA reported we have a spy in our midst

131

131

as well, and phone taps have confirmed the identity of the traitor."

"A traitor, huh? Who is the son of a bitch?" she asked, sitting upright in bed.

"Her name is Linda Lee. She's a cryptologist on our headquarters staff, in charge of coded messages to our field commanders."

"And you're sure she's disloyal?"

"No doubt about it. We caught her radioing some vital information to SUSA headquarters regarding troop movements."

"I thought you said it was a phone tap."

Maxwell sighed. "The phone taps record any conversation in the room, even though the phone is hung up."

"Oh."

"Madam President, there's more. Evidently, she warned Raines about the assassin we sent to kill him."

"Don't tell me the bastard failed!"

"Yes, ma'am. They were waiting for him and his team. The entire force was wiped out. How do you want me to proceed?"

"Isn't that obvious, General?"

"No ma'am. We have two choices. Keep her working and provide disinformation to SUSA, or terminate her immediately as a warning to others who might be tempted to follow in her footsteps."

Claire thought for a moment, thinking of the lost chance to kill Ben Raines. "No, that's too risky. Kill the bitch, and do it now!"

"Yes, ma'am," Maxwell said, and hung up the phone.

Claire placed the phone in its cradle and looked over at Knoff under hooded lids. "Herbert, are you busy at present?"

Knoff's face flushed again. "No, ma'am."

She threw the covers to the foot of the bed and lay back spread-eagled. "Good. Then be a good boy and come in

132

and lock the door. I want to talk to you about a raise in your pay . . . and perhaps something else will rise as well."

Chris Bradley always worked alone, a special privilege he had been granted by General Maxwell, even though he was officially a member of the Black Shirts. Now, as he approached a small farmhouse on the outskirts of Indianapolis under a moonless sky, he knew who his target was.

Bradley had been a paid assassin for the Osterman administration for a number of years, and his successes at ridding the USA of enemies of the State had no equal... he had only failed once, when his assignment had been to kill Ben Raines while he was at war with the Neo-Nazis in Africa, at a point when General Raines was occupied with tracking down and killing the leaders of the Nazi movement. Bradley had been waiting for Raines along the Congo River, and his shot, fired from a distance of more than three hundred yards, had been a narrow miss. When a team of SUSA Scouts was put on his trail, Bradley had felt lucky to get out of Africa with his life.

But now a second chance loomed large, in Bradley's view. He had a chance to get rid of one of Raines's informants, and also a personal friend of his, a bed partner. It wasn't quite the same as killing Raines himself. However, it was close enough to keep Bradley satisfied.

Linda Lee was a war widow. For years she appeared to be in a struggle to survive on her tiny forty-acre farm. But the USA's intelligence gathering had stumbled on a revelation only a few weeks ago . . . Linda Lee was an informant, sending valuable information to SUSA with regard to the USA's troop movements. And she was a personal confidante of Ben Raines. Orders had gone out at once to eliminate her. As a side note, Raines might be

133

with her on any given night, the reports said. Bradley couldn't bring

himself to believe Raines was foolish enough to visit someone so close to the USA capital, but Raines was known to be a daring son of a bitch. Perhaps he did frequent her small farmhouse when he was in the vicinity, and visit her while she was alone. If he did, it must be assumed she was sleeping with him, as well as giving him valuable information his armies along the war front could use.

Bradley meant to put an end to that tonight. If nothing else, he would silence Ms. Lee and break an important connection Raines had with the underground.

Chris came closer to the house, armed with a tranquil-izer gun, a silent weapon that would drop the attack-trained German shepherds in their tracks. Four darts loaded with a very powerful form of Thorazine filled the firing tube, enough to stop the biggest dogs on earth.

As he expected, a dog began to bark near the cabin. He heard it barking, the sounds moving as the animal ran toward him through a dense stand of oak trees surrounding the house where an open meadow had been cleared around the building itself-proof to a fighting man like Chris Bradley that someone had prepared her living quarters for an assault. This was not the peaceful, rural farmhouse it had seemed from a distance, when he first visited the area in daylight.

"C'mon, Lassie," Chris whispered, hearing a second dog bark right after the first. "Sounds like Lassie has a friend with him tonight. I was told to expect two of you, and the Huskie."

He could see them now, two dark shapes dashing across an open field leading to the woods.

"Keep comin', Lassie ... you an' Rin Tin Tin. I've got a little surprise for you, an' it goddamn sure ain't the dog chow you're used to."

He set his sights on the first huge dog and triggered

134

off a dart. Chris heard the shepherd yelp softly, and then it tumbled to the ground, struggling to regain its feet, making soft whimpering noises.

Two more, Chris thought. Intelligence reports on Linda Lee's dogs said she kept the vicious, blue-eyed Huskie at her side virtually all the time. It was this animal he worried about most, since it rarely barked, according to the intelligence report given to General Maxwell.

A second German shepherd appeared in his sights, and he sent a dart into its ribs. The dog went down instantly, rolling, not making a sound before it lay still in a patch of starlit grass fifty feet from the trees.

Where's the damn Huskie? Chris wondered, swinging his dart gun back and forth. Did she have the beast inside the cabin with her?

He glanced at the house. A single light was burning in a window at the back.

"The bitch is still awake," he muttered. It would make it that much better, to kill a traitor bitch like Linda Lee with her eyes open.

And still, there was no sign of the Huskie he'd been warned about. The creature was said to be a natural killer, trained by Ben Raines himself.

"Where are you, you blue-eyed bastard?" he whispered under his breath.

With both German shepherds out of the way, Chris decided on a bold move. He would cross the clearing . . . necessary to get to the rear of the house. If the Huskie showed up, he would have the tranquilizer dart gun in one hand, his Mauser 9 mm pistol in the other.

"Screw the Huskie," he said, leaving the trees. He was not truly afraid of any breed, so why worry about one Eskimo sled dog?

His boots made a soft swishing sound through the grass ... the noise something a dog would hear that might escape a human's notice.

135

135

"To hell with it," he said, confident after leaving the pair of shepherds half-conscious.

He crept over to the house, staying away from the square of yellow light from the windowpane. He paused long enough to listen for voices, or any hint that Ben Raines might be inside. It would be a coup, and a handsome reward in his pockets, if he got Raines along with the woman.

Glancing around him, Chris still wondered about the Huskie, and why he hadn't seen or heard it.

Probably inside with her.

When he was satisfied that the trees and grounds around him were clear, he started toward the back door of the cabin, tucking the dart gun into the waistband of his black pants. If the dog was anywhere close by, it would have come for him by now.

He advanced to the back porch steps and cocked his Mauser. The only other weapon he carried was a French-made dagger, more than sixteen inches long with a point like an icepick, hidden in a sheath in his right boot.

Are you ready to die, bitch? he asked, recalling the photographs he'd been shown of Linda Lee, placing only a slight amount of his weight on the first porch step to see if it made any noise that would announce his arrival. Miss Lee was a pretty woman with dark hair and big chocolate eyes, judging by the pictures. Bradley would get a special thrill out of killing a girlfriend of Ben Raines. If he could, he would make her die slowly.

The second step was soundless, as was the third, and only the chirp of crickets and the distant hoot of a night owl made any disturbance in the absolute silence around the farmhouse where he would make his kill. No vehicles were parked near the two-rut lane leading to the place, and it was a safe guess that Linda was alone—that Raines, if he did really visit, was elsewhere tonight.

He stepped to the back door, gun in hand, and twisted

136

the doorknob. Bradley grinned when he found the door was unlocked, opening inward easily.

The stupid bitch is gonna make it easy for me, he thought. It was as if she'd invited him in for tea.

He pushed the door out of the way, feet spread apart, his gun trained on the back room, a kitchen. The room was empty, or so he believed. He saw no one near the sink or seated at the small kitchen table.

Bradley placed his left foot inside, wary, unable to believe his good fortune. Raines apparently didn't think all that much of the woman, or he would have left a guard at her house or taught her to lock her goddamn doors at night. Relying on dogs to protect her was the dumbest notion he could imagine.

Suddenly, a dark shape lunged toward him from a cabinet near the kitchen sink. Strangely, there was no sound, no hint of a presence. A pair of glittering blue eyes came at him from his right.

Bradley swung his pistol toward the movement, seconds too late. A set of gleaming white teeth sank into the flesh of his neck, while more than a hundred pounds of animal slammed him against the wall.

"Shit!" he croaked, then his windpipe collapsed under the sheer power of a massive dog's jaws. He fell to the floor, dropping his gun, doing everything he could to free his neck from the raw strength of the Huskie's bite.

Bradley's head banged on the floor, while the giant animal began to shake him back and forth ... blood spewed from his neck wound in pulsing bursts, splattering over the front of his black shirt.

With his air supply cut off, he was losing consciousness within moments. He could not free his throat from the jaws no matter how hard he tried . . . and still, the huge dog made no sound at all.

A voice, a soft woman's voice, came from another part of the house. "Kill him, Cody."

137

137

A low growl came from the beast's chest.

"You bastard," Bradley croaked with his last breath of air, for now the pain in his neck was excruciating. He tried to pry the teeth from his flesh with both hands.

"And who is the bastard?" the woman's voice asked, sounding farther away.

"This son . . . of . . . a . . . bitch!"

A silence, and then Bradley felt himself falling off the very end of the earth.

"Kill him, Cody. Do it now!"

Chris Bradley saw his life flash before him, all his years of training,

his experience handling attack dogs. Something had gone wrong this time. He had disabled the German shepherds so easily.

"Jesus ... call him off!" he gasped, ready to make any sort of deal he could to stay alive.

"But why?"

"I'll . . . pay. I've ... got. . . money."

"Your money doesn't interest me."

"Please . . . listen ... to ... my ... offer."

"I don't care what your offer is, Mr. Bradley. It won't be enough. Kill, him, Cody!"

Incredibly, the power behind the Huskie's bite increased. Bradley felt gristle and bone snap in his neck while his head lolled back and forth on the floor in a spreading pool of his own blood.

He made a feeble attempt to bring his knee up into the dog's belly, and found himself too weak to bend his knee. He was dizzy now.

"Good-bye, Mr. Bradley. I'll tell Ben you dropped by to pay me a call. He'll enjoy that. You have . . . you had, a very good reputation as a paid killer."

Bradley's last thought was a question: How had the woman known his name? How had she known who he was?

138

The world turned dark around him, and his pain slipped away, until he felt nothing at all.

He was dead and his body was cooling by the time Linda fired up the radio transmitter she had hidden in her cupboard. "L-two calling Eagle Two," she began, glancing at the body on the kitchen floor as she slowly stroked Cody's neck.

When the transmitter gave the answering call sign, Linda talked quickly. "Eagle Two, this is L-two. I've been compromised. They sent an assassin after me tonight."

"Are you all right?" Mike Post asked, concern in his voice.

"Yes, but I need an extraction team soonest. Also, you need to check your security. There's no way I could have been uncovered unless they found out from someone on our side."

"Roger that, L-two. We have a Scout team in your sector, and we'll have them proceed to your extraction point at midnight. Is that enough time?"

"Yeah. Tell them I'll have dogs with me. I can't leave them behind."

"Ten-four, L-two. Eagle Two out."

139

Claire Osterman looked around her office at the men gathered for their meeting with Yiro Ishi. Otis Warner was smoking a cigar, as usual, his eyes far away as if his thoughts were elsewhere. Harlan Millard sat on her right hand, his eyes flicking back and forth like a lizard's, looking for enemies where none existed. She wondered again why she tolerated the weak-willed, cowardly son of a bitch, especially since his performance in bed had of late been sorely lacking. General Maxwell and Captain Broad-hurst completed the group.

She took the cup of tea Herb Knoff offered and tasted it. Delightful, as always. The man was a wonder. Too bad that in bed he was more like a rutting bull moose than a man making love to a woman. Ah well, time to get on with it.

"Do we have any business to discuss before we bring Ishi in?"

General Maxwell cleared his throat. "Yes, ma'am. Two things. First, the attempt to neutralize the spy I told you about failed. Linda Lee escaped after killing the man I sent to execute her."

Claire's face became dangerously dark. "More incompetence, General? It seems that every time I give you a simple assignment, your men manage to fuck it up! I don't know how much longer I will be able to put up with this,

140

Max." She hesitated. "I wouldn't count on reaching retirement age if things don't change General. What else?"

"It seems that lots of sick people from SUSA are migrating northward, trying to outrun the plague. Reports of massive casualties among our own civilians are coming in. The plague we sent to SUSA is coming this way, and fast."

Claire pursed her lips. "And why wasn't this eventuality foreseen?"

Otis Warner was the only one in the room with the courage to speak. He took his pipe out of his mouth and stared at Claire. "It was, Madam President. I warned you myself this was a distinct possibility. You said, if I remember correctly, 'screw the civilians. Our troops have been vaccinated, and that's all that counts.' "

Claire glared at him, started to speak, hesitated, then said calmly, "So I did. Thank you for reminding me, Otis." She leaned back in her chair, "Well, no use crying over spilt milk. Enough people will survive to rebuild the USA after we win the war. In fact, we may be able to use this to our advantage. Perhaps we can go to the UN and blame the entire plague on Ben Raines and his generals."

She glanced at Harlan. "See about sending a report to that effect to Chapelle at the UN, Harlan."

When he nodded, she gestured toward the door to the anteroom. "Herbert, show the little bastard in, please."

Herb walked ponderously to the door and opened it. He gestured, saying nothing, and the diminutive Japanese man walked in. He took small steps, his head bowed in a gesture of subservience, but Claire knew better. The son of a bitch had the temerity to demand money for his services. Well, she'd soon see about that. Put his balls in a vise, and see how fast he

capitulated.

"Mr. Ishi," she said, her voice all sweetness and light. "Won't you have a seat? Would you care for some coffee, or tea?"

141

141

He looked up at her from under black eyebrows, though his hair was snowy white. "Tea, please."

She gestured at Herb, then leaned forward with her elbows on the desk. "My associates," she began, inclining her head toward General Maxwell and Captain Broad-hurst, "tell me you refuse to provide us with the secret of your BW bomb, or the vaccine against the bug, unless we pay you a sum of money, yet you won't tell us how much you want."

He nodded his head once, quickly. "Hai."

Claire frowned. "I assume that means yes in English."

"I'm sorry, Madam President." He shrugged. "Old habits die hard. My answer is yes, that is correct."

She leaned back and steepled her hands in front of her as Herb handed Ishi his tea. "What am I to do with you, Mr. Ishi? We are at war, you see, and your refusal to aid your country in its time of need could be considered an act of treason. And, as you know,"-she hesitated and let her eyes go hard and flat-"treason in time of war is punishable by death."

A slight smile curled Ishi's lips. The bastard wasn't afraid of her threats, she realized. He knew he had her by the short hairs.

"You may call it treason, Madam President. I prefer to think of it as getting only what I deserve for saving the USA millions of dollars in war expenses and hundreds of thousands of lives."

Claire sighed. "Will you now tell me how much you think you deserve for this . . . patriotic act, Mr. Ishi?"

"I think five million dollars would be fair and equitable."

Claire tried and failed to keep astonishment off her face. "Five million dollars? Are you mad?"

"I do not think so, Madam President. The one Apache helicopter your flyers lost in combat the other day will cost over ten million dollars to replace, and that is not

142

counting the cost of training the pilots to replace those killed in the crash. I believe my offer is very reasonable."

How does the little bastard know about that? Claire wondered. She cut angry eyes at General Maxwell. She was going to have to have a serious talk with him about his security arrangements when this meeting was over.

"Of course, when you put it that way, I can see your point. I'm sure we

can arrange the cash for you within a matter of a day or two."

He smiled and shook his head. "I'm sorry. I should have made myself clear, Madam President. I would prefer to have gold, either coins or bullion, or uncut diamonds." He shrugged, and had the grace to attempt to look embarrassed. "I am sure you are aware that USA currency is virtually worthless, since the war has been going so badly."

"But," Claire stammered, "five million in gold would weigh a considerable amount. How would you carry it?"

"I do not want it given to me, directly," Ishi answered. "I would like to have it delivered to my numbered account in Switzerland, to the Bank Suisse on Rotterdam Strasse in Geneva."

Claire's face was flushed, and the veins on her neck were standing out. The little shit was lucky she didn't have Herb kill him on the spot.

"And then?" she managed to croak through dry lips.

"As soon as I am notified the money has been deposited, I will clear up any problems with updating the bomb's delivery system and provide your medical authorities with the appropriate vaccine for the plague."

"But that could take weeks."

He gave a tight smile. "I sincerely hope not, Madam President. The SUSA grows stronger every day, and the war is costing you millions every hour. The sooner this is accomplished, the sooner you will begin to save money . . . and lives."

143

143

"So you will stay here to help with the bomb and vaccine until the gold is delivered?" she asked, thinking he wouldn't live to spend the money once he'd given them what they needed.

Ishi glanced at Herb Knoff and smiled again, shaking his head. "No, ma'am. I fear that would be very foolhardy of me. There might be . . . ah . . . an accident, once I'd given your men the vaccine. I believe I will await the arrival of my . . . fee in Switzerland, a neutral country."

"Why Mr. Ishi, one would think you do not trust us."

"Madam President, are you acquainted with the mating habits of the black widow spider?"

"What?"

"The black widow spider. When it is time to mate, the male brings the female a fly or other juicy tidbit to nibble on while they mate. He has to be very quick, for if she finishes the bug before he is through, she begins to feed on him even as they are copulating."

"And your point is?"

"I am handing you a very tasty bug in the form of a way to end the war and destroy your enemies, and at a very economical price. I want to be

far away when you are finished with it."

In spite of herself, Claire threw back her head and laughed at the analogy. She found herself liking this little bastard, even if he was a Jap. He thought a lot like her. Too bad she hadn't made use of his guile before.

"Very well, Mr. Ishi. I'll see that you get what you deserve." In spades, she added. "But since you are so fond of analogies, here's one for you. I don't intend to buy a pig in a poke."

Ishi looked puzzled.

"I want a test first to see if your plague is effective against soldiers of SUSA who've already been vaccinated. We have some prisoners of war in captivity. Try it on

144

them. If they come down with the sickness and die, you've got your deal."

Ishi nodded, though his expression was troubled.

Claire turned to General Maxwell. "Max, make it happen."

The next morning, Maxwell had thirty captured SUSA soldiers moved to an isolated jail in the country, away from any possible contamination if they contracted the plague. One of Ishi's scientists, dressed in a Racal decontamination suit, threw a handful of flour laced with infected fleas into the jail cell, then stepped back quickly and was sprayed head to foot with insecticide to kill any fleas on his suit.

Within three days, ninety percent of the soldiers were sick with flu-like symptoms, coughing up purulent sputum and scratching at boils and pustules over their entire bodies.

On the sixth day, all but two of the men were dead.

General Maxwell brought in an Abrams M60 tank fitted with a flame thrower and torched the jail, burning it to the ground, trying to ignore the screams of the two soldiers that were still alive. Only when the site of the jail was a smoldering ruin, with even the bars of the cells melted to molten iron, did he call off the tank.

Maxwell reported to Claire Osterman that the fleas had inflicted over ninety percent casualties on soldiers who'd been inoculated against every BW agent in their arsenal. "The test, Madam President, was an unqualified success," he said, his face pale and drawn at the memory of the horrible deaths endured by the captives, and hating Claire for turning him from a decorated military hero into a monster.

Claire rubbed her hands together. "Good," she said, a joyful expression on her face. "Then get the son of a bitch

145

his money and let's go forward with the bombing as soon as possible."

"How do you want us to handle the transfer?" he asked.

Claire thought for a moment. "As soon as the gold and jewels are ready, have Herb fly to Switzerland with Ishi. Once he has the plans for the bomb and vaccine in hand, tell him to terminate the bastard, with extreme prejudice."

"But that won't get us our gold back."

"The hell with the gold. As long as Ishi pays for daring to blackmail me, I don't care about the money. After all, as he says, it's a drop in the bucket compared to what we'll save in the long run."

She grinned, suddenly in a good mood. "I can't wait to see the look on that son of a bitch Raines's face when his soldiers start dropping like flies. I may even force the bastard to come up here and beg me, face-to-face, to give him the vaccine to stop the slaughter." She actually looked heavenward, as if God himself had dropped this golden opportunity to humiliate Ben Raines in her lap. "Oh, what a glorious day that will be!"

"Madam President," Maxwell began, a troubled look on his face, "even after we get the plans for the bomb and the vaccine, it may be several months before we can have everyone in the USA inoculated against the plague."

Her face soured. "What do you mean everyone? "

"Well, the inoculation of the armed service personnel will go fairly quickly, but manufacturing enough vaccine for all the citizens will take a lot more time, not to mention the logistics of getting everyone to take the shots."

"Fuck the citizens," she said. "As long as my troops are protected, the others can get their vaccine after the bomb has been dropped. It'll take the disease several weeks to make its way northward, and by then our people will have all had a chance to get the shots."

"But, Madam President--"

"No buts, Max. I've waited for years to get Ben Raines

146

right where I want him, and I don't intend to wait a moment longer than necessary to finish him off. Now get out of here and get the gold ready for Ishi. I want this program to go forward within the next two to three weeks, and not a second later."

"\es, ma'am," Maxwell said.

He turned quickly toward the door to hide the expression of disgust on his face and exited the room. "Damn, but that woman would make a saint curse," he muttered as he walked up the hallway, "and I damn sure ain't no saint."

At the end of the hall, he picked up a phone and told the operator to find Harlen Millard for him. He slammed the phone down hard enough to crack the plastic and stalked off toward his office to start the process of transferring the gold bullion to Switzerland.

147

It was close to midnight under a moonless sky as Ben Raines and his team led Lara Walden, Chuck Harris, and the rest of the Freedom Fighters through the woods toward the hydroelectric facility that fed power to Buffalo, New York. Jersey, because of her bad ankle, had been left behind to monitor the radio for any late-breaking news.

They were dressed all in black with black greasepaint on their faces, so as to be virtually invisible in the inky blackness of the night.

One of Lara's team, Nora Smith, had been raised in the area, and she was point "man" on the expedition, leading them unerringly through the dense undergrowth around the station. She stopped on a rise overlooking the dam and river, and pointed ahead.

"There it is," she whispered, though there was no one within two hundred yards who could possibly overhear her.

"All right," Ben said, squatting next to her. "Anna, you take Lou, Val, and Dave with you and set your charges at the base of the dam, where it joins the bank of the river. Corrie, you and Lara and Chuck see if you can cross the dam and do the same to the far side. Coop, Beth, and I will see if we can get into the building and place our explosives around the plant itself."

"Make sure you get the big turbines, Ben," Corrie said,

148

"those are the most expensive and hard to replace components of the plant."

"Roger," he answered. Corrie was the resident expert in all things technical, and he valued her input on how best to disable the hydroelectric plant and render it almost impossible to rebuild with the USA's limited resources.

"Okay, team, let's go. Remember not to set the timers on the explosives. We'll detonate them all at once from up here with the radio transmitters."

As he made his way toward the plant, Ben heard Coop give a low chuckle behind him. "What's goin' on?" he asked over his shoulder.

"I was just remembering the look on Jersey's face when you told her she was going to have to stay behind. She was really pissed."

"Couldn't be helped," Ben said, also smiling at the recollection. "She'd never be able to keep up in this forest."

"Well, she sure hates to miss any action, that's for sure," Coop said.

"Let's hope there won't be any action tonight. If all goes well, and the facility is as poorly guarded as the FF says, then it'll just be another walk in the park."

Soon, they came upon the outer reaches of the plant, where forest changed to concrete.

"This is going to be the tricky part. We'll be totally exposed when we cross the parking lot," Ben said, "so crouch down and move at double-time."

"Roger that, boss," Beth said. Coop just nodded.

"We'll go one at a time, so if there is a guard he won't get a shot at all of us together."

"I'll go first, and then give you and Beth cover as you cross," Coop said in a low voice.

"Okay. I'll keep the Starlight scope on the building as you move out," Ben said, referring to the light-gathering scope that enabled him to see in starlight as if it were high noon.

149

149

Coop jacked a shell into his CAR and put his finger on the safety. He turned to Beth, gave her a wink and Ben a nod, and took off at a dead run across the cement parking lot of the plant. Ben kept his scope fixed on the building across the way, searching for any movement that would indicate they were under observation. Nothing moved.

Once Coop was across and safe, he waved at the others and they followed him, one at a time, while he kept his CAR pointed toward the plant next to him. Any sign of trouble, and he'd open up on full automatic to give the others a chance to make it across.

"See anything?" Ben asked when he got to where Coop was squatted down behind a hedge.

"Uh-uh. Quiet as a tomb," Coop replied.

"Thanks for the analogy," Beth said, her teeth flashing white in a grin as she scrambled up behind them.

Ben made his way to the door and tried it. It was locked. He removed his K-Bar from his belt and stuck the hardened steel point in the keyhole and twisted. The softer steel of the lock mechanism gave way, and the door swung open.

Coop and Beth and Ben filed into the darkened building, CARs at the ready. Ben turned on a penlight, and they walked down the corridor until they came to a large anteroom with several doors. Luckily, the doors all had signs over them telling where they led.

Ben picked the one that said Turbine Room and soon they were in a huge open room with six large turbines, all whining as they produced electricity from the movement of water through their mechanisms.

All three took off their backpacks and laid the charges of explosives on the floor. Each took a couple and made their way to the big turbine engines, placing the charges of C-4 plastique against the walls of the machines. Small detonator devices were inserted in putty-like plastique,

150

and switches were flipped, activating them for the radio signal which would set off the charges later.

Ben stepped back and dusted his hands off. "Well, team, this looks like

a good night's work. Let's get the hell out of Dodge before we're discovered."

"Sounds good to me," Coop said.

Beth opened the door to the turbine room and was blown backward by a burst of automatic rifle fire, spinning as a bullet ripped into her chest, knocking her spread-eagled onto her back on the concrete floor.

Coop, who was right behind her, slammed the steel door shut just as another burst of bullets slammed into it.

"Goddamn!" he shouted. "We've been made!"

Ben rushed to Beth's side and checked her out.

"Shit, that hurt," she said, rubbing her chest and taking deep breaths.

Ben opened her BDU shirt and saw three 9mm slugs imbedded in her Kevlar vest. None of the bullets had penetrated the bulletproof material of her body armor.

"You all right?" he asked.

She nodded, picking the lead out of the vest with her fingers. "Yeah. Thank heaven for technology," she groaned as she got to her feet and picked up her CAR where it'd dropped.

"What now, boss?" Coop asked. "Looks like they've got us pinned down in here."

Ben swung his penlight around the room. There were no other doors, and all of the windows were at least twenty feet high.

He shook his head. "I don't know, Coop. I don't see any other way out of here. Damn! I should have stationed a guard at the door. Now we're trapped in here. My mistake."

Coop grinned. "No sweat, chief."

Ben stationed himself next to the door. "Okay, Coop. On my mark, jerk the door open and I'll sweep the cor-

151

151

ridor with my CAR. Beth, you stand behind me and see if you can tell how many we're up against out there. Be quick, 'cause we'll only have a few seconds to get a count."

"Right, boss," she said.

Coop grabbed the door handle while Ben held his CAR at waist level. He nodded and Coop jerked the door open.

Ben crouched and pulled the trigger, emptying his clip into the darkness and sweeping the barrel back and forth as he fired. The muzzle flash lit up the room, and Beth saw two men go down, clutching their chests, while another three opened fire at Ben.

When she saw their muzzle flashes answering Ben's, she grabbed him by the shirt and jerked him back into the room. Coop slammed the door shut just as the bullets slammed into it.

"You got two, and there looked to be at least three more left alive," Beth shouted, trying to be heard over the explosions of gunfire and the metallic sound of bullets crashing into the steel door in front of them.

Ben jerked his empty magazine out and replaced it with a full one. "What a mess," he said, his eyes flicking back and forth as he tried to figure a way out of the trap they were in.

Lara Walden and Corrie and Chuck were just finishing placing their charges under the large steel I-beams that connected the dam to the ground on the far side of the river when they heard the sound of gunfire from the hydroelectric building.

"Shit!" Corrie said. "It sounds like Ben's run into some trouble."

Lara shook her head. "I don't know what happened. This building was never guarded before."

152

Chuck frowned. "Maybe they've put some men here since the bombing by Rebel forces last week."

"Well, someone's here now, and they're firing at Ben and the others." Corrie jerked her CAR around from her back, where it hung by its leather strap. Jacking a round into the chamber, she flicked the safety off and started back across the dam. "Let's go see if they need some help."

"But the charges aren't ready yet," Chuck said.

Corrie flipped him a handful of the detonators. "Here. Stick these in the plastique and then hightail it back across the dam. With any luck, it'll all be over by then . . . one way or another."

Lara readied her M-16. "I'm coming with you."

Corrie nodded once. "OK. I figure we'll try to get in the building from this side. Maybe that way we can come at them from behind and catch them in a crossfire with Ben's team."

Just as they finished crossing the dam, they ran into Anna and her FF team. "Did you hear the shooting?" Anna asked, her CAR cradled in her arms and her eyes wide in the starlight.

"Yeah," Corrie answered. "We're gonna go in this side of the building. Why don't you and your team go in the same door Ben did? That way we'll be coming at them from two different directions."

"Roger," Anna said, turning and leading her FFs toward the door Ben had entered.

Corrie walked to a side entrance door and tried it. It was locked. In too much of a hurry to wait, she stepped to the side, turned her head away, and blew the door handle out with her CAR. Kicking the door open, she crouched and ran through it, aiming her automatic rifle ahead of her

into the darkness.

Lara was right on her heels, her M-16 at the ready.

153

153

Once inside, they squatted behind some desks in the corridor, and Corrie pulled out a flashlight.

Lara said, "Wait a minute-won't that let them know we're coming?"

Corrie shrugged. "Yeah. That's the general idea. We've got to draw their fire from Ben so he'll have a chance in case he's pinned down."

Just before Corrie switched on the light, another burst of automatic weapons fire came from just around the corner ahead of them.

Corrie put the flashlight in her pocket and pulled a grenade from her belt. "This is a stun grenade," she said, handing it to Lara. She pulled another one off her belt, "This is a phosphorous grenade. The stun grenade makes a loud sound, and the phosphorous one makes a brilliant flash of light. Together they ought to incapacitate whoever is shooting up there."

"OK."

"On my count, pull the pin and throw it as far up the corridor as you can, then duck your head, hide your eyes, and cover your ears. As soon as they go off, we're gonna charge the bastards."

"All right," Lara said, grabbing the grenade's ring with her fingers.

"One, two, three, go!" Corrie said and they threw their grenades at the same time and ducked their heads.

A few seconds later, a tremendous flash of light was followed immediately by a loud explosion. Corrie and Lara were on their feet in seconds, running down the corridor as fast as they could.

As they turned the corner, they saw several men staggering around, holding their hands to their faces, blood coming from their ears, their mouths open in silent screams of pain.

Corrie didn't hesitate. She opened fire at the same time as Lara, and sprayed the men with bullets. They spun

154

and jerked in a dance of death, blown apart by the force of the twin streams of lead pouring into them.

Seconds later, Ben and Coop and Beth dove through a door across the room, and their rifles joined in the fire-fight.

It was over in seconds, a cloud of cordite and smoke filling the room. Ben got to his feet and walked among the dead, moving their weapons in case any of them were still alive.

Anna and her Freedom Fighters arrived just after the fight was over.

Once Ben had made sure there was no further danger, he turned to the others. "We've got to get a move on. They may've radioed for reinforcements."

The team jogged for the door, meeting Chuck Harris just as they left the building.

"Everyone OK?" he asked.

"Yeah," Ben said. "Let's make for the hilltop over there and set off the charges before any company arrives."

Once they were a safe distance away, Corrie flipped a switch on her radio detonator and pressed a red button. The dam seemed to heave itself up as twin explosions roared. The building didn't move, but smoke and fire exploded out of the windows to the turbine rooms.

For a few seconds, nothing else seemed to happen. "Damn," Chuck Harris said. "It was all for nothing. It didn't even affect the dam."

Ben smiled. "Give it a few minutes, Chuck."

Sure enough, minutes later, the dam seemed to collapse into itself with a mighty roar. As the dam broke apart and the river began to surge through the wreckage, the building came apart and fell into the river's rushing waters. Within minutes, all that was left of the hydroelectric plant and the dam was a pile of twisted metal and concrete.

155

155

"Jesus," Lara said, awe in her voice. "I've never seen anything like that."

"That ought to get Madam President's attention," Ben said, a satisfied look on his face.

156 Twenty

When Ben and the others arrived back at the cabin, Jersey was waiting by the door.

"I don't have to ask how it went," she said, glancing at the night sky on the horizon where the low-lying clouds were painted orange by the flames of the hydroelectric plant."

Ben nodded. "You're right. All things considered, it went quite well, except for Beth, who's gonna have some rather spectacular bruises from a run-in with the plant guards."

Coop smiled at Jersey. "I offered to rub some ointment on her chest, but . . ." he said, waggling his eyebrows.

"That'll be the day," Beth said.

"Just trying to be helpful," Coop said with a shrug.

"Ben," Jersey said, "Mike Post has been on the horn trying to get in

touch with you. I told him you'd bump him when you got back."

"OK, set it up for me, would you, Corrie?"

"Sure thing, boss." She sat before the radio transceiver and twiddled the dials until she had the correct frequency, which was changed on a daily basis and had a mathematical relationship to the day of the month.

Finally, she handed Ben the microphone. "It's all ready, Ben."

"Eagle One to Eagle Two, come in."

"Eagle Two here. I've got some news, Eagle One. There

157

was an attempt on one of our covert operative's life last night."

"Which one?" Ben asked.

"L-two," Mike answered, referring to Linda Lee.

"Is the operative all right?"

"Yes. L-two made contact immediately after the attempt, and arrangements were made to have one of the scout teams do an extraction."

"And was it successful?"

"Yes. L-two is in the pipeline, headed for home."

"That's good. Did Sugar Babe order the hit?"

"Affirmative, Eagle One. However, the operative is certain that she was fingered by a spy on our team, somehow. She says there's no other way they could have known about her."

"Are you checking it out?"

"Yes. We're going back through the security reports on all our personnel and rechecking their files."

"Good. Let me know what you turn up. And the package I've ordered for Madam President is on the way?" Ben asked, remembering his order for Mike to contact Sied Sadallah.

"The package has been ordered, and we're currently awaiting delivery."

"Let me know as soon as delivery is accomplished. Eagle One out."

He turned to his team. "Osterman must've found out about Linda Lee, our informer in their cryptology section. She ordered an assassination attempt, but it failed, and Linda is on the way back to SUSAS."

"Thank God," Anna said. She was a close friend of Linda's, as was Ben.

"We're gonna miss her intel, but at least she made it out alive," Ben said.

Jersey stared at him. "What was all that about a pack-

age you ordered for Osterman? Are we sending her birthday gifts now?"

"Not exactly," Ben answered, with a sly grin. "This package is more a reminder that ordering assassins is a two-way street, and what goes around, comes around."

The Jackal, Sied Sadallah, watched the USA compound with an experienced eye. Trained in Libya, named after the assassin made famous fifty years earlier for his relentless pursuit of enemies of the East, a paid killer in the employ of Muammar al-Qaddafi, he took great pride in his hunting and shooting skills, if the target was human. He had killed enemies of the state on three continents, depending upon which government paid him the highest fee.

And now his target was the President of the USA, Claire Osterman. In the dark, hidden by deep shadows, Sied had memorized the routes by which her limousine took her home every night, to the underground bunker where she'd been forced to live after the bombardment by SUSA Rebels of her command post in Indianapolis. Her drivers, trained bodyguards, took her home by different routes every night.

But there was a moment, less than a minute, when she emerged from her command bunker to enter her bulletproof Mercedes limo. With his high-powered Ninnko rifle equipped with a night scope, Sied was sure he could take her down with the first or second shot-if her bodyguards did not suspect anything in the way of a trap.

He whispered to Ahmed, who lay behind the fence beside him, a paid assassin in his own right with almost as farflung a reputation as Sied's.

"Make sure you can hit her in a vital spot. This will be our only chance."

"I won't miss," Ahmed assured him. "All I need is one clear shot at her."

"The big bodyguard is careful. He sees everything, even though he is older. He stands in front of her until she enters the car."

"I know him," Ahmed said. "He is Herb Knoff, the big fat German. He is past fifty now, but he will be very hard to kill. He always wears a bulletproof vest."

"Shoot him in the head," Sied whispered. "He will die like any other man."

"Many people have tried, Sied. He seems to have a sixth sense for when a gun is aimed at him."

Sied chuckled soundlessly. "You have become too superstitious, old friend. No one knows when he will die. You listen to too many of the old stories about him. He is a mortal, like any other man."

Ahmed swallowed. "It is more than superstition, Sied," he said. "I have tried to kill the big German once before. He came out of a building with Bruno Bottger in Africa, and even though there was no moon he looked right at me when I was two hundred yards away behind a tree. The night was as dark as pitch. Somehow, he knew I was there. I am unable to explain it, how he knew I was there."

"What happened?"

"He pushed Bottger to the ground and opened up on me with an Uzi. I was lucky to escape with my life. He could not have known where I was, and yet somehow, he did. Some say he has eyes in the back of his head."

"It was luck, Ahmed. He heard you make some small sound or he saw you move."

"I did not even breathe when he came out of the bunker with Herr Bottger. I did not move. My rifle was cocked. I had him in my sights. There was nothing I did that could have warned him I was there. And somehow he knew we were waiting for him. He warned everyone, before a single

160

shot was fired, and yet he could not have known we were there."

"Nonsense," Sied replied. "He is just a man. He will bleed and die like any other, if you hit him in the right spot with a bullet."

"There are some who say Ben Raines is every bit as clever as Knoff."

"Raines is cautious, I agree," Sied said. "He never turns his back on anyone . . . not even his most trusted associates. But why should we care? He is paying us to get rid of President Osterman in order to prevent a bloodier, more expanded war. His money is good, and he keeps his word. We are not being paid to assassinate him."

"\bu don't think Raines will double-cross us?"

Sied wagged his head. "Not from what I have heard about him. He is honest. But he is ruthless when someone betrays him."

"Then he will pay us our money? If we kill this Osterman woman?"

"Without a doubt, just so long as we accomplish our objectives here tonight. We must bring down Claire Osterman and her advisers. If we can. We are being paid to kill the President of the USA, and that is all we have to do to earn our money, according to General Raines. I have worked for him before, and I believe him. Osterman must die . . . tonight, and we will be the instrument of her death."

"She escaped the heavy bombing," Ahmed remembered. "She may remain in her underground bunker until the SUSA attack from the skies is over. They are sending in specially trained teams from every quarter. Perhaps we should wait until the bombing is over in New York."

"It is over, for now. General Raines has called a halt to the bombing, to keep from harming more innocent civilians, we were told."

"Raines is a strange fellow. He believes in his cause,

161

161

yet he is willing to end thousands of lives to stop President Osterman and the armies of the USA by bombing them. Most peace-loving leaders are too softhearted."

Sied saw a dark Mercedes limousine drive toward the front door leading to the underground headquarters of the USA government. "Here comes the president's car. Don't worry about Raines or his softheartedness. All we care about is getting paid to rid him of his nemesis, the bitch everyone calls Sugar Babe Osterman."

"I will crawl under this fence, to be closer, so my shot cannot miss," Ahmed said.

"Be careful of the landmines. We do not know where they are."

Ahmed grinned. "I have a nose for explosives, Sied. Do not worry about me."

He inched forward on his elbows and belly, pushing his way under an electrified fence with great care. Sied had already killed two of the perimeter guards silently, with a knife and a piano wire, leaving the way clear for them to crawl closer to the compound.

Suddenly, Ahmed halted. "Who is that?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

Sied studied the giant figure walking up the stairs from the underground bunker where President Osterman stayed during the day, her command headquarters.

"That is Herb Knoff," Sied whispered, examining a towering giant in a full set of body armor—a bulletproof face mask, vest, and bulletproof leggings—with an automatic rifle cradled in the crook of an arm.

"That is Knoff," he said softly. "Something has gone very wrong."

"What do you mean?" Ahmed wondered.

"He is wearing a full suit of bulletproof gear. He never does this. He suspects trouble here tonight."

"But who could have warned him?"

162

"I don't know. We were the only ones, other than General Raines himself, who knew this plan."

"Should we pull back?"

Sied had to think about it a moment... all the trouble they'd gone through to get this far. "No. Let's kill her now."

"Knoff... he is huge," Ahmed said. "With full body armor he may be hard to bring down."

"Kill President Osterman," Sied said, tightening his rifle against his shoulder. "This is the only way we can earn our money."

"I'll move even closer," Ahmed said, creeping forward again with his body pressed flat against the ground.

"Be careful of the landmines," Sied warned again. "They will surely have this place mined against an attack from the trees."

"I will be very careful," Ahmed said, inching over the ground at a slow crawl.

Sied keyed his small radio and spoke into it without waiting for a reply. "Eagle Two, this is Jackal. They were warned of our coming. They are ready for us, but I will attempt the assignment, anyway. Jackal out."

As he put the radio down and picked up his rifle, a soft, metallic click was the only warning Sied had that Ahmed had made a fatal mistake. In fractions of a second, the dirt around them exploded with a mighty roar.

Ahmed was blown almost ten feet into the air by a powerful landmine, still gripping his rifle. He screamed as his body was tossed into the night sky.

Sied Sadallah rolled quickly to his left to escape the full force of the blast, as dirt and tiny rocks showered him from head to toe.

"Ayiiii!" Ahmed cried as his chest and abdomen flew open, spilling his guts and sprays of blood all over the earth where Sied lay.

Ahmed toppled to the forest floor, moaning, grunting,

163

163

his life flowing away from a gaping cavity in his midsection and a hole in his throat. Dark crimson rain fell down on Sied like a warm, late summer shower.

Sied sleeveed the dirt particles away from his eyes, just in time to see a towering man in a bulletproof suit and mask come racing toward him.

"Fuck you, German bastard," he snarled, letting go with a stream of bullets from his Ninnko rifle.

The giant kept coming toward him at a run. Sied could not believe his bullets had no effect on Knoff or his body armor.

A sound beside Sied made him flinch. He glanced over to Ahmed's pulpy body, where the noises were coming from.

Ahmed's jaw had been blown off the bottom of his skull, and now his tongue, fastened deep in his throat, flapped back and forth on his chest like a bloody snake while the Libyan assassin tried to speak, free of his jawbone and lower cheeks.

"Shit!" Sied hissed, turning his attention back to the big man lumbering toward him with the Uzi.

Sied fired off the last of his clip at Herb Knoff, taking care to aim at vital spots. The giant kept on coming without slowing his strides.

With his rifle empty, Sied leapt to his feet to begin a fast retreat into the woods, his heart thudding inside his chest as he ran.

A cracking sound came from the middle of his spine, and, just as quickly, his legs refused to obey his commands. He willed his feet to move, and they would not, floundering underneath him, not able to

support his weight.

He tumbled forward into a tuft of blood-soaked grass, gasping for breath. A pain unlike anything he had ever experienced in his life raced down his lower body.

164

I'm hit, he thought, still struggling to regain his feet in order to run.

Another staccato of fire from an Uzi jerked his torso off the ground. His eyes bulged in their sockets. This was no way for the Jackal to end his career as an assassin ... what the hell had happened?

It was Ahmed's fault, he thought as he began to lose consciousness. The stupid son of a bitch had crawled over a landmine. . . .

He tried to roll over, but his body wouldn't obey his commands. He lay there, facedown in the dirt, pain like a live animal crawling up his back toward his head.

Claire Osterman was furious. She exited her command bunker in such a towering rage that no one dared try to stop her. She stalked over to Knoff, who was standing over the assassin's body, smoke still trailing from his Uzi barrel.

"What the hell is the meaning of this?" she shouted, causing Knoff to turn and look at her.

"Madam President, you shouldn't be out here until we make sure there are no others left," he said, his voice muffled by his helmet and armor.

"Screw that! I want to know how this bastard was able to get so close, and who sent him."

"He's still alive. Would you like to ask him?" Knoff asked.

Claire used the toe of her boot to turn Sadallah's body over onto its back. She squatted next to him and slapped his face, back and forth, until his eyes flicked open.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice shrill in the night air.

"I... I am Jackal," Sied mumbled though lips covered with blood.

"The Jackal!" Claire screamed. "Why you son of a

165

165

bitch, I've hired you myself in the past. How dare you try to kill me?"

Sied licked the blood from his lips and bared bloody teeth in a grin. "Nothing personal ... it was . . . business."

She reared back and slapped his face so hard it made his eyes roll back in his head. "Who hired you? Who paid you to do this?"

His eyes cleared momentarily. "Your old friend . . . Ben Raines. He said

... he was sending you a message about. . . breaking the rules."

"Breaking the rules? Why you little shit! I'm the president ... I make the rules."

Claire stood up and held out her hand to Knoff. "Give me your pistol, Herbert."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, handing her a Walther P-38 semi-automatic 9mm.

She jacked the slide back and pointed it between Sied's eyes.

"One thing more," the assassin mumbled, motioning her to come closer.

She leaned over, and he spat a glob of bloody mucous in her face.

Rearing back, she screamed, "You bastard!" and fired at point blank range, the pistol bucking and exploding in her hand.

The bullet took Sied in the forehead, shattering his skull and showering Claire with blood and brains and tissue.

She took a deep breath and calmly handed Knoff his pistol. "I'll show that bastard Raines who makes the rules," she growled as she walked back toward her bunker.

"Herbert, get out of that suit and join me in my room. I have need of your services," she said over her shoulder.

Knoff glared at Sadallah, thinking that if he wasn't al-

166

ready dead he'd kill him himself for causing Osterman to order him to her bedroom.

He shook his head. It was a lousy way to make a living.

167

The chumming of helicopter blades was a drone in Tom Harrison's ears as he came in low, dangerously low, under USA's radar in the south of Indiana, where so many SUSA missiles had knocked out the most strategic radar installations SUSA intelligence reports could give them.

The night skies would help hide him and the noisy Huey with its twin turbines. And an all-out war was going on, with General Raines attacking the USA base from the north, after successful raids in the northeast, as far away as New York and Vermont, and parts of Ohio.

This could be the death blow to Osterman's government, he told himself, using the stick and the rudder pedals to keep the big Huey on a low trajectory, armed with four ATG missiles that would level everything in their pathway for a quarter of a mile in any direction.

It was a bold plan, initiated by Lara Walden in a short but specific coded radio message, with the right wording to prove it had come from General Raines himself: Strike the main compound in Indianapolis at midnight, when there would be "other distractions."

Other distractions could mean only one thing.

"They've sent someone to target Osterman in an assassination attempt," he whispered, with his mike turned off so no one at base command could hear him.

It was a bit unlike Raines, calling for a single chopper

168

strike in the middle of the night without other air and ground support.

"Someone knows something." He sighed, guiding his powerful airship over the treetops in total darkness.

"What did you say?" asked his co-pilot, Les Minor. "You didn't have your mike on."

Tom thought about his reply before he gave it out loud, for a man could never be too careful about where a bug had been planted. "Someone knows our target will be easy to hit tonight," he answered.

"It does seem strange," said Les. "We have no support in the air of any kind."

"I think it was designed this way, Les. We're supposed to go in with these ATGs and fire them off with as little fanfare as possible."

"This Huey makes a hell of a lot of noise, Captain. It will be hard as hell to go in without being noticed on the ground."

Tom's jaw clamped. While he agreed with his copilot, it was dangerous to question orders from the top levels of command. "We're doing what we were told to do, Les. We should be sighting our target in less than five minutes, give or take. I can't read our ground-speed indicator with all the instrument lights turned off. This is like flying blind in a really bad dream."

"Our radar is working. Nothing I can see in our way for the next quarter mile."

"It's what we can't see that worries me," Tom replied, using a bit more thrust to increase the Huey's speed and forward tilt to the north. "A heat sensor on a SAM will pick us up right away, and we'll be ducking and dodging for our lives up here. This is not my idea of a good assignment."

"We don't get to pick 'em, unfortunately," Les said. "What worries me most is that this one came so quickly, and it came from Lara."

169

169

Tom nodded. "I know, but I verified the source of the radio signal, and it came from SUSA. We didn't really have a choice."

"Seems odd that they'd send us to the USA headquarters without a backup, Cap'n. General Raines is usually very careful about sending us out. We've had plenty of air support."

Tom was growing tired of the banter. "Why don't you contact him by radio and ask him if he was serious about this mission, Les?"

Les gazed down at the inky forests below them. "I think I'll just keep my mouth shut about it, Cap'n. If this is what they want us to do, I'd be the last one in this Rebel army to question it."

"You'll remain an officer a helluva lot longer with that attitude," Tom told him. "I'm real sure they've got plenty of potatoes needing to be peeled at the mess hall, if you'd rather have that job."

"It'd be safer," Les observed.

Tom gave the Huey's radar screens a glance. "Could be trouble," he said after a moment's contemplation. "See that little blip coming up from the north? Could be a SAM being fired at us."

"We're still way out of range, Cap'n. I don't think that's a missile. It's too small."

Tom wasn't so sure. "I hope like hell you're right about it, Les. This big metal bird will go down like a damn rock if they hit us."

"My belly ain't feelin' so good, Cap'n. Wish you wouldn't talk like that."

"I'm a realist, Les. If they've fired a heat-seeking SAM at our radar image, we don't stand a chance in this big son of a bitch."

Tom watched the screen again. "Looks like it's coming right at us."

170

"It's too damn small. Hardly more'n a speck on that screen right now."

The blip on their radar screen was aimed in a straight trajectory toward the Huey. Tom watched it a moment longer, and there was no mistaking its course. Whatever it was, it was coming for them.

"You don't suppose we've been double-crossed?" Les asked in a small voice.

Tom swallowed, for now his mouth was dry. His hands were wet, and his feet trembled slightly on the rudder and rear rotor pedals. "Tricked might be a better word for it," he said. "I know that was Lara's voice. She gave me the code word, and when I answered back, she gave me the correct reply. It had to be her, unless--"

"Unless what, Cap'n?"

"Unless they somehow picked up an earlier transmission and broke the code."

"But you said it sounded just like her."

"It did. I swear I would know her voice anywhere. It was Lara, all right."

Les was staring out the front of the chopper. "I can see a vapor trail now, Cap'n. That's a damn SAM missile, and it's headed straight for us."

Tom had only one choice ... to take the Huey down as fast as he could. The big helicopter was awkward, hard to maneuver in the air.

He shut down the engines and headed for the dark ground underneath them with the blades in autogyro, hoping the crash wouldn't kill them, knowing for certain a SAM missile would.

The Huey crashed into the tops of a copse of maple trees, slowing its fall as a SAM missile streaked by overhead, fooled by the absence of the heat signature from the big Whitney-Pratt engines that the pilot had shut down in the nick of time.

The bird stopped momentarily, held in place by tree

171

limbs. Tom slapped at the buckle on his seatbelt and rolled to the door as the chopper tilted at a crazy angle. He lay on his back and kicked out the plexiglass window and dove through it just before the Huey turned turtle and crashed to the ground, thirty feet below.

Tom landed on his left shoulder and back, his stomach doing flip-flops at the sound of his bones breaking. Then pain rushed at him like a red fog and he was swallowed up by blackness.

Hours later, he awoke. His shoulder felt as if someone was holding a branding iron to it, and any movement brought him dangerously close to passing out again.

He crawled on hands and knees, using only his right arm, his left hanging useless at his side. "Got to warn HQ, he mumbled. There's a traitor somewhere. Got to let General Raines know.

It took Tom thirty minutes to crawl the fifteen yards to the wreckage of the Huey. Pulling himself up, he glanced in the window and saw Les, bent and crumpled in the copilot's seat, his neck canted at an angle, his open eyes staring at eternity.

Son of a bitch, Tom thought. If only I'd checked with headquarters, this wouldn't have happened.

Another half hour was spent prying open the door and crawling into the chopper. There was the smell of burnt insulation everywhere, along with the heady aroma of avgas. The tanks must've ruptured on impact, he figured, so he didn't have much time left to warn the others.

With a Herculean effort, he pried back the pilot's seat and fumbled at the radio controls. Thank God, it's still active.

"Eagle Two, come in. This is Whirlybird Three calling. Come in."

"Eagle Two HQ here," a voice answered. "Eagle Two is not here. Shall I send for him?"

"No. We're down ten klicks from enemy headquarters.

172

Tell Eagle Two we got fake ... repeat bogus ... message from Lara Walden to attack without air support."

"Say again, Whirlybird Three."

"There is someone out there using our codes and the name Lara Walden. Warn Eagle Two . . . you've got to warn-"

A loud whoosh sound was followed by an intense wave of heat as the aviation gasoline in the tanks went up in flames.

Tom had time for one quick intake of breath, and he was consumed by the inferno.

"Whirlybird Three, come in . . ." The radio began to melt from the incredible heat and the transmission was not completed.

There was no one left alive to hear it.

173

Ben and his team and Lara Walden's Freedom Fighters were just finishing breakfast, with Cooper giving those members who hadn't been along on the raid on the hydroelectric plant a highly colored version of the firefight when the radio buzzed.

Corrie stepped to the transceiver and keyed in the frequency, switching on the scrambler at the same time.

"Eagle One, come in. This is Eagle Two calling Eagle One."

Corrie picked up the mic. "This is Eagle One. Come back, Eagle Two," she said, glancing at Ben with raised eyebrows. It was highly unusual for Mike Post to call during the day unless he had important news to convey.

Ben got up from the table and walked over to the radio set.

"Eagle One," Mike's voice said. "This transmission is ears only. Are you secure?"

Ben leaned over and plugged in the earphones, so only he could hear what Mike had to say. His face showed worry. Mike had never before called with an "ears only" message. Something big was up, and Ben wasn't sure he wanted to hear it.

"This is Eagle One. Transmission is secure. Go ahead, Eagle Two."

"Ben, I've got some disturbing news. The boys in Se-

174

curity have been putting some things together, and have come to the conclusion we have a spy among us."

"I've had similar thoughts, as you know, Mike. Any idea who, or where, the operative is?"

"Yeah. From the times of the leaks and culling out people who had access to all of the information we know has been sent to the USA, Security is about fifty percent sure it's someone up there with you. Their best guess is ... Lara Walden."

Ben's face paled. "I was afraid you were going to say that. Anything more certain than a guess?"

"Well, one of our helicopter pilots received a secure transmission from someone calling herself Lara Walden. She had all the right code words, and he said he was sure it was her voice."

"What happened?"

"She sent him and his crew on a mission against Os-terman's compound without any air cover. The pilot said they were waiting for him."

"Did they make it?"

There was a moment of white noise, then Mike came back on. "No. The ship and the crew were a total loss."

"Anything else?"

"Well, preliminary word is our hit on Sugar Babe was a bust. The Jackal radioed they were expecting him, but he was going to go ahead, anyway. That's the last we've heard, so I guess that's another couple of lives we can chalk up to our informer."

Ben was stunned. He thought he knew Lara, and he would never have taken her for a traitor. There must be more to it than he knew. "Thanks, Mike. I'll take care of it on my end. Eagle One out."

When Ben looked up from the radio, everyone in the room was busy trying to look as if they hadn't been listening, but he knew they'd heard his every word.

When he turned off the radio and walked back to the

175

table, everyone looked at him with questioning eyes, especially his team, who knew how unusual it was for Mike to ask to talk to him in private.

He assumed a casual expression on his face. "Just some intel info from Mike concerning a joint operation I'd planned. Nothing important."

Corrie started to speak, but a look from Ben silenced her.

Ben poured himself another cup of coffee and took out his makings. He built himself a cigarette and struck a match on his pants to light it.

He took the smoke deep into his lungs, enjoying the bite of it and chased it with a long drink of coffee. Two of the most underated pleasures in life, he thought, not looking forward to what he had to do next.

He picked up an old fly rod lying in a corner and looked at Lara. "Any fish in that lake out back?" he asked.

She grinned. "Sure, if you know how to catch 'em."

"Why don't you give me a quick lesson? Fish for lunch sounds mighty tasty."

"OK," she replied, refilling her coffee cup and following him out the door.

Cooper turned to Jersey and raised his eyebrows. She shook her head, not

knowing what was going on, but having faith that Ben knew what he was doing.

At the lake, Lara dug in the moist soil for a moment, shoving pine needles and humus aside until she uncovered a couple of white grubs. "The bass around here love these. Put one on your hook and see what happens."

Ben fixed the bait to his hook and cast over next to a half-submerged log in some shadows near the edge of the lake.

He sat on a fallen tree and smoked and drank his coffee, his eyes on the small cork.

176

After a moment, Lara sat next to him. She stared into her coffee and said in a low voice, "Ben, what was that transmission about?"

Without looking at her, he answered, "It was about you, Lara. It seems someone has been divulging sensitive information about our strategy to the enemy."

She nodded, also without looking up. "And you think it's me?"

He glanced at her, his eyes dead. "We know it's you, Lara. Security has determined it can't be anyone else."

When she continued to stare into her cup, he said, "\bu want to tell me why?"

She took a deep breath, her face flushed a deep crimson. "It's Carl. \bu remember I told you he disappeared?"

Ben nodded.

"Well, when I was captured, they told me he was still alive. Then . . . then . . ."-she began to sob as she spoke-". . . they showed me a finger that still had the ring on it I'd given him as an engagement present."

Ben remained silent, his eyes on the cork.

"They told me if I'd help them, give them occasional bits of information, he'd be kept alive and treated well. If I refused, they'd keep sending me pieces of him until there wasn't anything left to send."

Ben took a deep breath. It was worse than he'd imagined. The trouble was, he could see where she'd had little choice but to comply. God only knew what he would do if they had Anna, or Buddy, in a similar situation. He turned to look at her.

"Then the escape was planned?"

She nodded. "They let Jimmy get the gun, and arranged for us to escape so I'd be in a position to give them information about SUSAs plans."

"They must have known about our . . . relationship, then."

She nodded, still unable to look him in the face.

177

"Do any of the others know?" he asked.

She wagged her head. "No. They'd kill me if they did."

"Then we can't tell them, can we?"

Lara jerked her head around. "What. . . what do you mean?"

"Do you have any idea where they're keeping Carl?"

"Yes. They have him in a camp, a prison really, over near the Hudson River. It's called Falls River."

"Then here's what we'll do. I'm going to tell the others the transmission from headquarters was intel information about them holding Carl, and then we're going to break him out."

She put her hand on his arm. "You'd . . . you'd do that for me?"

"Lara, I'll be honest with you. I, and SUSA, can't forgive what you've done, but I do know why you did it. Let's get Carl back, then we'll decide what to do about your treason."

"Oh, Ben," she said, throwing her arms around his neck. Her face fell and she blushed again as he pulled back, a look of distaste on his face.

The cork bobbed twice, then went under unnoticed as Ben stared at her. "I may regret this, but I do believe everyone deserves a second chance. Especially, someone I've come to . . . care a great deal about."

When they got back to the cabin, Ben explained to the others that he'd received information that the USA had some prisoners of war at Falls River, on the banks of the Hudson, and he planned a rescue mission to free the prisoners.

As he spread maps of the region out on the kitchen table, he ignored questioning looks from his team and began planning their assault on the prison fortress.

178

Yiro Ishi approached his aged father's house in darkness, his senses alerted for the first sign of trouble. His battered Nissan had barely made the drive and he was low on gas, since all forms of fuel were in short supply after the war began with SUSA and Ben Raines. Even food shortages were showing up after the relentless bombings, and the price of necessities was rising day by day. In parts of the USA, there was no food to be had in grocery stores, only row upon row of empty shelves and no fresh vegetables or meat. The war was taking its toll on the entire country.

It would be no surprise to discover that President Os-terman and General Maxwell were keeping him under close surveillance . . . until they had what they wanted. Yiro had been very careful to make certain he had not been followed on the drive to Pittsburgh. It had been a dangerous trip, with so many missiles and aircraft from both sides filling the skies. Falling bombs brightened the night most of the way, and at times the aftershocks were so violent that his tiny car trembled.

Yiro got out of his car and looked both ways up and down the street before he started up the sidewalk to his father's small house in a suburb of Pittsburgh.

He rapped softly on the door. His father's illness was much worse now, and his strength was failing. However, this trip to tell his father what he was about to do was

179

179

too important to let pass, and it was Japanese family tradition to show respect by informing his father of his plans.

Yoko, the housemaid, answered his knock after a long silence.

"It is late," Yoko said in Japanese. "I believe your father is asleep."

"I must talk to him tonight," Yiro told her, looking behind him.

"Come in, then," Yoko said, stepping back to admit him to the front room.

"See if he is awake," Yiro said quietly. "I must speak with him now."

"Do you want me to wake him up, even if he is asleep?" the girl asked.

"Yes. What I have to say to him is far too important to wait."

She bowed and hurried off down a dark hallway to the rear of the house. Yiro went to a front window, to see if any cars or trucks were passing down the dark street. He was relieved to find the road empty.

He heard Yoko's whispering footsteps coming toward him from the back bedroom.

"I woke him up, Master Yiro. He wonders what is wrong, that you have come to see him so late."

"I can only speak with him," Yoko. Keep a watch on the front of the house. Let me know if anyone comes. If you see a car or a truck drive by slowly, let me know at once. I may have been followed."

Her almond eyes rounded with fear. "Is the ethnic cleansing coming here tonight?" she stammered, clutching the front of her silk kimono.

"I do not think so ... not tonight. However, bad things may be happening soon."

"What . . . bad things? Will they take us away to the prison camps?"

"I do not know. Now, keep a lookout from one of the

180

windows and let me know if anyone arrives. I must speak with my father at once, and what I have to tell him may take some time. It is very important."

"I understand, Master Yiro," she said, bowing again.

Yiro walked down the hallway to enter his father's room, to tell him about the meeting with General Maxwell and his staff. It would gladden his father's heart to know that at last there would be revenge for what had been done to their people by the ruthless administration of President Claire Osterman and the top leaders of the USA.

Yiro bowed. His father lay still on the bed, watching him with concern in his eyes, his head raised by pillows propped up underneath him. Behind him, on a wall above the bed, a small rendition of the old Japanese flag, a rising sun, was encased in a picture frame.

They spoke in Japanese.

"What is it that brings you here so late, my son? Yoko says it is important."

"It is, Father."

"Has the ethnic cleansing begun in Indianapolis? Have they come for you and your family?"

"No, Father, but it will come soon. Right now, they are concentrating on the black people. Thousands of them have been killed, taken to the prison camps where they have been starved to death, or shot."

"Tell me why you have come to see me." His father's voice had turned grave, hoarse.

"They have contacted me, the government of the USA. General Maxwell and President Osterman, along with a staff of experts on warfare, asked for me."

"Why you?"

Yiro smiled. "They know about grandfather's work at Unit 731."

His father frowned. "Do they know you have kept the cultures alive?"

"Yes. I told them."

181

"Why would you do that, Yiro? Would you use my father's work, your grandfather's work, to destroy our own people and spread the plague?"

"I have a plan, Father. I have a plan that may stop the ethnic cleansing before it reaches us."

"Tell me about it... quickly. You know how dangerous the bacteria is."

He pulled a small wooden chair from a corner and sat at the foot of his father's bed. "You remember that General Ishi had also developed a vaccine against the bubonic bacteria," he began, certain that his father would recall these important details of the work done at Unit 731, even though it had taken place so many years ago.

"Of course. Without it, the bombs filled with plague-carrying fleas would have been useless," his father replied, sounding irritated.

"I told General Maxwell that I had the vaccine, as well as the cultures

of bubonic bacteria," Yiro continued. "As you say, without the vaccine the bacteria has no value, for it would kill everyone on this continent and possibly even spread to the rest of the world."

"Please continue, my son. You have not told me anything I do not already know."

"I have made them an offer."

"An offer?"

"Yes, Father. I have offered to show them how to build the bombs and prepare them with diseased fleas. They knew some of the details before I arrived at the military compound below the ground at Indianapolis."

"Why would you do such a thing? The Rebels of SUSA are tolerant of all races, and yet you offer President Os-terman and her generals a way to kill General Raines and the people he is fighting for? This makes no sense to me."

Again, Yiro smiled. "This is only what they think, Father. I am going to sell them the bacteria cultures and

182

show them how to build the bombs. They want the formula for the vaccine, and I will give them one-

"You will be responsible for the deaths of thousands of innocent people. Surely you know this? How can you do such a thing with your grandfather's work? Do you understand what you are giving them? Do you not remember your history? How in the late fourteenth century a wild strain of this very bacterium spread across the entire world, killing twenty-five percent of the earth's population?"

"I understand, Father, yet it is not quite what it seems to be."

"Please explain. You have disappointed me, breaking a sacred trust given to us by my father . . . that we would never use the plague to harm innocent people. After what he saw in China he denounced the use of biological and chemical weapons. He asked me to destroy his notes and the bacteria . . . everything he had regarding Unit 731. After hearing what you are telling me now, I wish I had followed his instructions. You disappoint me, Yiro."

Yiro looked at the floor a moment, preparing what he would say next. "This is not what I intend to do, Father. I have no plans to betray you, or my grandfather. But they know I have the bacteria and the instructions for building the bomb. They would have killed me and my family if I had refused to cooperate with them. But there is more. I have an idea, a way to escape what they plan to do to us."

"Go on . . ."

"I will show the USA and its military leaders how to build the bombs. However, I will give them a false formula for the vaccine."

"A false formula?"

"It will be useless. I will take the money offered to me by President

Osterman and use it to take you, and my family, back to Japan."

"I still do not fully understand, my son. What will pre-

183

183

vent the infected fleas from killing tens of thousands . . . perhaps millions . . . of innocent people living in the USA?"

"I will give the formula for the vaccine to one of SUSA's military leaders. They can begin developing the correct vaccine within a few days."

A silence lingered in the bedroom. Yiro had doubts that his father would approve of his plan.

"Still, my son, many innocent people like us, who live in the USA, will die from the plague."

"I know this father. I feel I have no choice but to do what I plan to do . . . give the formula for the vaccine to officials of the SUSA government and take you, and my wife and children, out of this country."

"You may be right-"

"I know I am right, Father."

"The innocent victims will linger in my memory, and in yours, until the day we die."

"I have made this decision. I choose to save my family and let these people fight their war any way they wish. I will give the USA the bombs, the information, and nothing more. I will give the formula for the vaccine to General Raines and his scientists."

"If they find out, if they even suspect what you propose to do, the government of the USA will have you executed. Perhaps even your wife and children."

"I'm certain I have no choice, Father."

The old man glanced at the ceiling. "You may be right, Yiro," he said softly.

Yiro stood up, for he knew his father was tired now and he had a heavy burden to carry, a great deal to think about in the coming days. "I will send someone for you, Father. Have Yoko prepare everything for our departure to Japan."

"When?"

184

"I have no idea. I will contact you or send word to you."

A tear trickled down his father's cheek. "So this is what our world has come to, my son. We are all destined to destroy each other at all costs."

Yiro came to the bed and kissed his father's cheek. "If I can, I will

make sure our family survives this war. You must trust me, Father, for I am doing the only thing I can. . . ."

185

Yiro arrived at the bombed-out remnants of the Research and Development facility outside Indianapolis at five in the morning. Nothing much remained of its exterior walls-only skeletal brick sections blackened by smoke and fire-after the SUSA bombing last year. So much of the country now reminded him of photographs from Europe during World War II. Entire cities had been abandoned not long after the Final War started, when SUSA's bombs hit targets with such uncanny precision. Power and gasoline and water were often in short supply, a circumstance the Osterman administration played down in the press as a "temporary condition."

Important bridges and roadways had been destroyed. It was no easy task to cross parts of the USA without asking about roads and bridges along the way . . . and the availability of fuel for an automobile between major cities, if the bomb-cratered roads were passable. Telephone service was unreliable, when it was available at all. Television and radio broadcasts were in the hands of the government now, showing old reruns between the political messages designed to comfort the nervous citizenry of what had once been the most powerful government in the world, the United States of America.

* * *

186

Research and Development was in a remote section of Indiana woods . . . what was left of the old laboratories after the bombs and missiles struck. The new Science Center was inside the compound at Indianapolis now, under heavy guard, where the advancement of biological and chemical weapons was being conducted by President Osterman's hand-picked staff of scientists and military leaders whom she trusted.

"I am not among them now," Yiro muttered, steering through the night, "because I am of Japanese ancestry. It is a choice President Osterman will live to regret . . . if things go as I've planned."

He swung onto a dirt lane far from the city, being careful to avoid chuckholes.

Yiro turned off his headlights, wondering where his wife, Sun Li, might be. He had called her from the only working pay telephone he could find on the trip back from his father's house in the dark. Sun Li had agreed to meet him here, for he would need her help carrying out his secret plan. She was the only one he could trust.

Yiro parked his car in a grove of trees near the remains of the building, switching off the motor, wondering if somehow the higher-ups at USA had tapped his telephone at home. They would arrest Sun Li and take her and their children to one of the prison camps to await execution. Information about the camps was being kept from the press. No one knew about the exterminations, except those who had lost family members. He had done what he could to prevent anyone who might be tapping the phones, speaking to his wife in the Japanese dialect of their childhood. Even if Osterman's security forces overheard, it would take them some time to find a reliable translator of their conversation, and by then she would be safely on her way to join him.

Where is Sun Li? he wondered again, climbing slowly out of the car.

187

All was quiet around him as the hour approached dawn. Yiro knew his wife should have been there-unless something had gone wrong.

A whispered voice from the dark startled him, and he wheeled around.

"Yiro. I am over here."

He smiled when he recognized Sun Li's voice. "I did not see your car. I was worried."

She ran to him and threw herself into his arms. "Oh, Yiro, we must hurry. The children are at home alone, and I fear the soldiers might find us here. I was afraid when you told me to meet you here. Please tell me ... what are you planning to do with the experiments in the cellar? I brought the key, as you told me to do."

"Do not worry," he assured her. "No one comes here anymore. The soldiers do not know about the cellar, and most of the scientists who knew about it were killed during the bombings and the fire."

She tugged his shirtsleeve. "Please hurry, Yiro. We must do whatever it is you want and do it quickly, before the sun comes up."

He led her around to the rear of the burned-out structure, then to a thicket of bushes and short trees fifty yards behind it.

"Give me the key," he said, looking around them to be sure they were not being watched. The skies were clear of all aircraft now. The bombing and missiles had stopped over an hour ago. An eerie silence blanketed the Indiana countryside, a silence that worried Yiro for reasons he could not fully explain to his wife. He wondered if he had simply grown accustomed to the sounds of bombings during the night, and the screams of victims being taken away by the Federal Protection and Prevention Service.

Sun Li handed him a small padlock key. Yiro went into the bushes first, carefully probing the tall grasses with his foot to find the heavy metal door. He carried a small

188

flashlight, for the windowless cellar would be inky dark and he would need to be very sure of his moves, handling the vials of bacteria in culture very carefully. His life, and Sun Li's life, depended on not making any mistakes.

"Remember to put on the mask and gloves," he told her as he bent down to find the padlock. "Take no chances handling the old vials, for they will break easily."

"What are you doing, Yiro?" Sun Li asked. "You have always said this experiment, whatever it is, was too dangerous to move."

He found the lock and opened it. Then he pulled a heavy iron door open above a set of sagging wooden stairs. "Do not ask me questions, Sun Li,"

he responded. "The less you know, the better off you will be."

He started down the steps, until Sun Li grabbed his arm. "I am frightened, Yiro. Please tell me what you are doing. I am your wife."

Yiro turned to her, admiring her smooth face and gentle features in the darkness. "You must trust me," he whispered gently. "There is a chance I can save our lives and take us back to our homeland."

"Everyone says there is no escape," Sun Li told him, a tear sparkling in her eyes. "We will never be allowed to leave. I know they will kill us if we try."

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes, Yiro. With all my heart."

"Then ask me no more questions. Do exactly as I tell you to do, and say nothing."

"I will be silent," she promised. "Tell me what you want me to do."

"When I give you a vial, carry it up these steps very carefully and put it in my car. If you stumble ... if you break the glass ... we will both die."

"I am afraid, Yiro."

He smiled at her. "It is all right to be afraid, my dear wife, but do not break the vials. Be sure of every step

189

you take. What we are doing tonight will see our children safely out of this war."

He aimed his penlight into the dank-smelling cellar. "Follow me. Touch nothing until I tell you it is safe, and put on the breathing mask and gloves."

"I love you, Yiro," she said as he went down the steps to the cellar floor.

Silky cobwebs like gossamer lace hung from each rafter beam above them. The cellar was damp, cloying. Wooden shelves stood in rows across the floor of the tiny underground room. The smell of rot was everywhere, clinging to their nostrils like a damp cloth across their faces.

Wearing gas masks and elbow-length gloves, they carried ten glass vials out of the cellar, one at a time, and put them in the trunk of Yiro's Nissan, surrounding each one with several towels to keep them from breaking on rough roads. The culture medium was a shade of dull pink, swirling in the bottom of each deadly vial of bubonic plague bacterium.

Two of the vials were dry, for it had been months since he visited the cellar. But a powerful bacteria like this would encapsulate, protecting itself in a dormant phase, until it was awakened by the addition of water, which would bring it back to life even after years of hibernation.

When the last vial was loaded Yiro closed the trunk of his car. He returned quickly to the cellar to bring out a rusted metal box painted a

fading white color with a red cross on the lid. He placed it carefully under the front seat of Sun Li's car. Dawn was brightening the eastern sky.

"You must go now," he said, pulling off his gas mask and gloves.

"I will hurry," Sun Li said. "I must be there before the children are awake. What is in the small white box?"

"Ask me no more. When you get home, put it in the back of our refrigerator."

190

"The refrigerator?"

"Yes. Hurry now, but do not drive too fast, or the police will stop you and ask you questions."

"What will you do?" Sun Li asked. "Where will you go with those bottles?"

"It is better if you do not know."

"Why won't you tell me?"

"When the time comes, I will tell you everything. Until then, pack our clothing and only the bare essentials. Be ready to leave the moment I contact you. I will tell you where to take the children. You will be boarding an airplane that will take you and the children to Japan, while I will fly across the ocean to open a Swiss bank account. Remember to bring the white box with you. Hide it in our luggage."

"I am so scared, Yiro. If anything were to happen to you, I would be lost--"

"Nothing will happen. But you must do exactly as I say, and ask me no questions."

She grabbed his shirt collar and stood on tiptoe to kiss him. "I love you, my husband. I will do whatever you ask of me."

"I love you too, Sun Li," he whispered, his voice thickening with emotion. "You must trust me. I am doing everything I can to save our lives."

"I understand," she said softly, unwilling for the moment to let go of him.

"Get in your car. Drive straight home. Tell no one where you have been, or that you have seen me. I want you to understand how important it is that you deny having seen me for many days."

"Of course I will, Yiro."

"Then go now. The sun is rising."

She turned away from him toward her dark green Toyota. "You must call me as soon as you can, Yiro, to tell me that you are safe, that nothing has gone wrong."

191

"I will," he assured her. "Go now."

Sun Li hurried toward her car. Yiro waited until she had driven down the

lane and turned onto the empty highway before he climbed in his Nissan for the most dangerous trip of all.

His mind was made up. He would keep the actual formula for the vaccine in another place, until he had been paid in gold and silver and diamonds for the bacteria. He would prepare a second formula for the vaccine, slightly different, and give it to the ranking officers of the USA as soon as he was certain his family was safe in Japan.

192

Tsi Ishi lay in bed, only half asleep, wondering what his son, Yiro, would do with the ancient specimens and the formula. Tsi's medicine for the cancer was less effective now, and the pain was sometimes excruciating, leaving him awake for hours at a time during the night. There were nights like this when he truly wanted to die. But tonight he was worried about his son, and the dark legacy left to him by Tsi's father when he was a general of the Japanese army.

Using the ancient formulas against the government of the USA would be dangerous.

They will be too clever, he thought. Yiro is not a soldier, nor has he lived during the terrible times when every government employee was a potential informant.

Tsi worried about his grandchildren. Would the dreaded FPPS find out what Yiro meant to do and kill him, along with his family? It was like something from the old days of war, World War II, when no one could be trusted, when even your closest friend could be a spy.

Sun Li will not be wise enough in the ways of such things to protect her children, he thought. She is from another generation. And, like all women, she is ignorant of the ways of the world.

A noise at the front of his house gave Tsi a start. He sat up in bed despite his pain, listening. It sounded as if

193

193

someone had broken down the front door. Or could he have been imagining it?

"Yoko?" he cried. "What was that?"

He got no answer. The house was silent now, a silence that bothered him.

"\bko! Are you awake?"

Again, he received no answer.

Then he heard footsteps coming down the hallway toward his bedroom.

"Is that you, Yoko? Tell me! What was that noise I just heard?"

The door to his bedroom opened. Tsi turned on a bedside lamp to see who was there.

A man in a black shirt and black beret stood in the threshold, glowering

at him. He was heavily muscled, with a mean gleam in his eyes.

"Where is your, son, Yiro?" a deep voice asked.

"I... have no idea. Why are you here? What are you doing in my house?"

"You know damn well why we're here, old man," the intruder snarled. Another man in a black shirt appeared behind him, with a bloody knife in his hands.

"I took care of the Jap bitch," the second stranger said. "I cut her goddamn throat. She never knew what happened. Never made a sound."

"Good," the first intruder grunted, directing his attention back to Tsi. "I'm gonna ask you just one more time, you old rice-eatin' son of a bitch. Where is Yiro? Tell us where the hell he went."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I have not seen Yiro in months."

"Bullshit! You're a lyin' son of a bitch. We followed him to this neighborhood, only we lost him. Then we found your name in the phone book. We drove over to this address, you old fool. Your name was in the phone book."

194

"My name?"

"Ishi. Ain't many of 'em in Pittsburgh. The rest was easy as hell."

Tsi looked at the bloody knife blade. "You have killed my housekeeper, Yoko?"

"What damn difference does it make, old man? If you wanna stay alive, then you'll tell us where your son went. An' don't act like you ain't seen him. We already know he was here just a few hours ago."

"You must be mistaken."

"The only mistake bein' made here tonight is you playin' dumb on us. It's gonna cost you your life, you old Jap bastard, unless you tell us what we want to know. You've got just one minute to spill your guts or we'll cut 'em open for you, same as we did your slant-eyed maid."

"What is it you want with my son?" Tsi asked, pulling the bed sheet around him. Fear knotted in his stomach, and yet he knew he could not show his concern or these men would know he was lying to them. He had no choice but to deny Yiro's visit at all costs.

"Tell us where he went. Where he is now? We know he went after that secret bomb formula he told General Maxwell an' the others about when he had that meeting at the compound in Indianapolis."

"I have no idea what you are talking about. What secret formula?"

The first man in the black shirt stepped closer to the bed, and then he drew an automatic pistol from his belt. "Just one more time, you ole bastard. You know damn well what I'm talking about."

"I swear I don't."

"Then you're one dead, rice-eating motherfucker-unless your memory improves real quick."

"I haven't seen Yiro in a long time."

The stranger raised his pistol, aiming it for Tsi's head. "You saw him, and talked to him about what he was gonna

195

do, maybe only a couple of hours ago. Tell us the truth, you old fart, or you're headed for a grave . . . along with your son, as soon as we find him."

Tsi swallowed hard. "Please do not kill me. I know nothing of Yiro's plans."

The pistol made a clicking sound when the man in the black shirt cocked it. "One last time, old man. Tell us the truth or I'm gonna splatter your head all over your bedroom wall... an' the maid is already dead, so there's no telling who'll have to clean up the mess."

"You have made a terrible mistake. I have not seen Yiro in a very long while."

"You're the one makin' the mistake, Grandpa. You have two grandchildren ... a girl named Linda, and a boy named John. Kinda funny that you Jap bastards would try to give your kids real American names. Hell, it ain't gonna work. Even a man who can't see too good will be able to see them slanted eyelids. Smell the rice an garlic on their breath. You want us to kill them same as we're gonna do to your son? Unless he gives us his full cooperation . . ."

Tsi worried now about his grandchildren, and what these men would do to them. He loved them so very much, and he would give up his own life without regrets in order to spare theirs. Visions of ancient Samurai filled his head. He must show the same courage, for he knew the fate of the world depended on his son's achieving his goal of destroying this cancer that the USA had become.

"Answer me, old man."

Tsi sighed, deciding upon a desperate plan. He must mislead them, send them on a false trail.

"Kill the old bastard," the second black-shirted stranger said. "We're wastin' time."

"I'm gonna give him one more chance to cooperate with us before I blow his head off," the first man replied, aiming his pistol at the center of Tsi's forehead. "But this is the last minute I'm gonna waste."

196

"He came here," Tsi stammered.

"We already know that. Keep talkin', and this had better make some sense."

Tsi closed his eyes a moment. "My father, General Ishi of the Japanese Royal Army, developed a biological weapon during the second world war."

"We already know that too. Get to the goddamn point, you Jap bastard. Where is Yiro now?"

"He has gone to retrieve a very old bacteria he kept alive in a test tube. It was developed by my father at Unit 731 during the war."

"Stop tellin' us shit we already know. Where the hell is that boy of yours?"

Tsi waited a moment, buying as much time as he could for his son. "He has driven down to the northern part of what was called the state of Illinois. He has kept the bacteria for the bubonic plague hidden there for many years.

"Illinois? What part of Illinois?"

"A small place. The name of the town is Ava. It is very close to the ruins of Steelville, the town where they used to make steel."

"Why the hell would he keep it there?" the second of the black shirts demanded.

"He felt it would be safe."

"Exactly where in this town of Ava is it located? Be damn sure you tell us the truth."

"Behind an old Catholic church. There is a cellar behind the ruins. A bomb struck the church at the beginning of the war, but it did not damage the cellar. This is where Yiro told me he was going... to get the bacteria, because he is offering it to the USA for their war effort. He has spoken with General Maxwell and members of his staff."

"Illinois don't sound right to me," the second black shirt said. "Our intelligence reports don't show anything about Yiro ever bein' in Illinois. Hell, the little bastard don't hardly ever go anywhere."

197

197

The first Black Shirt stepped closer to the bed with his gun aimed downward. "Yiro Ishi used to work for Science and Development in Indiana. Are you real damn sure that ain't where this cellar is?"

"I am quite certain. He said he needed to find a place to buy enough gasoline so he could drive to Ava, Illinois, tonight and pick up the specimens."

"He's a liar," the second man said.

"Maybe," the other assassin responded. He leaned over the bed and put the muzzle of his pistol against Tsi's right temple, nudging it gently. "Be damn sure you're telling us the truth, old man, or we'll come back here and kill you just like we did the little Jap bitch in the front room."

"I am telling you the truth," Tsi replied, with a calm he did not feel.

The second black shirt spoke again. "Best thing to do is get on the radio an' have squads check both places, Sergeant. We can drive to the

old site in Indiana while a two-man team checks out this story about the church in Illinois. That way, we'll be sure."

"Makes some sense," the sergeant replied.

Tsi shuddered inwardly. If these two men went to the old building where Yiro worked before the bombs started falling, they might find him there in the cellar. "He did not go to Indianapolis, of that I am certain," Tsi said. "That was where he used to work."

"You're tellin' us shit we already know."

"He said there was no place to hide the test tubes where the other workers would not find them. More than anything else, he wanted to keep the specimens in a safe place where no one would find them by accident."

The first black shirt spoke, poking the gun into Tsi's flesh. "Maybe there's a cellar there too, you lyin' old bastard. I never met a Jap who could tell the truth unless you beat it out of him."

198

"No. He went to Illinois ... to Ava. I am very certain this is where he went."

The black shirt smiled. "By lyin' to me, you rotten little son of a bitch, you just told me everything we needed to know. He went to Indianapolis."

"No!"

"Go to sleep, old man. Dream the dreams of your forefathers, on account of you ain't ever gonna wake up again."

A thundering gunshot sent a stabbing pain through Tsi's brain and he stiffened on his mattress. Then the scene before him faded, the ever-present pain of the cancer disappeared, and his body seemed to rise toward the ceiling-----

199

Ben had Lara and her team pack their SUV with weapons, ammunition, and explosives, and then tied a Zodiac boat on top of the vehicle. The Zodiac, an air-filled boat powered by a small electric engine, was necessary for them to get close enough to the prison to mount an attack.

They drove on back roads to the outskirts of Falls River and then turned down a road leading to the shores of the Hudson River. From the map Lara had given him, Ben knew the prison was on the bank of the river, in a wooded area away from the town itself. It was an old mansion, once inhabited by the railroad barons of a bygone age.

They filled the boat with their equipment and then got in. Ben had Jersey, Cooper, Anna, Lara, Chuck Harris, and Lara's friend Nora along on the mission. Beth had been left behind to monitor the radio for any late-breaking news from Mike Post. She would be able to contact them on their headsets if anything urgent occurred.

Once in the boat, they started the engine, which purred with a sound no louder than the hum of a television set. Luckily, the half-moon was

obscured by heavy clouds. Keeping the boat next to the shore, which was thick with overgrowth and shrubs, they eased down the current, rifles at the ready in case they were spotted.

As they approached the house, which was set back from the river about fifty yards of lush lawn, Ben saw they'd have to cross the area without any cover. Luckily, there

200

were no spotlights, the only illumination coming from inside the mansion.

He took his binoculars and studied the layout of the prison. Through the windows on the first floor, he could see what looked like normal living quarters—a living room, kitchen, and large dining room. The windows of the second floor were covered with bars, and there were no lights in them. He suspected the prisoners were housed there, with guards and administrative personnel occupying the lower floors.

He motioned to Chuck to pull the Zodiac into the shore just before they came to the cleared area in front of the house.

They unloaded the boat and gathered in the dense undergrowth in a tight circle. "The only problem we're gonna have is crossing the lawn. There's no cover, and we're going to be totally exposed for the few seconds it takes to cross it."

He looked at his team. They were dressed completely in black, with all exposed skin covered with black greasepaint. They should be totally invisible, unless the sky cleared and uncovered the moon.

"Jersey, Coop, and I will go first. We'll enter through the French doors leading to the living room. Chuck, I want you and Lara and Anna and Nora to make sure they can't call for help. That means cutting any phone lines and taking out any radio antennas or satellite dishes you find on the exterior of the building. By the time you've done that, we should have the first floor secured, silently I hope. If we have to fire our weapons, all bets are off and it's gonna turn into a firefight, so make sure of your targets. I don't want us killing each other in there."

"Roger, Ben," Chuck said, while Anna and Nora nodded.

Ben walked to the edge of the brush and looked across the expanse of lawn, making sure there weren't any guards

201

201

out back sneaking a smoke or looking toward the river. With a final backward glance to make sure Jersey and Coop were ready, he took his CAR off safety and sprinted across the grassy expanse with his two teammates right behind him.

When he got to the patio overlooking the backyard, he stopped with his back to the rear wall of the house, waiting for his breathing to slow to normal.

Using hand signals, he motioned for Jersey and Coop to enter by the right side of the house while he went in the left.

The right rear side door was locked, but opened readily enough when he stuck the point of his K-Bar knife in the keyhole. He eased the door open and peeked around the edge, finding he was in a small anteroom off the kitchen. A lone guard was making a sandwich on the counter, his back to Ben.

Ben slipped through the doorway and approached the man on tiptoe. He must have sensed something, for he turned, a questioning look on his face, just as Ben got to him.

His eyes widened and he opened his mouth to yell, but before he could make a sound, Ben drove the K-Bar into his chest, slipping the blade under his left rib with an upward stroke into the guard's heart. He managed a wheezy gurgle before his eyes glazed over and he fell into Ben's arms.

Ben pulled out his knife and lowered the body to the floor, looking around at the same time to make sure he hadn't been observed. The room and hallway were quiet. No one else was present.

Walking slowly, his CAR in his left hand and the K-Bar in his right, Ben made his way into the downstairs dining room, just off the kitchen.

His finger tightened on the CAR's trigger at a move-

202

ment across the room, until he saw it was Coop and Jersey coming out of another hallway.

He gave a thumbs up and pointed across the dining room at the doorway leading to the living room. Coop nodded, and he and Jersey turned toward the doorway.

With Coop on one side and Jersey on the other, Ben slipped through the opening, weapons at the ready. On a couch across the room, a solitary figure sat reading a book by the light of a single lamp. The rest of the room was in semi-darkness.

Ben trained his CAR on the stairway leading upstairs and motioned with his head to Coop.

Coop nodded, handed his M-16 to Jersey, and got down on hands and knees, his K-Bar's blade gleaming dully in the light from the lamp.

In a matter of seconds, Coop rose behind the guard and grabbed his mouth with his left hand and slit his throat with his K-Bar. The man made no sound as Coop lowered him onto the couch.

Ben and Jersey quickly crossed the room, Jersey pointing her M-16 up the stairway while Ben and Coop walked to another doorway off the living room. Though the door was closed, muffled sounds could be heard through the door.

Ben cocked his head and put it next to the door. It sounded like crying or whimpering, punctuated occasionally by a deeper, harsh voice saying something he couldn't understand.

Ben put his hand on the doorknob and turned. It moved. The door was

unlocked, so he eased it partway open and peered inside.

It was a bedroom, and on a bed against the far wall he could see two figures writhing under the covers.

He laid his CAR down and walked into the room. A burly guard was on top of a woman, who was crying and struggling with his hands on her throat.

203

"Please ... don't... you're hurting me," she groaned, trying to push him off her.

"Shut up, you bitch," the man growled, holding her by the throat with one hand as he tried to tear her clothes off with the other.

When Ben approached the bed, the female saw him. Her eyes widened in surprise and she quit struggling.

The man reared up, looking over his shoulder to see what she was looking at, and Ben pounced. He hit the man in the mouth as hard as he could, and when the guard flopped backward, he drove the K-Bar into his throat, the blade penetrating his neck and lodging in his cervical spine.

The wounded man thrashed like a fish out of water, his mouth opening and closing as he tried to force air past the knife in his windpipe.

Jersey followed Ben into the room and as he held the man down, she went to the side of the bed and put her finger to her lips so the frightened woman wouldn't scream.

When the man was quiet, Jersey helped the woman arrange her torn clothing and stood her up next to the bed. "How many other guards are there?" Ben asked in a whisper.

The girl thought for a moment. "Usually three downstairs and four up," she said in a low voice, using the back of her hand to brush tears out of her eyes.

Where are they stationed?" Jersey asked.

"Two sit at a desk at the head of the stairs, and the other two stay in the guards' bunkroom."

"Any way to get up the stairs without being seen?" Ben asked.

She shook her head. "No, and they keep weapons ready at all times."

Ben pulled his 9mm Beretta automatic pistol from its holster on his belt. "You know how to use this?"

204

The woman grinned and took the pistol from his hand, expertly jacking back the slide and cocking it. "Yes, sir, you bet I do. That's why I'm here!"

"Are you up to going up there and getting the drop on the two guards?" Jersey asked, concern in her eyes.

"Just watch me," she replied, slipping the gun in her waistband at the back of her pants.

She walked slowly up the stairs, moving deliberately to give Ben and the others a chance to station themselves below her.

As she topped the stairs, a harsh laugh could be heard. "Johnny through with you already, Susan?"

Another voice added, "You must've been very good tonight, girl."

Susan could be heard to say, "OK, boys, keep your hands on the desk where I can see 'em."

"Why, you bitch!" growled one of the men as Ben and Jersey and Coop rushed up the stairs.

Two quick shots rang out from the girl, blowing both men backward off their chairs.

Ben and Coop didn't slow as they passed, snapping the safeties off their assault rifles.

Down the hall, a door burst open and two men ran through, pointing rifles ahead of them.

Ben and Cooper opened up on full automatic, spinning the men and throwing them back through the door they'd come out of.

Ben continued his advance, diving through the door and rolling on the floor, bullets flying over his head and stitching a pattern across the wall.

He fired from a prone position and killed the last guard, just as he was lowering his aim.

Ben lay there a moment, catching his breath, letting his adrenalin levels go back down to normal.

Coop sauntered into the room and walked over to check and make sure all the guards were dead. They were.

205

Seconds later, Chuck, Lara, Anna, and Nora bounded up the stairs, their rifles leveled.

"Stay cool!" Jersey shouted before they could fire. "We've got it under control."

Coop looked at Ben lying on the floor. "You OK, chief?"

Ben nodded and scrambled to his feet. "You and the others spread out and give the house a good going-over. I want to make sure all of the guards are accounted for," he ordered.

"Ten-four," Coop said, and he and Jersey went out to get the others to make the search.

"Lara, you might want to go with me to release the prisoners," Ben offered, knowing she was anxious to see Carl and make sure he was all right.

"OK, Ben. Thanks," she replied, her eyes downcast as if she was ashamed to look him in the face.

Starting at the end of the hall, they opened the first door using a key they'd found at the guards' desk. Inside was what was at one time a bedroom, although now it had only a few old mattresses on the floor and two buckets in the corner. From the smell emanating from them, they were the only toilet facilities allowed the prisoners.

There were six men in the room, all cowering back in a corner, and all showing obvious malnutrition and signs of torture.

"They'd be less afraid if you went in first," Ben said to Lara.

She nodded and stepped into the room. "I'm Lara Walden, and we're with the Freedom Fighters who've come to rescue you," she said in a calm, low tone.

At first, the men reacted with frowns of disbelief, as if this were some new torture device devised by their captors to give them false hope. After a few moments, they began to believe. Slowly, moving as if they hadn't had any real exercise in months, they got to their feet and

206

shuffled over to Ben and Lara. One of the prisoners, tears in his eyes, took Lara's hand and gently kissed it.

"Thank you . . . thank you so much. We were afraid we'd never . . ."

He stopped and began to sob openly, unable to go on.

Ben put his arm around the man's shoulders and said, "Come on out, gentlemen. There's plenty of food and drink in the kitchen. We'll meet you there in a few minutes after we release the others."

The prisoners didn't need to be asked twice. Moving quicker now, they filed out of the room and headed down the stairs.

The next room was much the same, only it held three men and four women, all of whom showed signs they'd been badly mistreated. After sending them to the kitchen, too, Lara rushed to the last room on the floor, her face showing a mixture of hope and fear. She wasn't sure Carl was really there.

Ben opened the door and let her precede him into the room. As he followed her in, he heard her gasp and groan at the same time. The only occupant of the room was a gaunt man with dirty, bloodstained bandages on his left hand. He reminded Ben of pictures he'd seen of concentration camp survivors from World War II. Though from Lara's description he knew Carl to be in his mid-twenties, the man Lara rushed to hug looked fifty at least.

Ben slowly backed out of the room and went downstairs, where the other team members were busy fixing food and drink for the prisoners, who were devouring it as fast as it was served.

"Chuck," Ben said, "Lara's friend Carl is upstairs, and he looks as if he may need immediate medical attention."

Chuck glanced at Nora. "Nora, would you mind fetching my medical bag from the Zodiac? I'll be upstairs with Lara and Carl."

After they left, Jersey walked over to Ben, a speculative

207

look in her eye. "Chuck told us they thought Carl had been killed when they were prisoners before." She stared at him. "This wouldn't have anything to do with that mysterious call you got from Mike, would it?"

He smiled, "Yeah, but the less you know about it, the less chance you have of being court-martialed."

He walked toward the front of the house. "Has anyone checked on the garage?" he asked.

Coop looked up from making sandwiches at the counter. "Yeah, boss. There're are two SUVs in there, a four man Jeep with a full tank, and a boat."

"OK," Ben said and walked up the stairs.

In the room, he found Lara watching anxiously as Nora and Chuck worked on Carl.

"How is he?"

"Chuck says a couple of shots of antibiotics and two weeks on some pills and he'll be okay. He mainly needs food . . . protein and such, to heal his wounds."

"Come out here in the hall with me for a minute, Lara."

"OK, Ben."

When they were alone, Ben took her by the shoulders. "Lara, as I said before, SUSA can't condone what you did, even though I know why, and sympathize with your motives." He took a deep breath and pulled a map case from his back pocket. He handed her the map. "There's a Jeep in the garage. As soon as Chuck is through with Carl and he's had some food, I suggest you two take it and head north. Don't stop until you are in Canada. This map will show you the latest intel we have on which roads are unguarded. OK?"

Tears welled in her eyes as she took the map from his hand. "Are you sure you want to do that for us? Won't it get you in some sort of trouble?"

He shrugged. "Lara, I wouldn't know what it means not to be in trouble. It's your only hope. There is a death

208

sentence on your head, by both SUSA and the USA, but Canada should be safe enough."

She stood up on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. "Thank you, Ben. We'll never forget you for this."

He forced himself to turn away. "Just see that you make it to Canada before you stop, or all this will have been for nothing."

209

Yiro found a pay telephone outside of Indianapolis and made a cautious entrance into the parking lot beside it.

It was five minutes before ten in the morning. Traffic was slow, due to the bombings during the night. At one point he'd had to travel by back roads to get to the USA's capital. Bridges were out all over the state of Indiana, too, and it was virtually impossible to find a fuel station with power for its pumps on the main thoroughfares running east and west. The many SUSA Scout teams had been markedly successful, along with the almost constant bombing in disrupting power stations all across the USA.

Toward the end of his journey he was again almost out of gas, coasting down hills to make the most of the fuel he had left, wondering all the while if he would make it. He knew if he ran out of gas and was found by security forces of the USA he was as good as dead, for they would never again let him out of their sight until he'd given them what they wanted.

He got out of his car, after careful scrutiny of the area to be sure no FPPS vehicles were nearby, with their distinctive license plates bearing the insignia of the USA painted on the plates in silver.

Yiro dialed the number General Maxwell and Harlan Millard had given him and waited while the phone rang.

"Hello?"

The voice was unfamiliar, as Yiro expected. There

210

would be a number of security blockades placed between himself and General Maxwell.

"I need to speak to General Maxwell, or to Harlan Millard. My name is Yiro Ishi."

"Who?"

"Yiro Ishi. Either the general or Mr. Millard will know who I am."

"Will they know why you're calling?" the unfriendly speaker asked.

"Yes. Just give them my name."

"It will take a few minutes."

Yiro knew they were tracing the call. After he had gone this far, there was no turning back. The trunk of his Nissan was loaded with biological disaster. The box containing the formula for the vaccine was with Sun Li. He carried a slightly different formula for the bubonic plague vaccine in his briefcase, just in case he was questioned in detail. It was almost the same as the correct vaccine cultures, although different in one deadly respect that made it useless.

Desperate times call for desperate measures, he thought. He had to wait,

even though the call was being traced, until he could talk to General Maxwell or Harlan Millard and make them his offer.

"Please hurry," he said, watching an Indianapolis police patrol car roll by slowly. The policeman seemed to be paying more than casual notice to him as he stood in the telephone booth.

"Don't tell me what to do," the voice snapped. "I have to check on a few things first."

Yiro could hear the click of telephone tap lines being put into place.

"Tell General Maxwell, or Mr. Millard, that I will only wait two minutes," Yiro added.

"Just who the hell do you think you are, mister?" the voice wanted to know.

211

211

"Maxwell, or Millard, will tell you who I am. Please hurry or I will be forced to hang up."

"You're an insolent son of a bitch. Do you know what number you've reached?"

"This is the main security number for headquarters of the USA at Indianapolis."

"Maybe you're only guessing. Could be you just got lucky and the call came here."

"Where do you think I got the number?" Yiro replied. "It was given to me by General Maxwell himself. President Osterman is waiting for me to call with the information I have. It should be very easy to verify this. I will only wait one minute longer, and then I will call another number that was given to me by the general."

"Another number?"

Yiro glanced down at a small piece of paper he had been given after the meeting with Osterman's staff. "I have a number for Otis Warner."

A silence.

"Are you still there?" Yiro asked.

"What is this number for Mr. Warner? I'm making sure you're legitimate. Hell, everyone in the USA knows these names. You could have gotten them anywhere."

Yiro took a deep breath. His patience, and his nerve, were running short. "If you believe I am an impostor, then explain how I got this number. I am quite sure it is classified as top secret."

Another silence, longer.

"What is the number you have for Mr. Warner? If you have it, I'll know you are telling the truth."

Yiro read the number to the security officer, being sure of each numeral.

"I'll put you right through, Mr. Ishi. Sorry, but we have to take precautions. The general should answer almost any moment now."

212

"Thank you," Yiro said, without too much heavy sarcasm in his voice.

A series of clicks, then a dial tone, followed by a ring on the other end of the line.

"Yes? This is Maxwell."

"I am Yiro Ishi. Your security experts did not want to put me through."

"There are certain measures we must take--"

"I understand. I have the ... items we discussed. I am ready now to make a deal with you, if you have my price and are ready for the transfer."

A meaningful pause.

"There is a slight problem raising the amount you asked for. Madam President wants to know if you will settle for a more reasonable price, Dr. Ishi."

"Reasonable?" Yiro asked. "What is reasonable for a weapon that will win the war for you?"

"How much will you take? Give me your lowest amount. Let's get to the bottom line instead of dealing in bullshit."

"I have already told you my price. Five million dollars in gold or precious stones. They must be delivered to me within two hours at your airport inside the compound, along with a jet to take me to Switzerland. Only after the money is deposited in an account there will I tell you where the information concerning the making of the bombs and the vaccine can be found. In addition, I want a plane to carry my wife and my children back to Japan. My father, who lives in Pittsburgh, will also be included as a passenger on this flight. My family must be safe before we strike a bargain."

"That's too much. You gotta be crazy ... to think President Osterman would pay that figure. I'm telling you, Ishi, the treasury just doesn't have that amount in it."

"Very well," Yiro said, his heart pounding. "I will sell

213

my grandfather's formula to General Ben Raines. He will pay what I am asking."

"Hold on a minute, you little ... Dr. Ishi. I'll have to get clearance from someone higher up in order to pay that much, and I can't promise you that airplane."

"Then our business proposition is off," Yiro said. As another police car drove by the phone booth where he was making the call.

"Don't hang up yet, Dr. Ishi," Maxwell said, a change in his tone. "All I said was ... I'd have to check with someone else before I agreed to your . . . offer."

"I cannot wait any longer. I will call back in one hour, if the arrangements haven't been made, then sayonara, General."

General Leland Maxwell couldn't believe it when he heard the dial tone in his ear. The little bastard was turning out to be a much more difficult negotiator than he'd thought he would be. Damn, he thought, if I blow this, Osterman is going to have my head on a platter.

He sat at his desk a moment, drumming his fingers, trying to figure a way out of calling her, but knew he had no choice.

Reluctantly, he dialed her number.

"Claire Osterman here."

"Madam President, this is General Maxwell."

"Ah, Max. Have you convinced that Jap to take less money?"

"No, Madam President. He is standing firm. He says if arrangements aren't made within the hour, he'll sell his formula to Ben Raines."

Maxwell held the phone away from his ear as Claire began to scream into it. "What! That son of a bitch is threatening me?" After a few more curse words, she

214

growled, "Bring him in and we'll torture the secret out of him. Use his family if need be."

"Uh, there's a slight problem there."

"What is it, Max?" she asked in a dangerously mild tone.

"It seems some overzealous Black Shirts killed his father and his father's housekeeper last night, and we don't exactly know where Ishi is at the moment."

"Oh, that's just great, Max. So you're telling me we have to give in to the bastard's demands?"

"That decision is entirely up to you, Madam President. However, I'm afraid that without Ishi's plague bombs and the formula for an effective vaccine against them, the citizens aren't going to put up with the war much longer. Too many of them are having to do without the basic necessities of life. Even food and potable water is becoming scarce."

"Max, is this a defeatist attitude I'm hearing from you?"

"No, ma'am. I'm just trying to explain the situation to you so you can make an informed decision," Max answered, sweat beading his brow. He knew he was treading on extremely dangerous ground. Sugar Babe never, but never, liked to be told they were losing the war, or that she'd ever made any decisions that could be construed as being wrong.

"So,"-she paused, and he could almost hear her thinking of a way to make any decision she came to his fault if it proved to be a wrong one-"your recommendation is to give in to the little son of a bitch's demands?"

Max swallowed the lump in his throat. "Yes, ma'am, it is."

"OK then. Do it, Max. Make it happen. But be quick about it. I'd hate to lose this war because of your failure to act soon enough to get the formulas from Ishi."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll get right on it."

215

"Oh, and Max . . ."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Make sure you have Herb Knoff handle the transfer of funds, and the acquisition of the formula for the bomb and the vaccine. He has instructions from me to make sure that bastard Ishi never lives to enjoy his blackmail money."

"Certainly, Madam President. I'll see to it."

Forty-seven minutes later, when Ishi called back, General Maxwell came on the line in less than a minute. "OK, Dr. Ishi. We have a deal. Five million in gold and diamonds are on the way to my office now. Arrangements have been made to fly you to Switzerland, and your family to Japan. You understand, as soon as they are deposited in your account you must give us the information we need both for the bombs and the vaccine."

"I only have the scientific formula for the antidote vaccine, as you call it. As you must have guessed, I will keep it until my family, and the gold and diamonds, are safely out of the USA. Then I will give the formula to you, and instructions for your scientists on how to prepare it in a living culture. It grows very rapidly. In only a few days you will have enough vaccine to inoculate every soldier and civilian in this country. As with most vaccines, it requires only a small amount. What about the airplane I requested?"

"A private jet will be waiting near the runway here at our military compound. We'll send someone for your wife and children. However, there has been a problem with your father. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you."

"A problem? What sort of problem?"

"Your father and his housekeeper were apparently killed by robbers last night. Our reports say someone

216

broke down the front door. The housekeepers throat was cut, and your father was shot in the head. I'm truly sorry."

Yiro froze, his hand clamped around the telephone. He knew for certain that his father's death, and Yoko's, were not due to a robbery attempt. Someone from FPPS had traced him to his father's house and then killed him.

He closed his eyes for a moment, fighting back tears. Tsi had not deserved to die like that.

"Are you still there, Dr. Ishi?"

"Yes." He sighed. "I am here."

"Drive to the main gate of the compound. Ask for me, and give them the code word-Atlas."

"Atlas?"

"Yeah. He had the weight of the world on his shoulders. Sometimes, I feel the same way. A guard at the gate will call me, and I'll have you escorted here as soon as you arrive."

"I do not have the bacteria with me," Ishi said, trying to hide the fury he felt at his father's murder. "They are in a safe place, the location of which I will divulge to you after I have the money and what remains of my family is safe." Yiro warned, "Once recovered, someone must guard the vials closely. They can be very dangerous, and special equipment has to be worn while they are being handled."

"I understand, Dr. Ishi. In the meantime, call your wife and have her ready to travel. A squad of special soldiers will be there to pick her and your children up. They will be driven to the airplane. The pilot will await your instructions as to where they are to land in Japan."

Yiro's mouth was dry. "You understand, General Maxwell, that I have taken certain necessary precautions. Unless you do exactly as I have asked, the bacteria and everything I have shown you will be useless."

"We expected no less, Dr. Ishi. Drive to the main gate and give the guard the code word. You will be brought

217

here to my office, and then you can verify that your family is safely aboard the jet."

"And you will have the gold and diamonds and another plane there for me?"

"Of course."

"I will be there in half an hour, General. Please do not betray me, or there is a possibility many innocent people will die."

"I understand, Dr. Ishi. I'll be waiting for you here, and there will be no betrayal."

Yiro hung up, sleeveing tears from his eyes while remembering his father. He would make damn sure he hadn't died in vain, and that President Osterman and her generals paid dearly for his death.

He drove his car with its deadly cargo to a Buddhist temple on the outskirts of Indianapolis. He carried the vials of bacteria into the temple and through a door leading to the basement. As he stored the plague bacteria in a wooden box, he thought it fitting that the deadliest weapon known to man was resting in a temple dedicated to

peace, for if all went well his vials would at last end the war and bring peace to the world.

218

Yiro Ishi drove into the command post west of Indianapolis without hesitation. The guards seemed to know he was coming, but he played the general's game and gave the code word, anyway.

"Atlas," he said when the guard leaned in his window. The guard waved his hand and another soldier in a Jeep led him toward the underground bunker where he had first offered his grandfather's project to the top brass at USA headquarters.

He stopped the Nissan in front of the small building leading to an elevator down to General Maxwell's offices, and the nerve center of the USA's military effort. A detail of eight men in black shirts, automatic rifles slung from shoulder straps, came toward him, surrounding his battered car.

"Follow me, Dr. Ishi," a tall soldier said.

After Ishi got out of the car, the guard whispered to another man, "Search the car and make sure he doesn't have anything hidden in it."

Ishi overheard the order and smiled to himself. He'd repacked the vials and added an envelope with a bogus formula for the vaccine and left them in the basement of the temple, where no respectable agent of the USA would ever venture.

"Contact General Maxwell. Before I go down to talk

219

to him, I must be certain that the jet plane is ready, and that my family is on board."

The Black Shirt scowled. "You aren't exactly in any position to be making demands. In case you can't count, you are surrounded by soldiers of the USA--"

"You are not soldiers," Yiro said quietly, his voice filled with scorn. "You are nothing more than common thugs who hide behind your black shirts as if they give you power. Now, do as I said and call General Maxwell at once, unless you want me to tell him I've changed my mind due to your insolence."

The Black Shirt gritted his teeth and clenched his hands until they were white on his automatic rifle. He was not used to people, especially not minorities, talking to him in this manner. He was about to slap the little bastard's face, until he looked into his eyes. They were deadly serious, and showed not an iota of fear. The man hesitated. Maybe he'd misread the situation. With a shrug, he turned and picked up a telephone mounted on the wall of the building.

"Please inform General Maxwell that I will not talk to him until I have seen my family, and the airplane that will take them across the Pacific to Japan."

"You talk mighty big for a little bastard who ain't even carryin' a

gun," the Black Shirt said, turning to the others around him.

"Perhaps so. But I assure you that all of you will die a slow, miserable death from the bubonic plague unless you do as I ask."

Another Black Shirt spoke up, a short, muscular man with a number of tattoos on his arms. "Why don't we just kill this smart-mouth Nip?" he asked, looked to the leader of the squad for support.

"Shut up, Clyde," the squad leader snapped. "Show Dr. Ishi to one of our Jeeps and take him over to the airfield."

220

His wife an' kids are there in the Learjet. We'll let him talk to 'em for a minute."

Ishi gave an insolent smile and a slight bow of his head. "Thank you."

"Radio down to the general that his little Jap friend is here, and that we're takin' him over to see his family."

An older model Learjet sat at the end of a runway, with a pair of Black Shirt guards flanking the steps leading into the plane.

Yiro climbed the portable steps carefully, wondering if he might be facing a double-cross after he got inside the fuselage to see his family.

Sun Li leapt out of her seat to throw her arms around his neck.

He embraced her, and smiled at their children buckled into seats near the front of the plane.

He spoke to her in Japanese.

"Do you have everything?"

"Yes, just as you instructed."

"The box?"

"It is here, in my small suitcase."

Yiro kissed away the tears on her cheeks. "Do not worry, Sun Li," he whispered.

"I have never been so afraid, my husband. These are mean people. They will kill us. I fear for the lives of our children."

"It is a chance we must take. The ethnic cleansing would have sent us to our deaths sooner or later. I am doing this for our children . . . and for us."

"They will kill you, Yiro."

He wagged his head. "Not now. Not yet. I have the thing they need most. Do not ask me to explain it now. I will tell you later."

"What do I do with the box? If something happens to you, my husband."

"Send it to Alfred Simmer. He is with the Rebels, living

221

221

in Florida. The address is in the box. Do not entrust it to anyone."

"But how do I send it... if... if something happens to you?" she cried.

"There is a name on the outside of the envelope, a man who will see to it that the box is handed over to Dr. Zim-mer. Money for the delivery is in the envelope."

Sun Li trembled against him, holding him fiercely against her. "I am afraid I will never see you again, darling Yiro. My heart tells me that we are saying good-bye for the last time. Please assure me this is not true."

"It is not true," he said, speaking the high-mountain Japanese dialect they both knew.

He felt her shudder again.

"Do not cry. Once you get to Japan, I will have a great deal of money in a bank in Switzerland. I will contact you with the account number, so the funds can be accessed from our Japanese bank. Take the account number to my cousin in Hiroshima, and give him the letter addressed to him hidden at the bottom of the box. He will know what to do. If nothing goes wrong, I will be able to join you within the week."

She stepped back and stared into his eyes. "You mean if they do not kill you?"

Again, he shook his head. "They need me, General Maxwell and his staff. Without me, they cannot use the vials without grave risk."

"Why do we have to do this?" his wife asked tearfully, a plea in her voice.

"Because they would have ultimately killed us as a part of the ethnic cleansing, anyway. I am doing the only thing I can to keep us, and our children, alive. If nothing goes wrong, my plan should work."

A Black Shirt stuck his head into the plane. "Hey, Ishi! General Maxwell wants to see you right away, and he's a man who don't like to be kept waiting."

222

"I must go now," Yiro said. "I will be in touch with you soon. I will not give them what they want until I have heard you and the children are safe. Remember the code word is cherry blossom-if you are okay and they are not holding you under duress. If I do not hear you say that, I will know it is a trick, and you are not safe." He leaned down and kissed her gently on the lips, whispering, "Remember my instructions once you get to Hiroshima."

She looked up when he released her. "You said your father would be flying to Japan with us. Where is he? Will they bring him here?"

Yiro took a deep breath, not wanting to lie to Sun Li, at the same time afraid of what the truth might do to her. "He is dead. Yoko is also dead."

"Dead? What happened?"

He prepared himself to tell a small white lie, the same lie he'd been told by the Black Shirts. "Some robbers broke into his house last night."

Sun Li blinked, searching his face. "I do not believe that," she said softly. "It is a part of what you are doing now, isn't it?"

"Do not ask me questions now," he said. "I must speak to General Maxwell at once."

The Black Shirt spoke again in an angry voice. "Let's go, you yellow bastard. General Maxwell is waiting for you, and we ain't got all day."

Yiro kissed Sun Li one more time, then he turned and followed the soldier out of the Learjet.

He turned and waved to his children, who stared out at him from small windows, as he walked across the tarmac.

The canvas bags were heavy, almost more than he could carry, and he'd been sure to examine each one. Most were filled with gold coins. Two smaller bags held cut diamonds of the best possible clarity. He was tempted to put the bags on the Learjet with Sun Li and his children, but he knew the USA would have agents watching them in

223

Japan. The only place in the world the money would be safe from the USA's influence was Switzerland, which still guarded its numbered accounts and kept them secret.

General Maxwell introduced him to a man who had been sitting in a corner of his office while Ishi examined the bags. "Mr. Ishi, this is Herb Knoff. He is going to accompany you to Switzerland to make sure you don't have any trouble depositing the money, and you are to give him the information on the location of the vaccine formula and the vials of bacteria."

One look at the man was enough for Ishi. He'd seen his type plenty of times before. He knew Knoff was along to kill him as soon as he gave him what they wanted.

Ishi nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He didn't want them to know he was aware of what they had in store for him.

Maxwell and Knoff led him to another Learjet on the landing field, just a hundred yards from the one containing his family. He watched Sun Li and his children take off, then entered the airplane, followed by Knoff.

After they were seated and his bags stored next to him, Knoff leaned his seat back and closed his eyes. "It's a seven hour trip to Geneva, so you might as well get some sleep," he said.

Ishi laid his head back and closed his eyes. He still had plans to make, and would use the entire seven hours to make sure there were no loopholes in his scheme.

The plane flight to Switzerland and the ride to the bank were uneventful. The Credit Suisse was housed in an old building, in a row with several other banks. It seemed to Ishi as if the entire economy of Switzerland was built on handling other people's money.

The lobby was large, with several windows occupied

224

by tellers, all busy serving people from many different countries.

Ishi walked to a desk and asked to see the manager. In less than a minute, a heavysset gentlemen dressed in a suit and vest sauntered out from a private office.

"I am Herr Geldman. What can I do for you?"

"I have approximately five million dollars in gold and diamonds to deposit," Ishi said, smiling slightly at the reaction of the banker, who suddenly became quite deferential.

"Of course, gentlemen. Perhaps you could come into my private office, just down the hall?"

It took less than an hour for Ishi's treasure to be counted and placed in the bank vault and for him to be issued his nine digit account number.

He folded the paper carefully and placed it in his billfold, then turned to Knoff, who was sitting in a large, overstuffed chair across the room.

"If you will excuse me, Mr. Knoff. Perhaps you could wait for me in the lobby while I call to see if my wife and family are safe."

Knoff's face looked uncertain. "Is there any back way out of this building?" he asked Herr Geldman.

"Why ... no. The only exits are through the lobby."

Knoff nodded, glaring at Ishi. "I'll be waiting outside. Don't try anything funny."

After he left, Ishi turned to Geldman. "Might I use your phone for a long distance call to Japan?"

"Certainly. Make yourself at home, Herr Ishi."

Ishi called the prearranged number in Japan and his wife answered.

"How are you, Sun Li? Is everything all right?" Ishi asked.

"Oh, Yiro. Everything here is even more beautiful than I imagined it would be. The cherry blossoms are in full bloom, and are gorgeous."

225

225

"The children are well?"

"Yes. We are all safe and awaiting your return, my husband."

"Good. I love you, Sun Li. Here is the account number-write it down." He gave her the number and hung up, telling her he'd see her in a few days.

After he hung up, he turned to Geldman. "Is there a Japanese restaurant nearby?"

"Yes, the Bizan. The food is excellent."

"Is it a traditional Japanese restaurant?"

"Yes, and the decorations are delightful. I'm sure you'll find it to your satisfaction."

"Would you dial the number for me, please?"

"Certainly."

When he had the restaurant on the line, he handed the phone to Ishi.

Speaking Japanese, he asked if the waitresses dressed in the traditional manner. When the manager assured him they did, Ishi made him an offer he couldn't refuse.

He hung up the phone, picked up the small valise he'd carried with him on the plane, and walked out to the lobby.

Knoff stood up, his face dark. "What took you so long?"

"I had to make sure my family was safe before I gave you the location of the bacteria and the vaccine formula."

Knoff didn't speak, just held out his hand. Ishi took a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to the bodyguard.

"Perhaps you'd like to call General Maxwell and have him verify that everything is in order before I leave?" Ishi asked, as if naively assuming Knoff was going to let him go free.

"Yeah, that'd be a good idea," Knoff said, a crafty look in his eye.

Ishi pointed to a set of doors at the side of the lobby.

226

"I'm going to use the rest room and freshen up a little. Okay?"

Knoff walked over and peeked in the men's room, making sure there were no windows Ishi could climb out. "Sure, I'll just be over there on the phone."

Once in the rest room, Ishi went into a stall and locked the door. He opened the valise and took out what he needed and began to prepare his escape.

Knoff gave Maxwell the location of the hidden vials of bacteria and left his number so he could be called back when the general was sure all was as it should be.

"Don't kill the bastard until we're sure we have what we want," Maxwell ordered.

"I'll wait. Then I'm gonna break his fuckin' neck."

Knoff sat in one of the chairs next to the phone and crossed his legs, watching as a crowd of five Japanese women dressed in traditional gowns and with painted white faces entered the bank. Two went to a teller's window while the other three made for the women's rest room.

"Jesus," Knoff muttered. "How can Japanese men stand all that paint on their women's faces?"

The phone next to him rang and he picked up the receiver, glancing up as the women came out of the rest room and joined their friends at the teller's window.

"Maxwell here. We've got it, and it looks like the genuine article."

"So, I'm free to take the bastard out?" Knoff said, smiling and nodding as one of the Geisha girls batted her eyes at him and smiled as the crowd of women left the bank.

"Kill him, but don't get caught. We need you back here."

"He's in the John. I'll do it there, and leave his body on the toilet. A fitting end for the son of a bitch."

He hung up the phone and walked toward the restroom, pulling on a pair of black leather gloves so as to leave no fingerprints for the police.

227

He eased the door open and went to the only stall with a closed door. Pushing the door open, he drew back his arm for a killing karate blow, only to discover a pile of clothes and a note.

He picked it up and read, "Thank you for the money and for my freedom. I'm sorry you didn't get to complete your assignment, but I'm sure President Osterman will not hold it against you. I hear she is a very forgiving person."

"Oh shit!" Knoff said. He'd be lucky if Osterman didn't have him killed for this.

Unless, he thought, she never finds out. Who's to say I didn't kill the son of a bitch, after all? Ishi sure as hell wasn't going to tell anyone.

He wadded up the note and flushed it down the toilet.

Feeling better, Knoff walked out of the bank and hailed a taxicab to take him to the airport. As of now, Yiro Ishi was officially dead.

228

Yiro watched from the window of the Japanese restaurant until he saw Herb Knoff come out of the bank building and hail a cab. Only when the cab was around the corner and out of sight did he relax.

Turning to the Japanese waitresses who'd helped him, he took out a wad

of hundred dollar bills and passed them out, to much giggling and chattering. Thank God Mr. Knoff knew nothing of our Japanese theatre tradition of Kabuki, in which men play all the roles, even those of women, thought Yiro.

He exited the restaurant through a side door and made his way to a men's clothing shop recommended by the restaurant owner. Once he had changed into a business suit, with a bag full of new shirts, underwear, and socks, he took a cab to the Alpine Hotel. He picked it because it was neither so swank nor so dingy as to draw attention, just in case Mr. Knoff hadn't really given up on finding him.

In his room, he changed into more casual clothes and dialed the concierge.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Smith," the concierge said, addressing him by the Anglo name he'd used to register.

"Is it possible to place a call to the office of the President of the Southern United States of America?"

"Why, certainly Mr. Smith. I'll ring you back when I have them on the phone."

229

In less than ten minutes, the phone rang.

"Yes?" Ishi said.

"This is Margaret Peterson, assistant to the President. May I be of service to you?"

"This is Yiro Ishi calling. I have an urgent message for whoever is running the army."

"May I ask what it is about?"

"It concerns a plan by the USA to drop bombs containing a new plague bacillus on your country. I must speak with someone in authority in order to avoid a catastrophe."

"One minute please," the young woman said, as if she received such calls on a daily basis.

After a moment, there were several clicks on the line, followed by a burst of static. Finally, a male voice said, "Hello, this is Mike Post."

"Mr. Post, I assume you have the authority to act on my information."

"That is correct, Mr., uh, Ishi."

It took Ishi fifteen minutes of nonstop talking to relate the series of events that'd landed him in Switzerland, and to give Mike the name of Doctor Alfred Zimmer.

"I'm familiar with Dr. Zimmer," Mike said.

"Good, then you know he is a patriot and is a renowned bacteriologist. I have arranged for a formula-for a vaccine against the bubonic plague bacteria the USA is planning to drop on SUSA-to be sent to Dr. Simmer

from Japan. It should arrive very soon, giving you plenty of time to prepare the vaccine, test it, and administer it to your people before the first bombs are dropped. Included in the sample is a small vial of the bacterium itself, so you may see that the vaccine works."

"Why are you doing this, Mr. Ishi?"

"For many reasons, Mr. Post. First and foremost, I am a scientist, not a mass murderer. And, the truth of the matter is, I admire and respect the form of government

230

under which you live, and would hate to see it destroyed by that monster, Osterman."

"That sounds mighty nice, Ishi, but is it enough of a reason for us to trust you?"

"The bastards murdered my father in cold blood, Mr. Post." Ishi's voice cracked. "For that alone they deserve to die. That is why the vaccine formula I gave them is useless against the strain of bacteria they will be using." He forced himself to gain control, and said in a calmer voice, "I think it only fitting they will die by their own hand in a futile effort to destroy you."

"OK, Mr. Ishi. We'll give your vaccine a look."

"Please, Mr. Post, do more than that. The vaccine takes two weeks to confer full immunity, so don't waste too much time."

"I understand. Is there anyplace we can contact you should Dr. Zimmer or our other experts have any questions?"

"I shall call you back weekly," Ishi said, "and I will use the code word Fujiyama, after Japan's highest and most sacred mountain, when I call. If it is more urgent than that, place an add in Tokyo's major newspapers to Mr. Fujiyama, and I will contact you the same day."

"Good enough, Mr. Ishi. Needless to say, the thanks of a grateful nation will be yours if this works out as you say."

"No thanks are necessary, Mr. Post, as long as you rid the world of Claire Osterman and all she stands for."

As soon as he hung up on Ishi Mike Post placed a call to Ike McGowen, ex-SEAL and commander of Battalion 502.

When he came on the line, Mike didn't waste any time explaining Ishi's call.

231

"Sounds fishy to me," Ike said. "Why would he give the plague to the USA, and the antidote to us?"

"It's a long story," Mike said. "What I want you to do is get a team together, including Dr. Lamar Chase, and fly down to Florida. I want you to be there when the vaccine and plague bacillus samples arrive. Your mission is to protect Dr. Zimmer and see that the vaccine formula is thoroughly tested by Doc Chase and Zimmer. If what Ishi says is true,

we're gonna need every second of time you can buy us to get the vaccine in production and administered to our troops and citizens."

"OK, Mike, but it still sounds fishy to me." "I'll bump Ben and let him know what's going on, and see if he's got any intel about the supposed attack by the USA. Meanwhile, make sure that nothing happens to Zimmer until we get that vaccine."

"Ten-four, Mike. You can count on me." "And, Ike. I hear the smoked mullet is great down in Florida."

"You know me, Mike. If it's edible, I'll give it a try." "Good luck, Ike. Eagle Two over and out."

Ben was just pouring his first cup of coffee and lighting his first cigarette of the day when Corrie informed him Mike was on the horn.

"Hello, Eagle Two, this is Eagle One," Ben said, trying to balance the microphone, his cup of coffee, and his cigarette all at the same time.

"Ben," Mike said, "I've got some new intel I need to talk to you about, but first I want to know if you've taken care of the problem I bumped you about yesterday."

Ben hesitated. He had never lied to Mike, but he didn't want him to know the details of how he'd handled Lara Walden and her friend, Carl. "Yeah, Mike. The problem

232

has been handled. I'll guarantee we'll not have any repeat of what was going on before."

"Then you've terminated the source of our leaks?"

"The problem has been taken care of. There'll be no more leaks or false orders given from this location," Ben said, skirting the truth, but letting Mike know Lara was out of the loop as far as Intel went.

He didn't bother to give him the details-how he'd let Lara and Carl leave for Canada, or how he'd arranged for all the prisoners they'd rescued to take the remaining vehicles in the garage of the prison and return to their homes, to keep up their work as Freedom Fighters assisting SUSA in its war against the USA. Even Ben's team didn't know the full details of their mission.

"We have a new problem," Mike said. "I've just received information that Osterman has been given a new BW, one that we have no vaccine against. My source says she's preparing to drop BW bombs containing the new bacteria within the next few weeks."

Ben was shocked. He'd heard nothing of a new BW. "That's news to me," he said over the radio.

"Luckily, we have an ace in the hole Osterman doesn't know about," Mike said. "It's too delicate to go into over the radio, but if all works out, the BW will not be as effective as she hopes."

"Anything I can do on this end?"

"Keep your eyes and ears open. If you get any intel concerning a new BW attack, let me know soonest."

"Will do. Eagle One over and out."

As soon as his men had recovered the vials of bacterial cultures and the vaccine formula from where Ishi had told Knoff they were hidden, General Maxwell turned them over to his scientific staff. His orders were simple: Make

233

the weapon and the vaccine as soon as possible. If there were any delays, heads were going to roll, literally!

Once he had the BW weapon's manufacture on track, he put in a call to Claire Osterman.

"Hello, Max. I hope you have good news for me, for a change."

"Yes, ma'am. I am in possession of the bacteria for the new bombs, as well as a formula for a vaccine which will protect us against the plague."

"That's very good news. Let me know as soon as we have the bombs ready. It can't be too soon to show that bastard Ben Raines what it means to fuck around with me."

"Yes, ma'am. As soon as we have adequate amounts of the vaccine for our troops and our citizens, we'll proceed with an attack."

"Wait a minute, General. I want to know the minute the plague is ready to drop. As long as we have adequate vaccine for our government officials, and our most valuable troops, then we can proceed with the bombing."

"But, Madam President, it will take an extra week or so to get enough of the vaccine to distribute to the citizens of the USA."

"Perhaps you didn't hear me, General. I said, as soon as the bacteria and enough of the vaccine for us is ready, drop the damned bomb! I'm sure before the disease has spread this far north, we'll have had time to get our citizens inoculated. Besides, as you well know, our esteemed citizens are already suffering greatly from the effects of the disease organisms we dropped previously on SUSA, so another plague won't make a whole hell of a lot of difference." She hesitated a moment. Then, with a low, almost obscene chuckle, she continued. "In fact, this might almost be construed as a blessing. It will give us a chance to pick and choose our most valuable citizens to save, and allow us to cut out a lot of unproductive, or

234

otherwise undesirable citizens that we've been forced to spend our hard-earned tax dollars to support or eliminate."

Maxwell couldn't believe what he was hearing. The coldhearted bitch was sentencing millions of her own citizens to death, along with those of SUSA, in order to drop the bombs a few days earlier. Damn! He only wished he had the balls to defy her on this. Of course, what she said did make a macabre sort of sense. They could give the vaccine to

well-educated, wage-earning and therefore necessary, citizens and simply let the diseases cull out the deadwood among the populace. It would make the country a lot leaner, and a lot more efficient.

When she didn't get an immediate answer, Osterman continued. "Max, I didn't hear you agree to my wishes. Is it time for me to think about appointing a new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff?"

"No, ma'am. I'll do as you wish."

"Of course you will, Max. That's what generals are for, to carry out orders."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now, did Herbert take care of our other little problem, in Switzerland?"

"Yes, ma'am. He reported Dr. Ishi would never be heard from again."

"Good. You will send Herbert to me as soon as he arrives back in town, won't you? I have a special . . . reward for the excellent job he did in carrying out his orders."

Maxwell sighed, knowing Knoff would be less than thrilled at the "reward" Osterman had planned for him. "Yes, ma'am. I'll send him over as soon as he gets here."

"Excellent. I can hardly wait."

Maxwell hung up the phone, knowing in his heart that despite his years of loyal service to the USA he would be eliminated without a moment's remorse by Osterman

235 CRISIS IN THE ASHES 235

should he ever dare to defy her orders. He'd never seen anyone as single-minded as the president, and for the first time he could remember he didn't envy her the job.

236

Two weeks later, General Maxwell went to President Osterman's office.

"Hello, Max," she said from behind her desk.

Maxwell, who hadn't seen Claire since their last phone conversation, was shocked by her appearance. Her hair was disheveled, her makeup was spotty and looked as if it'd been applied in the dark, and her clothes were wrinkled and dirty.

"Madam President," he said, wishing he'd phoned instead of coming in person. Whatever was causing her to look this way was something he was sure he didn't want to know about.

She ran a hand through her hair, glancing at him with eyes that were red and bloodshot. "I certainly hope you've come to me with some good news."

"Yes, ma'am. The flea bombs are ready, and we have enough vaccine on hand for our armed service personnel and other essential persons that you designate."

"Thank God!" she said, her eyes showing some signs of life. "Max, what I have to tell you is extremely confidential, top secret."

"Ma'am?"

"You know the war is not going well for us at all, Max. The constant bombardment by SUSA forces, as well as the daily acts of sabotage and assassination, are taking their toll. Our treasury is almost empty, there is hardly

237

enough food and water to keep our people alive, and very few cities have electricity or phone service."

She stood up and walked to a table in the corner of the room and poured herself a cup of coffee, motioning to him to get some if he wanted it.

As he poured himself a cup, she sat on the corner of her desk. "And, to make matters worse, the plague has spread from our southernmost borders to infect practically every area of the country. In some areas, the number of dead is so great they've given up trying to bury them and have taken to burning huge piles of corpses in the streets." She shook her head. "As you can well imagine, the populace is on the very verge of revolution. I don't know how much longer I can keep the nation together. Even some of our armed forces are deserting and crossing over to SUSA, so they can be fed and get medical attention."

Max was stunned. He'd had reports of the desertions and the spread of the plague, but had not known the rest of the country was in such dire straits. What Claire was describing was like a third world country.

He cleared his throat, realizing he was about to take the biggest risk of his career. "Have you considered suing SUSA for peace? From what I hear, they have no designs on our land, and if we asked to end the war would probably leave us alone to rebuild the country."

Instead of the hysterical outburst he'd expected, she looked at him with calm, defeated eyes. "Yes, Max, I've even thought of that." She took a deep breath, "However, as I'm sure you're aware, that would lead to ... complications."

"Complications?"

"Yes. I had Harlan make some general inquiries of President Jeffrey's staff. They informed him that for any such situation to be considered, a prerequisite would be for me and for all of my staff to be tried for war crimes by the United Nations."

238

"But . . . but that's ridiculous, Madam President. No such undertaking would have any chance of a guilty verdict."

Claire gave a short, harsh laugh and returned to her seat behind her desk. "I'm afraid you underestimate the feelings of jealousy and hatred the rest of the nations of the world feel for the United States, Max. I feel sure they would in fact find us guilty, and would not hesitate to have us hanged, or incarcerated for the rest of our lives."

"But-"

"No buts, Max. So, our only chance of coming out of this with our hides, not to mention our jobs, intact, is for this new weapon of yours to hurt SUSA enough that they'll agree to our suit for peace, without any preconditions."

"Then, if this flea-bomb of Dr. Ishi's is our only chance, I suggest we take it," Max said, his stomach churning with fear at the prospect of his exenjiplary career ending with charges of being a war criminal. After all, he'd only been following orders.

Claire smirked. "I had a feeling you'd say that. How soon can we deploy the bombs?"

Max thought. He'd have to get things ready faster than he'd thought, but it could be done. Hell, it would be done. His very life depended on it. "I'll push the men night and day, and we should be able to launch a strike within forty-eight hours."

Claire glanced at a desk calendar. "Two days to launch, and another week for symptoms to start showing up in SUSA citizens, and one more week for them to realize what they're up against."

She nodded. "That means I have to hold on for two to three weeks at the outside, and then we can start some preliminary talks with President Jeffreys."

"What about Ben Raines?"

"Fuck Ben Raines," Claire said with the first show of

239

enthusiasm she'd had since he entered. "Raines is a bleeding heart, and that is perhaps his only weakness. As soon as his beloved people start dropping like flies, he'll agree to anything to save them."

"I hope you're right, Claire," Max said, unconsciously massaging his neck, "I hope you're right."

At precisely the same moment that General Maxwell was talking to Claire Osterman, President Jeffreys, Mike Post, and Doctor Lamar Chase were conferring with Ben Raines over a microphone.

"Ben, Dr. Chase has some good news for us," Mike said.

"Good. Let's hear it," Ben said.

"I've just finished our preliminary work in the laboratory with the plague bacillus and vaccine formula Dr. Ishi sent to Dr. Zimmer."

"Is it legitimate?"

"Oh, yes. This is an extraordinary find. This strain of bubonic plague is almost a hundred years old, and nothing we have is even close to it immunologically."

"Then our previous vaccines won't confer immunity to us?"

"No, but from our tests, the vaccine Ishi sent will give ninety-nine percent immunity within a week, and at least fifty percent immediately."

"How long will it take to get it made up and distributed?"

"If we pull out all the stops, I can have everyone in the SUSA who wishes to take it vaccinated within four days."

"You've got two days, Mike."

"What? Why?"

"Intel tells me there is a crash program going on in the USA. They will probably be launching a strike within the

240

next few days. They've already started vaccinating their troops and politicians."

"But Ishi's note to Dr. Zimmer said he'd given them a false formula for the vaccine."

"Do you believe him?"

"Sure. He had no reason to lie. After all, he told the truth about giving them the plans for the bacterial bombs."

"Then, evidently her scientists are not able to tell they have a bogus vaccine. Ishi must be brilliant."

"That wouldn't surprise me," Dr. Chase said. "With Osterman killing off people at whim and all their ethnic cleansing, they've probably gotten rid of most of the scientific community that's worth a damn over there."

"So, if Claire thinks she's protected, there's nothing to stop her from launching an attack momentarily."

"I agree," Mike Post said over the speakerphone. "I'll pull all nonessential personnel off everything else and put them to work manufacturing as much vaccine as we can before the attack."

"And I'll redouble my efforts to get a Scout team into Indianapolis and see if we can't hold up the attack for a few days with some judicious sabotage. Eagle One, over and out."

Ben turned off the radio and handed the mic to Corrie. He looked up at the Freedom Fighters who were gathered around listening to his transmission.

"Chuck, you heard what was said. We've got to somehow mount a campaign against Osterman's compound in Indianapolis, and soon, or there's gonna be an untold number of casualties from the BW bombs she's fixing to drop."

Chuck Harris shook his head, a worried look on his face. "God, I wish Lara and Carl hadn't decided to quit and head for Canada. She had much better contacts in Indiana than the rest of us."

Ben didn't mention that he was sure she had, since she'd

been a spy for them for the past six months. He'd let Harris and the others think that Lara had simply decided she needed to take Carl somewhere safe to recuperate. They had no idea she'd betrayed them to save his life.

"I know, Chuck, but she did, so we're just going to have to do the best we can with what we have. If we can somehow manage to get our hands on one of the USA choppers, Coop can fly us in. He's trained to pilot just about anything that flies."

"That's gonna be tough, Ben. The USA guards those things like they're made out of gold."

"\bu get your people to get us the location where one is hangered, and my team and I will see about getting us into it."

Jersey grinned as she sat sharpening her K-Bar. "They thought their prisoners were safe, and look what happened. \bu find it for us, Chuck, and I'll guarantee you we'll find a way to take out the guards."

Chuck laughed and shrugged. "Damned if I don't believe you'd beard the devil in his own backyard, Jersey."

She shoved the K-Bar in its scabbard. "Count on it, Chuck."

"Nora," Chuck said, "see if you can raise the group over our south. Last I heard they were having some trouble with raids by a helicopter during their last mission."

It was just after midnight the next night, and Ben was observing an air base on the southern border of New York state through a StarLight scope. They were on a knoll about two hundred yards from a hangar on the edge of the airfield. Besides his team, he was accompanied by Chuck, Nora, and three members of the local group of Freedom Fighters.

Jerry Casey, the local leader, whispered to Ben, "There's the bastard that's been giving us fits. It's a Huey

with a side-mounted 50 caliber Gatling gun. Even if we're hidden in thick cover in the forest, that son of a bitch'll tear through it like it was mowing grass. We've lost three good men in the past week alone."

"Any idea how many guards?" Coop asked from his station behind Ben.

Jerry shook his head. "I don't know exactly, but at least a platoon ... fifteen to twenty would be my best guess."

"Have you ever tried hitting them before?"

"Once. The problem is there's a clear zone of two hundred yards all around the hangar, and they've got sharpshooters stationed on the roof. We never even got close, and were barely able to escape with our lives."

"How many sharpshooters?" Ben asked.

"Four. One on each corner of the building."

Ben turned to Coop. "I make it about two hundred yards and a downward trajectory. Can you make the shot?"

Coop ran his hands over the rifle he was holding—a Heckler-Koch .44 magnum sniper rifle with a nine power infrared scope on it.

"No problem, if they show themselves. But that'll mean someone has to give them a target so they'll come up to shoot. It'll be risky, but I think it can be done."

Ben didn't hesitate. "You stay up here and get situated. I'll bump you on your headset when we're ready. On my mark, we'll charge and try to knock out the searchlights on our way in. When the snipers rise up to shoot, take 'em out."

"Yes, sir," Coop said as he began to stuff long 380 grain bullets into the rifle's magazine.

Ben handed the Starlight scope to Anna. "Anna, I want you to stay up here and spot for Coop. He's gonna need some help with his targeting since the field of vision of the infrared scope is so narrow."

243

"Roger, Daddy Ben," Anna said, trying to hide her disappointment at not being chosen for the assault team.

It took Ben and the others twenty minutes to make their way down the knoll to the edge of the forest next to the concrete runway.

He keyed his headset and said, "Ready?"

"Ready," Coop answered.

"Go!" Ben said and began to run forward, his CAR on full automatic, extra magazines in his coat pockets within easy reach.

They'd made it only thirty yards across the tarmac before they were spotted. Searchlights on the corners of the hangar swiveled toward them, and a shrill siren began to blast the night's stillness.

Flashes blossomed along the rooftop, and the whine of ricocheting bullets off cement punctuated the siren's song.

Billy Boudreaux, one of Jerry's men, screamed and spun to the ground, a crimson stain on his right chest where he was hit.

Ben slowed and aimed his CAR, triggering off a sustained blast which took out the left searchlight just as Jersey did the same and the right light winked out.

A series of staccato shots from Beth stitched the side of the hangar near the door, and three men who were standing there fell screaming to the earth.

A hollow boom from behind them was followed seconds later by the form of a man falling from the roof, his sniper's rifle tumbling next to his dead body. Score one for Coop, Ben thought.

Jerry fired his M-16 until the barrel was smoking and glowing a dull red in the darkness, and another searchlight was extinguished.

A sniper fired just as another boom blasted the night. Jerry went down with a shout, and the sniper that got him paid for his shot with his life, jerked back out of sight by the force of Coop's slug in his chest.

244

Ben and his team were now only seventy-five yards from the hangar, and Jersey fired off a grenade from a launcher attached to her M-16. The grenade landed just in front of the big double doors to the hangar, blowing one off its hinges and completely destroying the other one.

Ground troops were pouring out of the barracks attached to the hangar, only to be swatted down by almost continuous fire from Ben's CAR and Beth's M-16.

There were two more loud explosions from the knoll, and seconds later Ben heard Coop say in his earpiece, "Scratch four snipers. Good hunting, partner."

As soon as Ben made it into the hangar, he set the others up as a perimeter guard and climbed in the Huey. He flicked switches, turning on the generator and starting the engines so they'd be warm by the time Cooper and Anna made it down to join them.

There were scattered shots as individual soldiers tried to retake the hangar, but Ben's team suffered no further injuries.

Jersey stepped to the Huey. "I'm gonna backtrack and see if Jerry and Billy are still alive."

Ben nodded. "Go with her, Johnny," he said to the last member of Jerry's squad. "If you need help with them, give me three flashes with your light and we'll be right there."

"Ten-four, Ben," said Johnny as he and Jersey sprinted out onto the runway while Beth gave them cover with her M-16.

While the engine was turning over and warming up, Ben checked the 50 caliber machine-gun mounted on the side of the Huey. It was primed and ready to go, with a box containing several thousand rounds of ammo sitting next to it. The gas gauge on the instrument panel read full, and all of the other gauges indicated the Huey was in good condition and ready to fly.

245

Within minutes, Jersey came running back. Beside her was Jerry Casey, a large crimson stain on his left shoulder where the sniper's bullet had torn a chunk out of his del-toid muscle. Johnny followed, the body of Billy Boudreaux over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. It was obvious the young man was dead.

Seconds behind them were Coop and Anna, both breathing heavily after their 200-yard dash across the landing field.

"Coop," Ben yelled from the doorway of the Huey. "Get up here and get this thing ready to go. There's no telling how long we have before

reinforcements arrive."

While the others smashed radios and telephones so no one could get a message out, Coop pulled the Huey out of the hanger and onto the tarmac.

The others jumped aboard, and slowly, like a large bird of prey taking off, the Huey lifted into the darkness.

Coop turned to Ben in the copilot's seat. "Where to, Chief?" he asked.

"Head southwest, toward the airfield just outside Indianapolis. It's time to pay Claire Osterman a visit."

Coop grinned. "It's gonna get awfully busy up here. They'll have the airfield well-protected."

Ben glanced at his wristwatch. "By the time we get there it'll be almost four in the morning. With luck unless we run into trouble along the way, they'll all be asleep when we arrive."

"What about radar?"

"Take us down on the deck, partner, we'll fly under it," Ben said, smiling.

Coop shook his head and pushed the stick down. "Roger, Ben. Hell, who wants to live forever, anyway?"

246

Ben pulled out a map and gave Coop the coordinates of the airfield near Indianapolis and the correct heading to fly to get there.

As the Huey sped through the night, only a few hundred yards above the ground, Ben gathered the rest of the team in the back of the Huey.

"OK, people, here's the drill. We've got to buy SUSA some time to get our troops and citizens inoculated. About the only way we can do that is to do as much damage as we can to the bombers and what few missiles she has left."

"But, Ben," Corrie said, "we don't have any ATG missiles, and no bombs on this craft."

"I know. But we've got a fifty caliber machine-gun, and all of us are carrying rifles and hand grenades." He looked around at his troops and grinned, his teeth glowing white in the light from the instruments of the helicopter. "I don't expect us to completely disable her air force with what little armament we have, but every plane we damage will be one less she'll have to send against us with her deadly cargo. And, with our air defenses on full alert, maybe not too many of her aircraft will get through."

"Yeah," Jersey added as she stuffed shells into her M-16's magazines, "and all Mike asked for on his last radio transmission was a few days delay."

"Do you think we really have a chance with one twenty-

247

year-old helicopter to make it all the way to the most heavily guarded airfield in the US?" Jerry asked while Chuck Harris worked to bandage his wounded shoulder and stop his bleeding.

Ben glanced over his shoulder at Coop, who was leaning forward, staring intently through the plexiglass windshield of the Huey, watching for anything that could bring them down. "If it's humanly possible, Coop'll get us there."

"It'll help that the chopper has USA markings on it," Nora said. "Maybe that'll make 'em hesitate just enough to give us an edge if we're challenged."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that, since we don't know any of the radio codes or passwords," Chuck Harris said, putting the final touches on Jerry's bandages.

"Coop can buy us a few seconds by feigning radio trouble," Corrie said. "And if we're prepared, that should be all we need."

Ben picked up his CAR and jacked a round in the chamber. "So, gentlemen and ladies, let's get ready. We should be getting close enough to the airfield to run into some trouble soon."

Ben was right. Within ten minutes, the radio crackled to life. "Helicopter B-14, this is SAM Battery 34. Give the day's password, please."

"How did they identify us?" Jerry asked, gripping his M-16 and staring at Ben with wide eyes.

"Each aircraft has a transponder that's always on," Ben answered.

"Can't we turn it off?" Jerry asked.

"Don't want to," Jersey answered. "As long as it's on, they'll be reluctant to fire on us, at least for a few minutes."

Coop picked up the mic and pressed the key down. Whistling through his lips and making other weird noises which sounded like static, he spoke a few words.

248

"Trouble . . . whee-ooow . . . radio . . . eeeyeow . . . can't . . . shhhh . . . transmit-"

Corrie laughed. "That's the worst imitation of static and white noise I've ever heard."

"SAM Battery 34, having trouble reading you. Please repeat."

"Huey B-14," Coop started, then began making more noise into the mic.

"Say again, Huey B-14," the SAM battery commander said, and then they were out of range, and Coop put the Huey in a wide turn around a low knoll just beyond the surface-to-air missile battery, hoping if they did let loose a missile, it wouldn't be able to track the heat from their engine.

After a few seconds, they were in the clear, out of range of the missiles.

"Good work, Coop," Ben said, standing behind the pilot's seat and looking out the windshield into the darkness ahead of them.

During another ten minutes of silence the Huey swerved and jogged, dodging low-lying hills and high pine trees, speeding toward the airfield up ahead. Coop was flying so low that they could make out lights in windows of some of the houses along the road toward Indianapolis.

The radio crackled to life again. "This is the control tower at Osterman Air Force Base," the voice said over the speaker. "Helicopter B-14, please identify yourself and give the password, or we'll be forced to shoot you down."

Coop chuckled and said over his shoulder, "The egotistical bitch has named the airfield after herself."

"Do you think we can make it?" Ben asked.

Coop shrugged. "Probably. We should be within range in a few minutes."

"Lock and load, people," Ben called, stationing himself behind the 50 Cal machine-gun in the Huey's doorway.

249

249

He strapped himself into the harness of the big gun, so he wouldn't be thrown out when Coop banked and turned during the attack. The others squatted or stood next to him, also attaching themselves to the aircraft by means of leather straps.

As Coop topped a rise, no more than fifty feet off the ground and traveling at almost a hundred and fifty miles an hour, the lights of the landing field could be seen ahead. Two Apache helicopters were in front of a hangar, their blades whirling as they warmed up, with men rushing back and forth, scrambling to get in the air.

Ben spoke into his helmet mic. "Coop, do a flyby on those choppers first. They're taking off now!"

Coop banked the Huey and swerved toward the two Apaches. Men on the ground began to fire automatic rifles, but the small-caliber shells just ricocheted off the sheet metal armor of the chopper.

As they bore down on them, one of the Apaches lifted several feet off the ground, swaying in the turbulence of the Huey as it tried to get airborne.

Ben jerked back the loading lever of the 50 Cal and opened fire, raking shells along the side of the Apache. Smoke poured from its turbine engine, and it burst into flames, exploding in a giant fireball that almost engulfed the Huey.

Jersey, Beth, Anna, and Chuck Harris opened fire with their automatic rifles, strafing the ground and knocking the men running about to the ground as they passed low overhead.

As they flew over the second Apache, still on the ground, Jerry took

hand grenades in each hand, pulled the pins with his teeth, and tossed them out the door of the Huey.

Coop pulled the chopper up in a steep climb to avoid the control tower, and the Apache on the ground dissolved in twin explosions as the grenades went off simultane-

250

ously, leaving a pile of twisted, smoking wreckage and over ten bodies on the tarmac.

"That takes care of the pursuit," Ben yelled into his mic, "now let's take out as many bombers as we can."

Coop turned the Huey almost on its side in a steep bank and flew in a sharp curve toward the end of the runway, toward a group of larger hangars. There weren't any ground personnel there. The big bombers were not designed as attack planes, and the area was almost deserted.

Since the hangar doors were shut, he hovered less than ten feet off the ground. Jersey and Anna both pulled pins from grenades and pitched them toward the hangar doors.

As the doors exploded inward, he held the Huey steady and Ben poured a stream of 50 Cal bullets into the hangars, stitching holes in several of the big planes as they sat defenseless in the buildings.

One of the planes caught fire, sending dark clouds of oily smoke billowing out the doorway, obscuring their vision of the inside.

"Pull back!" Ben yelled, "and make a low pass over the other hangars."

As Coop yanked back on the stick, Ben hollered at Jersey, "Throw your grenades at the roofs of the other two hangars. Maybe we can collapse them onto the planes."

Jersey, Beth, and Anna, along with Chuck and Jerry, all pulled their remaining hand grenades from their pouches and got ready to throw.

"We've only got time for one pass," Coop said over the inter-ship radio, pointing down the runway toward a convoy of Jeeps and armored personnel carriers speeding toward them, machine-guns attached to the vehicles.

He tilted the Huey on its nose and passed as close to the roofs as he dared, the landing wheels clearing the hangar roofs by mere feet.

While the others tossed grenades out the door, Ben

251

raked machine-gun fire along the roofs, hoping some of the bullets would penetrate to the planes inside.

The Huey cleared the hangars just as the grenades began to explode, blowing huge holes in the roofs and bringing one hangar down in a pile of rubble.

Coop pulled the nose up and tried to gain altitude as fast as he could, loud shrieks coming from the rear of the Huey as bullets tore into the

helicopter from the vehicles chasing them.

The chopper's turbine coughed twice, causing the machine to stutter and yaw. Then the engines caught and pulled the helicopter away into the night belching smoke.

"I don't know how long I can keep her in the air," Coop yelled over the rough sound of the turbines. "Better find a hole to crawl into, and fast!"

Ben looked at Jerry. "Where's the closest group of Freedom Fighters?"

Jerry thought for a moment, then turned toward Coop. "Fly due east. We've got a cell about fifty miles from here, in a state park just over the border."

"And get that transponder off as soon as you can," Ben added. "They can use it to follow us."

Coop let go of the stick with his right hand, drew a .45 automatic out of his belt, and fired it into a console next to the pilot's seat. A burst of sparks was followed by a rush of smoke. Without turning his head, he holstered his automatic and kept both hands on the stick, fighting to keep the chopper in the air as it bucked and heaved like a bronco in a Wild West show.

Dawn was lightning the sky over the eastern horizon as they passed over a large lake. Flames and smoke were pouring out of the Huey, and it was becoming difficult to breathe in the passenger compartment.

"Can you make the far shore?" Ben yelled.

"No, I'm gonna have to auto-rotate down into the lake, but I'll get us as close as I can. Then we're gonna have

252

to swim," Coop answered, the muscles of his arms bulging as he fought the chopper's stick.

"Strip off any heavy gear," Ben said, unstrapping himself from the machine-gun harness. "This baby's gonna sink like a rock when we hit the water. Get out the door fast!"

Coop made it to within fifty yards of the bank before the turbines gave a last gasp and quit. The Huey shuddered and shook and began to revolve in a tight circle as it dropped like a stone.

Just before impact, Coop popped his seatbelt and dived out of his seat, rolling sideways and scrambling toward the rear compartment.

By some miracle, the entire team made it to the shore. Jerry tore open his wounds, and his shoulder was bleeding again. Anna ripped a sleeve off her BDUs and used it as a tourniquet to slow the blood to a trickle.

As they lay on the sandy beach, gasping and heaving up water, a series of shots rang out and six men approached out of thick woods near the shore.

"Hands up!" one of the men shouted. "Don't make any sudden moves."

"Is Cal Woods with you?" Jerry shouted, holding up his one good arm.

One of the men shone a flashlight on Jerry's face. "Jerry, is that you?" he asked, astonishment in his voice.

"Yeah, Cal. These are all friends. Tell your men to go easy on those triggers."

"What the hell are you doin' flyin' a US helicopter?" the man asked, glancing toward the Huey's wreckage, which could still be seen poking out of the water.

"It's a long story, Cal, but we'd better hightail it for a safe place. They're right on our tails, and this area's gonna get hotter'n a two-peckered billy goat in a little while."

253

Even within the confines of her underground bunker living quarters, the sound of explosions and machine-gun fire roused Claire Osterman out of a sound slumber.

She moaned when she moved to get out of bed. Her thighs and private parts ached in a most delicious manner after a night of rutting with Herb Knoff. She glanced next to her in the bed, where he snored, lying on his back with his mouth open and a trail of drool coursing down his chin.

She shook her head. He was an animal, all right, too rough, but a magnificent lay nevertheless. Just the medicine she needed to take her mind off the troubles she had to deal with on a daily basis in plotting the nation's course through this travesty of a war.

As she sat on the side of the bed, trying to come fully awake, another explosion sounded, rocking the walls of the bunker and causing some sheetrock dust to fall from the ceiling, hanging in the air like a light snowfall.

"Damn!" she exclaimed to herself. "What the hell is going on out there?" Those incompetent soldiers Maxwell had assigned to protect the compound and adjacent airfield had better not have let more of Raines's bombers get through their air defenses, or somebody was going to have their balls cut off.

She looked over at Knoff. The prick was still sleeping

254

soundly. He should have been awake to protect her if they were, in fact, under attack.

Claire leaned over and punched him in the side, enjoying the look of fear on his face as he came instantly awake. "Get your ass up, Herbert. I hear gunshots and explosions outside. Pick up the phone and find out what the hell is happening, now!"

Knoff rolled catlike out of bed, his hand automatically reaching for the .45 automatic on the bedside table, his eyes now alert for danger.

God, she thought, but he looks magnificent, standing there naked, his muscles bunched and ready for action. She let her gaze drift downward to his crotch. He had an erection. / do like a man who's always ready, she

thought, watching him as he turned and picked up the phone and dialed security.

"Knoff here. What's goin' on out there?"

He listened, his head cocked to the side, his eyes sweeping the sleeping quarters for danger even as he talked. "Uh-huh," he said, a frown on his face. "OK, I'll let the president know."

He hung up, laid his gun down, and began to pull on his pants, struggling for a moment to get his zipper fastened over his bulging crotch.

"Well, are you going to tell me what's happening?" Claire said petulantly.

"One of our helicopters has attacked the base. It's strafing the hangars containing the bombers."

"What?" Claire screamed, standing up, forgetting for the moment she was still naked.

He nodded. "It didn't answer when asked for the password, and by the time air defense tried to scramble their Apaches, it was on us."

"Why the hell would one of our own helicopters attack us?"

He gave her a scornful look, forgetting his place for a

255

moment. "Evidently, it's been commandeered by hostile forces, Madam President."

"Shit!" she said. She walked to her closet and began to pull on clothes, mumbling to herself as she dressed. "I'll have someone killed for this! How could those incompetent bastards let this happen?"

Knoff shrugged as he pulled on the remainder of his battle fatigues, stuffing his pistol in its holster on his belt.

Claire stormed through the door into her office and sat behind her desk. She picked up the phone and dialed the operator.

"Get me General Maxwell, and do it now!" she barked.

After listening for a few seconds, she practically screamed into the phone, "I don't care if the son of a bitch is busy. Tell him to get his butt on the phone right away."

Her knuckles grew white, and she gripped the phone as if it were trying to jump out of her hand. "All right, but have him contact me the moment the attack is over."

She turned furious eyes on Knoff, making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. "They say he's busy directing the counterattack on the helicopter. Too bad the bastard didn't do his job and prevent the attack before it started."

Standing up, she paced the room for a few moments, then headed back into her private quarters. "I'm going to take a shower. Call me the minute Max is on the phone," she said over her shoulder to Knoff.

"And get some coffee made. It looks as if it's gonna be a long night."

Claire was finished with her shower and had time to put makeup on and fix her hair before General Maxwell reported to her, in person.

He stood before her desk, his face flushed and sweating. "You wanted to see me, Madam President?"

Claire drummed her fingers on the desk, her lips in a

256

tight line, her eyes flashing dangerously. "Yes, General. I'd like a report of what happened tonight, and how a hostile helicopter was allowed to attack our base."

"Someone attacked one of our bases in southern New \brk, stole one of our Huey's, and flew it here. Their aim was to destroy or incapacitate the bombers we were preparing to use to drop the BW on SUSAs tomorrow."

"And did they succeed?"

Maxwell shrugged, his face flaming red again. "I ... I don't know the extent of the damage yet."

"That's not acceptable, General. Just tell me, will the attack be able to be carried out as planned tomorrow?"

"Uh ... at this time, I doubt it, Madam President. From what I could see just now, it looks like we're gonna have to make some repairs to the bomber fleet before there will be enough planes for an attack on SUSAs."

"And the BW bombs? At least tell me they're safe."

"Oh, yes. The bombs and their payload are stored underground in a secure bunker. They were not harmed."

She slammed her hand down on the desk. "At least, some marginal good news."

Standing up, she walked to the corner and poured herself a cup of coffee, not bothering to offer the general any. "Now, would you please explain how a helicopter flew several hundred miles through our territory, through our best defenses, and managed to attack me in my own backyard?"

"From what I can piece together from scattered Intel reports, the pilot flew the entire way less than a hundred feet off the ground. It was an incredible feat." He shook his head. "I wouldn't have believed someone could do that in unfamiliar territory in the dead of night--"

"What about our SAM batteries?"

"They were fooled by the transponder on the Huey. It gave an identification signal showing it to be friendly. By

257

the time the pilot failed to respond to their requests for password verification, the chopper was past them."

Claire nodded. "General, I want the commanders of every SAM battery shot. Is that understood?"

Maxwell opened his mouth to argue, but seeing the look in her eye, evidently thought better of it. "Yes, ma'am. I'll see to it first thing in the morning."

"And I want it done publicly, in front of the other troops. Perhaps it will be a lesson to them of what happens when soldiers neglect their duty."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now, I need three things from you, Max. I want a full damage report on my desk before dawn. I want to know exactly how long repairs will take, and when I can expect our attack to be carried out. And I want your assurances that this can never happen again. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll get right on it."

"Good. You're dismissed, General. And if that report isn't on my desk by 0630, I'll personally bust you all the way back to private, and you'll spend the rest of the war on latrine duty."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now, get out of here and get to work."

Without another word, the general did an abrupt about-face and stalked from the room, his ears the color of fresh blood.

Claire glanced at the clock on the wall. It was four in the morning.

She drained the last of her coffee and put the cup down. "Herbert, I'm too wired to go back to sleep. Lock the door and come back to bed. Perhaps you can think of something to do to pass the time until dawn."

"Eagle Two, this is Eagle One, come in," Ben said into the long range transmitter.

258

"Eagle Two, go ahead Eagle One," Mike Post answered.

"I think I've managed to delay the BW drop the USA had planned. How is the manufacture of the vaccine coming?"

"Very well, Ben. We've finally got the formula correct, and are in the process now of amassing enough for the complete inoculation of our forces and citizens."

"Good. I think my work here in the north is done. I've gotten the Freedom Fighters started, and they're recruiting volunteers to help them."

"Do you want an extraction?"

"Yeah. Send one of the Gulfstream II jets, and I'll bring my team home."

"Roger that, Eagle One. We'll be glad to have you back."

"Oh, and Mike-

"Yes?"

"Send as much of the vaccine as you can spare. I'd like the Freedom Fighters to be inoculated. I have a feeling the plague Ostermans planning on dropping is going to spread like wildfire, and I want our friends up here to be protected."

"Good idea, Ben. It'll also help them recruit new members with the vaccine as an added incentive."

"Ten four, Mike. Eagle One out."

Ben handed the mic to Corrie and turned to his Freedom Fighter friends. "You heard?"

Chuck Harris nodded. "Yes, and I want to thank you for what you've done, Ben. Especially for providing the vaccine to us. As a medical man, by default, I can't tell you how I was dreading the spread of bubonic plague after Osterman unleashes her bombs."

"I know, Chuck. I'm afraid the prospect of losing the war has unhinged Claire Osterman. Even though she thinks she has an effective vaccine, she must be aware

259

that her course of action will mean the death of thousands of her own people."

"I agree, Ben. The only reason I can think of that she'd try such a thing is to attempt to hold onto power any way she can."

Ben began to roll himself a cigarette. "What is it they say, Chuck? Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

260

At 0630, Claire Osterman's bedside phone rang. She reached over and picked it up. "Osterman here."

"Madam President," her secretary said, "General Maxwell is here to see you, as ordered."

Claire glanced at a sweaty Herb Knoff lying next to her, trying to catch his breath after hours of furious love-making. She smoothed her rumpled hair back, as if her secretary could see her over the phone.

"Have the general wait. I'll be there shortly," she said curtly. "He may have some coffee while he waits."

She eased out of bed, wincing at the pain between her thighs as she made her way to her shower.

Half an hour later, scrubbed and freshly made up, Claire sauntered into her office. Maxwell was waiting for her, pacing the office and sipping from a mug of steaming coffee.

"Fix me a cup, will you, Max?" she said, her mood considerably calmer

than it had been two and a half hours ago.

He handed her a cup and sat before her desk.

"Have you a report ready for me?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. We suffered major damage to five of our bombers, and minor damage to another fifteen."

"Spare me the details. When will they be repaired and ready for our mission against SUSA?"

He pursed his lips, thinking. After a moment he said,

261

"I feel we should have an adequate number ready within nine days."

"Nine days? " she yelled.

"Yes, ma'am. If we go any sooner with less aircraft, the chances of enough getting through SUSA's air defenses to do the job will be slim."

Claire's eyes burned into his. "And have the assholes who let the helicopter get to us been suitably punished?"

Max dropped his eyes, as if ashamed of his answer. "Yes, ma'am. All of the SAM battery commanders have been executed, as you ordered, and new men are in their places."

A grim smile curled her lips. "I trust these men will be considerably more alert in their new duties?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am. Their motto is 'if it flies, it dies'."

"Good. So within three weeks at the outside we should be seeing some results from Dr. Ishi's plague bombs?"

"According to our scientists, that is correct."

"Have you been able to determine who planned and carried out the attack on my air base?"

Max's face looked as if he'd tasted something bitter as he answered, "Yes, Madam President. Initial Intel reports say it was Ben Raines and his team of Scouts who stole the helicopter and flew the mission."

"Am I never going to be quit of that bastard?"

"He is daring and resourceful."

"And do we know where Mr. Ben Raines is at the present? Is he still in New York, as was reported previously?"

"No. We intercepted radio reports that he is being extracted by jet back to SUSA headquarters today."

"Is there any chance of us shooting the son of a bitch down en route?"

"No, ma'am. Our radar installations have been damaged so severely by the

almost constant bombardment from SUSA that we don't have the capability of tracking his flight."

262

She thought for a moment. "Do you have any men who might be able to get to him at SUSA headquarters and take him out?"

Max hesitated. "There are two. Men we've used before and have proven . . . quite resourceful in their missions. But, they're expensive."

"I don't care what it costs. But they don't get paid until they've accomplished their mission." She stared hard into Max's eyes. "And they'd better do a better job than the last two men you sent."

"\fes, ma'am. I'll contact them right away."

"See that you do, Max. It'll give me something to look forward to while I wait for my bombers to be repaired."

The sprawling military compound of SUSA was quiet. Security guards patrolled the perimeter. An electric fence and motion sensors covered every inch of the razor wire surrounding the enclosure. Guard towers stood at three hundred yard intervals along the perimeter fence, illuminated by giant lights revolving back and forth accompanied by the whine of electric generators. It had the look of a maximum security prison.

This was where General Ben Raines directed the activities of his vast armies, according to the intelligence reports gathered at USA headquarters in Indianapolis . . . if the reports could be trusted.

James Scott lay on his belly in knee-deep grass, three hundred yards from the fence. His AK47, equipped with a night scope, lay beside him.

He disdained the black shirts and berets worn by others who held high rank among the USA's elite assassination forces, as did his partner. James did not need a black shirt or a beret to make him invisible in the night. He relied upon his skills as a hired killer . . . instinctive, a part of his nature, needing no special clothing.

263

He spoke to Frank Brown, who lay in the grass next to him. "Real quiet tonight. It don't appear they suspect anything. This should go off smoothly."

Brown merely nodded.

"We'll cut through this fence on the east side," Scott continued in a whisper. "We'll place the landmines on the road running beside the fence. Scatter 'em out, so there's no way General Raines can avoid 'em. We'll be real close, so we can send a grenade underneath his armored personnel carrier at just the right time. All we gotta worry about is those goddamn dogs sniffin' us out."

"You've got the shit to spray on the dogs?" Brown asked, a wad of chewing tobacco stuffed into his cheek, muffling his words.

"You know damn well I do. I never come on a mission without it."

"Just checkin'. All this can go to hell in a basket if the dogs start barkin'."

"This ain't my first assassination, Frank."

"Never said it was."

"You don't act quite right, Frank. How come you're so damn quiet?"

"We ain't exactly on no church picnic, James. We're bein' paid to kill the top general of SUSA ... an' we already know he's underground. He'll be covered with security guards no matter where he is."

"I never let the small stuff worry me. Besides, our Intel says Raines don't always use a lot of guards. Seems there's usually only his personal team of four or five that travel with him."

Frank cleared his throat. "Still, it ain't no small thing when our target is fifty feet under the ground. We gotta be real damn careful how we go about this or we'll wind up dead. To me, you ain't takin' this serious enough."

James hesitated, giving the compound a lingering ex-

264

amination requiring several minutes. "I'm takin' this shit real serious," he said after a moment.

"Don't seem that way. You act like all we gotta do is run in there with our landmines and grenades an' kill the bastard. I can promise you it's gonna be more complicated than that. They'll have all kinds of guards on that lower level . . . good ones, men who ain't afraid of dyin'."

James appeared to be thinking. "It's the goddamn dogs I'm worried about. It ain't all that much trouble to fool a careless man, but have you ever tried to pull the wool over the eyes of a trained guard dog? Or one who's been trained to protect a wartime general?"

Frank didn't answer him.

"Have you, Frank?" James persisted.

"It can't be done. Not if the dog's any good. You gotta take 'em with a chemical . . . like our pepper spray we got in these here cans. As to the guards, they ain't nothing but men with guns. I've faced 'em a hundred times before all over the globe, an' I never found one who was any better than I am when it comes to killin' folks."

Frank wagged his head. "First thing we gotta do is get close. We gotta get those landmines in place an find a position where we can launch them grenades under Raines's APC."

"That ain't no trick."

"It sure as hell is a trick, if we aim to keep the bastard dogs from barkin'."

James watched a pair of K9 guards leading big German shepherds across the compound. "It's liable to be easy. Those boys leadin' them dogs

ain't payin' any attention to what's going on around 'em. It's just night duty to them. All they're really thinkin' about is going home to their wives ... or maybe to their girlfriends."

"How do we get close enough to use the spray on the goddamn dogs?" Frank wondered again. "We gotta bury those mines in the road next to the fence."

265

265

"You just leave that part up to me. I'll get behind them dog handlers and show you how it's done."

"We'll see," James muttered. "We ain't got through that fence yet . . ."

A pair of wire cutters sliced through the bottom of the razor wire. No alarms went off, and James was thankful for the silence.

"Crawl through," Frank whispered.

James complied, inching forward on his belly.

"Push your rifle through first," Frank said. "What the hell good is it gonna do if you get in there without havin' no kind of gun?"

"I forgot," James groaned, grabbing his AK47 by its stock, shoving it under the fence. He wore a silenced Glock at his waist, and carried a dagger in his boot.

"One of these days you're gonna forget you're a goddamn soldier," Frank warned. "Then all you're gonna be is dead meat in a six-foot hole."

"Let's not be talkin' about no six-foot hole while we're in here," James said. "I ain't plannin' to be part of no grave for Ben Raines."

Frank and James waited beside each other, lying on their bellies in the dark.

"Raines scares me," Frank said. "He seems like a nice enough feller, but I hear he's killed some of his own people who turned on him."

"We could be the next ones to die," James told him. "For what we're gettin' paid by that woman, Osterman, to assassinate Raines we'd better make damn sure we get it done without any screwups."

Frank hesitated, with an eye on the compound. "I heard a story... 'bout a Lara Walden, who was a double agent."

James wagged his head. "What's that got to do with Ben Raines, Frank?"

James chewed his lip. "I heard that Lara Walden was Ben Raines's lover for one hell of a long time." And the

266

story goes that once Raines found out she was a spy, he made her disappear. The fact they was lovers evidently didn't cut no ice with Raines." He shook his head.

Frank chuckled. "Hell, it won't come as no surprise to most men that a woman is capable of a double-cross."

"That's the God's truth. It just don't pay to talk about your work, 'specially to a woman."

Frank nodded again. "That's always the smartest thing to do in any army-keep your mouth shut, and your head down. Don't volunteer for a goddamn thing, and if somebody asks you if you heard this or that, you deny the hell out of everything. Tell 'em you never heard of that before."

An armored personnel carrier came lumbering out of a Quonset hut next to the entrance into the compound. K9 handlers with guard dogs walked in front of it.

A SUSA soldier manning a tripod-mounted machine gun sat on the front of the APC, as it drove slowly along a razor wire fence leading to a gate exiting the compound.

"Here he comes," Frank whispered from hiding.

"They're gonna drive right over them landmines we planted as sure as stink comes with shit."

"Exactly the way we planned it."

"All we gotta worry about is them goddamn dogs sniff-fin' 'em out," James said.

Frank gave James an impatient glare. "You saw me spray that pepper all around 'em. All those fuckin' hounds are gonna do is start sneezin'."

"I sure as hell hope you're right," James muttered as he watched the APC move toward the spot where the mines were buried in the roadway.

"I was only wrong two times in my life," Frank said. "I got married twice."

"You gotta be bullshitting me."

"No bullshit. Those were the only two mistakes I ever

267

267

made. Now shut the hell up and get ready to toss a grenade under that damn machine when it passes by us."

"Are those mines gonna blow dirt an' rocks all over us when one goes off, Frank?"

Frank let out an impatient sigh. "Would you rather have a little bit of dirt on you, or six feet of it coverin' your goddamn grave?"

The snap of a twig behind them made Frank stiffen. He had been so careful to watch their backtrail as they laid the mines in the road.

"What was that?" James asked softly.

Frank pursed his lips as he glanced over his right shoulder in the

direction of the noise.

A giant, hulking figure stood behind them only a few yards away.

"Holy shit," Frank breathed.

James turned around, just in time to catch the glint of an automatic rifle barrel in the moonlight. "Oh no!" he gasped when he realized what was happening. "How did the sumbitch get behind us?"

His answer came in the form of a staccato of weapon fire, thirty large-bore slugs thudding through the silence of the night as they tore through Frank and James.

Frank was lifted off the ground, twisting slowly in midair, landing on his back with eleven bullet holes in his torso and legs, dead when he fell.

James managed to let out a scream of pain when a series of bullets passed through his lungs. He fell flat on his face as a gurgling came from his chest.

Within seconds, both men lay still, their bullet-riddled bodies leaking blood onto the grass.

Ben Raines shook his head. He walked over to a spot about five feet from where the men lay and toed the grass with his boot. Lying there, half-buried, was a microphone pickup for the audio-sensors scattered across the compound.

268 268 William W. Johnstone

"Guess you boys haven't kept up with the latest technology in alarm systems," he said to the dead assassins. "Too bad."

269

Claire Osterman was looking over the latest Intel reports on the progress of the war and getting madder by the minute. It seemed that everything that could possibly go wrong was going wrong.

Her secretary barged into her office, a stricken look on her face. "Madam President," she blurted.

"What is it, Clara?" Claire barked. She'd told that stupid cow at least a hundred times to knock before entering her private office.

"There's a phone call for you."

"You mean you came storming in here to tell me that?"

"But. . . but. . . it's General Ben Raines calling."

"Oh?" Claire said, a surprised look on her face. She hadn't heard anything from the assassins she'd sent, so evidently they'd failed to rid the world of Ben Raines. The bastard's probably calling to gloat, she thought. Well, I'll be doing the gloating after we bomb the shit out of his precious SUSAs with my new plague bombs.

She picked up the phone. Might as well let him crow, while he has the chance. "Hello, this is President Osterman," she said, unable to keep a

smug tone out of her voice.

"Hello, Sugar Babe," Raines said, as if he were talking to an old friend.

"Oh, hello, Raines," she answered, refusing to use his title of general.

270

"I'm just calling to tell you not to send boys to do a man's job next time, or pretty soon you're gonna run out of people stupid enough to try to kill me."

"Why, I don't know what you're talking about, Raines. You know attempted assassination of a country's leaders is against the law."

"Yeah, I figured you'd say that. It's a typical Socialist Democrat tactic to not have the balls to admit when something isn't working."

"Did you call just to insult me, Raines?"

"No. Actually, I wanted to see if you've had enough of this stupid war and are ready to enter into some serious negotiations for peace."

"Why would I want to do that?" she asked.

"I just thought you might have some feeling for your citizens, who are being devastated by your insane continuation of a losing effort."

The word insane almost pushed Claire over the edge. "What do you mean, losing, you son of a bitch?" she screamed into the phone.

"You're beaten, Claire. Why not just admit it, and let's both go on with our lives?"

"You're the one who's going to be beaten, Raines. I still have a surprise or two up my sleeve."

"Oh, you mean your bubonic plague weapons?"

How in the hell did he find out about that? she thought. We must have another spy in our midst. She made a mental note to have Harlan do yet another full security check of all the employees of her headquarters staff.

"So, you know about that, do you? Well, it won't do you any good, Raines. In a very short time, your beloved citizens will be puking and coughing their guts out, and you'll be begging me to save you."

Raines chuckled. "Oh, Sugar Babe, if you only knew." He hesitated a moment, faint hisses of static the only sound on the line.

271

271

Finally, he spoke again. "I'm going to do you a favor, Sugar Babe," he said, his voice now serious. "I'm going to tell you something you don't know and hopefully save a lot of lives, mainly your citizens' lives."

"What could you possibly tell me, Raines, that I don't already know?"

"Just that the vaccine that Dr. Ishi gave you is bogus. It's worthless, Claire. He gave us the real vaccine, so the only people who're going to die from your bombs will be your own troops and citizens."

"You're lying, Ben Raines!" she shouted into the phone. "There's no way you could have the vaccine."

"I've given you fair warning, Sugar Babe, so that I won't have the deaths of millions of innocent people on my conscience. Of course, crazy people don't generally have consciences, so you're free to do what you want with the information."

"I don't believe you, Raines. This is just a dirty trick to try and save your own skins."

"OK, Sugar Babe, I've done what I can to help prevent a catastrophe. The next move is up to you. But, if you do decide to drop those bombs, you'd better make sure you stay away from fleas and anyone with a fever in the next few weeks, 'cause otherwise, you're liable to get the plague, too."

"\bu're a liar, Ben Raines, and don't call me Sugar Babe!" she screamed as she slammed the phone down in its cradle.

She sat there, breathing hard, sweat pouring from her forehead as she tried to think through the conversation. How had he known so many details of their plan, and how much of what he said was the truth?

Considering her options, she realized she really didn't have any. The only hope the USA had of winning the war, and the only hope Claire Osterman had of avoiding a hanging was for the plague bombs to work. Therefore,

272

she reasoned, she'd go on and drop the bombs. She really had nothing to lose, for she was dead either way if Raines was correct.

She picked up the phone and dialed General Maxwell's number. When he answered, she said, "Max, I want those planes launched today . . . right now!"

"But Madam President, we're still two days away from being ready."

"You heard me, General. Obey my orders or I'll come down there and personally blow your head off!"

She could hear the general's sharp intake of breath at her threat. Good. The son of a bitch needed to know she meant business when she gave an order.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll get the bombers loaded and send them on their way as soon as it's dark."

"Thank you, General," she said in a sweet voice. "Let me know the results of our raid as soon as you have them, no matter how late it is."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, his voice low and quiet.

273

In SUSA headquarters, Ben hung up the phone, a defeated look on his face.

"Do you think she'll call off the bombing, Ben?" Mike Post asked.

Ben shook his head. "I doubt it. I believe the lady really is insane." He took a deep breath. "But let's give her a chance. I want all offensive attacks against the USA halted immediately. Keep our air defenses on full alert, and we'll resume our attack only if she tries to launch her bombers against us."

"Ten-four, Ben," Mike said, and sat down immediately to give the appropriate orders to his field commanders.

Ben walked over to his desk, sat down, and rolled himself a cigarette. As the smoke trailed from his nostrils, he looked at his team, sitting in various positions around his office. "Now, we wait and see if she really is crazy enough to attack us."

Johnny Albright pulled back on the stick of his medium bomber and kept his eyes on the red lights of his altimeter.

"Squadron leader climbing to twenty-five thousand feet," he said into the microphone attached to his flight helmet.

One by one, the five other bombers in his squadron checked in to acknowledge his order.

274

Timothy Baron, his copilot, kept his eyes peeled through the plexiglass windshield of the plane, watching for evidence of fighters that they knew would soon be coming up to meet them.

"Keep a sharp lookout for SAM trails," Johnny said, "the fucking radar on these antiques ain't gonna be much help if we pass a SAM battery on our way in."

"Roger," Timothy said. "So far it all looks clear."

"It's too bad Osterman was in such a hurry for this mission," Johnny said, glancing out the side window at the full moon overhead. "It'd go a lot smoother if we'd waited until the new moon, or if we had a full complement of bombers in the squadron."

"You got that right, chief," Timothy answered. "Goin' up against SUSA at half strength ain't exactly my idea of a smart move." He hesitated. "I wish we had that bitch up here with us just once when the flak and SAM's started. Maybe she'd think twice about issuing stupid orders then."

Johnny grunted. "Ours is not to reason why, Timmy my boy, ours is but to do or die."

"It's the dying part I'm not particularly fond of," Timothy answered.

From out of nowhere a P51E fighter plane from SUSA streaked by, its wing cannons blazing, sending tracers ripping by their window in a narrow miss. Johnny jerked the stick to the side and pushed with his left foot to turn the bomber into a steep, curving dive.

"Goddamn!" Timothy screamed, flinching as if he could somehow dodge the crimson trails of death from the P51E.

Johnny yelled into his mic, "Fighters . . . fighters at twelve o'clock high! Take evasive measures!"

The big turbine engines of the bomber whined, revving up to rpms their manufacturers had never planned as Johnny tried desperately to evade the killer attackers.

Timothy glanced at his pilot, fear-sweat forming on his

275

275

brow in spite of the near freezing temperature at twenty-five thousand feet. He could almost see the wings dancing in the moonlight as they vibrated at speeds nearly twice the usual for the bomber.

"Do you see any more?" Johnny yelled, craning his neck to get a better look.

Timothy leaned to the side, looking first forward, then back over his shoulder. "Not yet, but you can bet your ass they're out there. Those bastards always travel in packs."

A bright flash from off to their right lit up the night as a fighter passed their wing man, its tracers stitching a pattern of death and destruction along the fuselage of the plane. Billowing smoke, colored orange by avgas catching on fire, blossomed from the stricken bomber.

"Mayday! Mayday! I'm hit!" said a voice in Johnny's earphones.

"It's Jackie," Timothy said, watching the death throes of their brother airman as he desperately tried to keep his plane aloft.

Johnny didn't bother to answer. He was too busy jerking his plane back and forth in a zig-zag pattern to try to evade the attack he knew was coming.

Timothy jerked back as a wing separated itself from the nearby bomber and the plane began to twist and turn in a falling spiral, out of control.

"Bail out... bail out!" Johnny screamed into the mic, watching helplessly as the plane disappeared in a mushrooming ball of fire.

The concussion from the blast shook Johnny's plane and almost pushed it on its side as he frantically fought the stick to regain control.

"Goddamn you, Osterman!" he muttered, cursing the woman who'd sent them on this mission before the squadron was at full strength.

276

"Where the hell are our fighter escorts?" Timothy asked, looking back and forth through the windows.

As he spoke another fighter, smaller and quicker than the P51Es of SUSA, dived into view. The USA fighters, though more agile and somewhat faster than SUSA's, had less body armor and were therefore much more vulnerable to return fire.

The P51E and the US fighter approached each other at combined speeds of more than six hundred miles an hour, playing out their deadly ballet right in front of Johnny and Timothy.

"Come on, fellah," Johnny said, "blow that son of a bitch outta the sky."

The planes swerved at the last minute, passing each other with their cannons blazing like some old-fashioned gunfight between western gunslicks.

The P51E curved off to the left, gradually losing altitude, smoke pouring from its engine.

The US fighter waggled its wings once-as if saying gotcha!-and started to climb as it looked for another attacker.

Just as it banked, a P51E came from six o'clock low and signed its death warrant with a blast of bullets that cut the plane almost in two.

Johnny saw silk blossom as the pilot ejected seconds before his plane exploded in a blinding flash of light.

"Damn, how many fighters does SUSA have?" Timothy asked, his eyes flicking back and forth, seeing the moonlit skies seemingly full of the buzzing instruments of death.

Johnny felt rather than saw his plane take a hit, as the stick shuddered in his hands and began to feel mushy. "We're hit!" he yelled at Timothy.

"You may have to help me with . . ." he started to say, fighting the controls as the plane began to dive and bank to the left, out of control.

277

He stopped in mid-sentence when he looked at Timothy and saw him slumped in his seat, the right side of his head missing and his sidewindow shattered by machine-gun fire.

As the plane lost altitude, Johnny glanced below and saw lights of a city. It must be Little Rock, he thought, recognizing his primary target.

He reached down and jerked the bomb-release lever, trying to ignore the P51E he saw headed straight for him.

"Our Father, who art in heaven," he prayed, feeling the shudder as his bombs released, staring ahead at the tracers from the fighter as they rushed toward him, never feeling the concussion when his plane exploded around him.

The night over Little Rock, Arkansas, lit up like a fourth of July fireworks celebration as the squadron of P51Es systematically destroyed every bomber overhead. Not a single plane survived the attack, and Johnny's was the only one which successfully dropped its payload of deadly plague bombs.

The infected fleas, designed to survive their bombs' detonation, spread out on the evening air, falling in a white cloud of flour, settling to the ground like ash from an exploding volcano.

The fleas, unaffected by their fall, scattered along the city streets, looking for warm-blooded animals and a blood meal, so they could lay

thousands of eggs, which would also be infected by the bubonic plague bacteria.

Those pilots who were still flying, searched the sky in vain for surviving US bombers or fighters, until they realized the attackers had been wiped out to the last man.

"Come on, boys," the squadron leader of the P51Es called on his command frequency microphone. "Let's go home. We're done here."

278

Ben and Mike Post and President Jeffrey's listened to the radio reports of Claire Osterman's bombing raids on the radio in Ben's office. Almost all of the planes had been shot down, or so disabled that they turned back before reaching SUSA territory. Some of the reports even said several of the wounded planes dropped their deadly cargo on USA territory to lighten their loads so they could make it back to their base airfield.

Mike Post shook his head. "I can't believe those pilots dropped BW on their own people just to try to save their own lives," he said disgustedly.

"When you have leaders who put their own interests above those of their country, it becomes contagious," Ben answered. "Everyone in the USA armed services is out for number one, and the country be damned."

"That kind of thinking is so foreign to me, I can't begin to describe how it makes me feel," Cecil Jeffrey's said in a low, sad voice.

Ben looked at his friend with gentle eyes. "That's why you're a great leader, Cec, unlike Sugar Babe Osterman."

The radio crackled to life again, and with a small amount of static, a voice said, "Eagle One, come in. This is squadron leader Jimmy Johnson reporting."

Ben keyed the mic. "Eagle One, go ahead Jimmy."

"We've managed to turn the attack around in this sector. Two planes managed to drop their payloads just north of

279

Little Rock, Arkansas. All others were destroyed or turned back with bombs undropped."

"Ten-four, Jimmy. Thanks. Eagle One out."

Ben glanced over at Corrie, who was keeping tabs on where the bombers had been successful, in a notebook. "What's that make us?" he asked.

She consulted her book. "Two loads of bombs in Little Rock, three near El Paso, and one just north of Phoenix, Arizona. All the others were unsuccessful, according to our fighters' reports."

"Mike," Ben said, "send in the decontamination squads to those locations as soon as we can. From what Dr. Ishi told Dr. Zimmer in his written correspondence, the bombs contain fleas infected with bubonic plague bacteria in some sort of food medium. If we can get our teams into the

sites quick enough with their insecticides and extra vaccines for the people in those areas that didn't take it the first time around, perhaps we can contain the outbreak before it starts."

"Ten-four, Ben. I've got over fifty old crop dusters who're ready to drop as much Diazinon as it takes to control the flea population. However, there's still bound to be some independent souls who get the disease."

Ben nodded. "That's why Dr. Lamar Chase is going to send his medical teams in after the decontamination squads to aggressively treat any and all persons suspected of having the plague."

Jeffreys looked surprised. "I thought antibiotics didn't work against bubonic plague."

"No, that's a myth," Ben said. "Tetracycline and Eryth-romycin are both effective in treating infected individuals. The problem is, the disease spreads so fast it's extremely difficult to contain with medical treatment alone. However, by combining decontamination, aggressive flea control, and vaccination with the antibiotics, I think we stand a good chance of not losing very many people."

280

"What are you going to do about Osterman, Ben?" Jersey asked from her seat across the room.

"I'm going to resume all bombing and sabotage in the US. That bitch is going to pay dearly for her actions."

"You mean her citizens are, don't you Ben?" Jeffreys said.

Ben stared at the president. "It's the same thing, Cec. A populace who countenances such actions by their elected leaders deserves to live, and to die, by their choices of leaders. Ultimately, they'll either get rid of her for causing them such hardship, or I'll wipe the entire country off the face of the earth."

He looked at Mike. "Send the word to all our field commanders and to the air force, Mike. Full steam ahead."

Claire Osterman stormed into the war room in her nightgown, her cheeks a flaming red. It was a few minutes past eleven o'clock, almost midnight. The ground above the war room shook with repeated bomb blasts, and the whistle of rockets screamed through night skies.

"What the hell is going on up there?" she demanded, as the ground trembled with bombs and missile warheads. "I can't sleep with all this shit going on. I damn near fell out of bed- a minute ago. Who the hell is doing all the bombing so close to our headquarters? I want some goddamn answers, and I want them now!"

Andy Schumberger, Otis Warner, Captain Broadhurst, General Maxwell, and Harlan Millard sat around a table with a map of the old United States on it, covered by a thin sheet of plastic. All across the map were red and blue plastic squares representing both USA and SUSA infantry and armored battalions. Tiny plastic airplanes represented airborne units.

281

"We've suffered some losses, Madam President," Harlan said softly.

"Losses?" She spat it out, as if the word had a foul taste to it.

She rested her palms on her ample hips, staring from one man to the next.

General Maxwell wouldn't look Claire in the eye, his gaze roaming around the war room.

"Yes, Madam President. . . losses we did not expect," Harlan explained when it appeared no one else was willing to answer the president's question.

She glared at him. "You keep telling me we won't have any more . . . losses, as you call them. What has happened now? Do I want to hear this shit?"

"You'll have to hear about them sooner or later, Madam President," Maxwell said, glancing around him for support.

"So tell me, Max," she snapped, "what sort of losses are you talking about? And tell me why my bed is shaking so goddamn hard I can't lie still in it. It felt like I was riding a damn bucking horse just a few minutes ago. Hell . . . no one could sleep with this shit going on."

When no one answered her, she glared at the men one at a time. "I spoke with Ben Raines on the radio, yesterday," she said, her voice dangerously low. "I was under the impression we'd sent some top notch assassins to kill the son of a bitch, and the next thing I know, he's calling on the goddamned phone!"

Another, longer silence.

"The two assassins we sent . . . both of them were killed last night," General Maxwell mumbled, looking down at the floor to keep from having to see the expression on Claire's face.

Claire stared at him in disbelief. "You bastards!" she exclaimed, examining every face in the war room. "To a man, you told me that this James Scott and Frank Brown

were the best money could buy. 'They have assassinated political leaders all over Europe,' you said." She stared at Maxwell, her eyes flashing. "You told me they were good!"

"They are . . . at least until last night, they were."

The president's face flushed a bright crimson. "I authorized the payment of a hundred thousand dollars, in gold, for the two of them to get rid of Ben Raines forever."

"Yes, Madam President," Harlan stammered. "You did. We were informed they were killed by some of Ben Raines's security men."

"Shit!" Claire exclaimed, dropping into a vacant chair at the table, holding her head in her hands. "First we give this little Jap son of a

bitch five million dollars out of our treasury and we still haven't seen his flea bombs work." She took a deep breath. "Now you tell me the pair of killers we hired from over in England are dead. You told me they were the very best in the world at laying landmines and using explosives. The big one, I forget his name-

"James Scott," Otis Warner told her. "He came to us very highly recommended by the British."

Claire shook her head. "He must not have been all that good, Otis. Neither was the other son of a bitch. I forget the bastard's name, or where he was from."

"Frank Brown, from Nova Scotia," Captain Broadhurst added in a meek voice. "I knew his training officer. He made very few mistakes. He was with the French Foreign Legion a number of years ago. His personnel files give him very high marks for the handling of explosives."

"OK," Claire said, a disgusted tone in her voice. "Any more good news for me tonight?"

Harlan spoke up when no one else was willing to respond. "The bombing raids didn't go as well as we'd hoped . . ." He hesitated.

"What do you mean?" Claire demanded. "Are you tell-

283

283

ing me the one thing I... we, were counting on to give us some leverage with Raines is a complete failure?"

A silence lingered in the war room. Again, it was Harlan Millard who was forced to speak when the others remained silent, staring at the map.

"It failed to achieve our objective, Claire, but it wasn't a total failure." <

"Failed? " she screamed. I

"Yes, ma'am."

"How the hell could it fail?" Claire asked, glaring into Harlan's eyes. "And what do you mean, not a total failure? Either they dropped the damned bombs, or they didn't."

"Something went wrong-

Claire's face was beet red now. "I can tell by the tone of your wimpy voice something went wrong, you damn fool! Just what the hell did go wrong?"

Another, longer, silence.

Now General Maxwell spoke up. "I tried to tell you we weren't ready, that we didn't have enough planes to get through the heavy air defenses of SUSA. Only four or five of all the planes managed to drop their payloads on SUSA." He took a deep breath, looking around the room for support, but finding none. No one else had the balls to tell Claire Osterman anything was her fault. "In fact, it even gets worse. Some of

the bombers, after being damaged on their runs, dropped their bombs on our own territory to lighten their planes so they could return to base safely."

Claire's eyebrows knitted in a deep frown. "The cowardly bastards!" she exclaimed, examining every face in the room. "These so-called soldiers, in order to save their own miserable hides, not only failed in their mission, but they bombed our own citizens?" She directed her anger toward Harlan. "You told me these pilots were good!

"They are ..." said Maxwell. "At least until last night, they were."

284

The president's spine stiffened. "I want the names of those cowards posted on the airfield bulletin board, and I want them summarily executed. I intend to show our troops that failure is not an option."

"Yes, Madam President," Harlan stammered. "I agree. The cowards will be shot at dawn."

"Shit!" Claire exclaimed venomously, spitting out the word as if she had a mouthful of it. She took a deep breath. That's just great, General," she said, staring at Maxwell. If looks could kill, he would have dropped dead on the spot.

"Perhaps, if we'd waited until we had our full complement of bombers, more of them would have gotten through," Otis Warner told her. "A day or so more or less wouldn't have made that much difference."

Claire arched her eyebrows. "Don't try to lay the pilots' failure on me, Otis. They were obviously too concerned with saving their own miserable hides to complete their mission successfully. A thousand planes manned by cowards wouldn't have made any difference."

"Madam President," Captain Broadhurst added in a meek voice. "Not all of the pilots neglected their duty. Bombs were successfully dropped in Arizona, Arkansas, and Texas. If the plague organism is as strong as Ishi said it was, perhaps that will be enough."

Claire swept a stray lock of hair away from her forehead, then reached for a cigarette.

"We're all very sorry, Claire," Harlan said as another bomb thudded into the ground somewhere near Indianapolis, rattling one of the metal drawers in a file cabinet on the far side of the war room.

"Sorry?" she asked with undisguised sarcasm. "General Raines and his goddamn Rebels will be marching through the streets of Indianapolis within a few hours, and all you can think of to say is that 'we're all very sorry?' "

285

285

"We're doing the best we can, Madam President," General Maxwell said.

Her eyes rounded with anger when she looked at him. "You say you're doing the best you can?" she shrieked. "What about these goddamn bombs

dropping on top of my bedroom now? How the hell am I supposed to get any sleep?"

More silence, until the general spoke.

"Somehow, Ben Raines is getting information as to where our anti-aircraft gun emplacements are located. He strikes them first, and then we must endure his air bombardment."

"How in the hell is he getting this information?" Claire wanted to know, inhaling deeply on her cigarette. "How does he know where they are?"

Maxwell looked at Captain Broadhurst before he answered the president's question. "I'm afraid we have an informant in our midst," he said gravely.

"An informant?"

Broadhurst nodded.

"Who the hell could it be?"

Once more, the captain hesitated. "It has to be someone at a very high level, Madam President."

She scowled. "Then find the son of a bitch and have him executed."

"It may not be that easy."

"And why not?"

"We aren't quite sure where the classified information is coming from."

Claire sucked on her cigarette again. "What the hell am I paying you for, if you can't find out something as simple as this?"

"I have my security staff checking on it now."

Claire turned to General Maxwell. Then she got up from her chair, addressing him. "That damn sure isn't good enough for me, General."

286

"What do you mean by that, Madam President?" Maxwell asked in a thin, hollow voice.

"Stand up!" Claire said to Maxwell. "Get out of that chair right now!"

Maxwell did as he was told, although it was apparent by the look on his face he was totally bewildered by her request.

"First you set up an assassination attempt which fails. Then your fucking pilots fail to deliver the bombs that might have won the war for us. Draw your pistol," Claire said evenly.

"But why?" Maxwell asked, yet he unfastened the snap over his holster and took out his forty-five automatic, just as he'd been instructed.

Claire rested her hands on the table, and for a time all was silence. She stared at General Maxwell intently, until she'd made up her mind.

"Aim your gun at Captain Broadhurst," she said.

"Do what?" he asked, his cheeks paling.

"Aim it at him, and then kill him."

"You can't be serious-"

"I'm completely serious, Max. Point your pistol at him and shoot him in the head. He's an enemy of the state. He has betrayed the USA."

"I don't. . . think . . . I can do that, Claire." he stammered as a tremor reached his fingertips.

"Do it!" Claire screamed. "Do it now, or I'll have you before a firing squad at dawn."

Very slowly, deliberately, General Maxwell turned to the chair Captain Broadhurst was occupying. He raised his forty-five with even more reluctance.

"Kill him!" Claire hissed.

"This is murder, Claire," Harlan whispered. "Coldblooded murder."

"I don't need you to tell me what it is," she growled, her chin jutting.

287

"But you can't simply order Broadhurst's execution for treason without some sort of proof."

"I don't need proof, Harlan, so shut your damn mouth. I say Captain Broadhurst is an enemy of the USA, and I want him shot right now. As commander in chief, I have just given General Maxwell a direct order. This is a question of his loyalty, not Broadhurst's."

"Jesus, Claire," Harlan sighed. "What makes you think Bob Broadhurst is an enemy of the state?"

Claire ignored Harlan, meeting General Maxwell's eyes with a steely look. "Kill him, Max," she said.

"But what if he isn't our traitor? What if I kill the wrong man?"

"Then we'll find out who the real Judas is, and he will be killed," Claire responded. She tapped out her cigarette impatiently. "I'm waiting-"

Captain Broadhurst stood up. He was unarmed. He spread his palms and looked at General Maxwell before he spoke. "Go ahead, Max. Shoot me."

"Dear God," Maxwell whispered. He ignored Claire for the moment, reading the look on Bob Broadhurst's face. "You can't be serious."

"It's your duty," Broadhurst replied. "We are both military men. An order is an order."

Tears streamed down General Maxwell's cheeks. The room was quiet.

"Kill him, Max," Claire said. "That's a direct order."

"No," he gasped, tossing his pistol on the tabletop. I won't do it. Someone else will have to do this dirty deed for you, Claire."

Maxwell turned on his heel and started for the door leading to the stairway out of the war room.

Claire picked up Maxwell's forty-five, jacked a load into the firing chamber, and aimed for the general's back. "Stop, or I'll kill you!" she snarled.

Maxwell reached for the doorknob. Claire's fury took

288

control of her and she pulled the trigger, filling the war room with the sound of exploding gunpowder.

General Leland Maxwell was driven into the concrete wall by the force of impact as the bullet severed his spine. He let out a soft groan as blood sprayed from an exit wound in his chest.

He sank to the floor on his knees. Then he toppled over on his face into a puddle of crimson, sucking his last breath into a torn lung.

Claire turned the pistol toward Captain Broadhurst, her eyes glittering with hatred. "I won't have a man in my command who lacks nerve," he said.

Broadhurst nodded once, a serene look on his face as if he'd known all along what was coming.

Harlan and Otis backed away from the table.

"I am prepared to die for my country," Captain Broadhurst said, bowing his head, looking at the floor.

Another thundering gunshot filled the room.

289

Otis Warner walked down the underground corridor to his office, his head hanging and his eyes on the concrete floor.

"Hold my calls," he said to his secretary, who was staring at his blood-covered clothes with a horrified expression.

"Mr. Warner, what. . . what happened?" she asked, a quake in her voice as if she thought enemy troops might be massing in the building.

He waved a hand at her as he entered his office. "Don't even ask," he mumbled.

He shut the door and went into his sleeping quarters. All of Osterman's staff now stayed in the headquarters bunker, since the bombing raids had destroyed the other housing on the base.

Putting his hands on the sink in his bathroom, he leaned close to the mirror, staring at Maxwell's and Broadhurst's blood, which speckled his face and upper body. They'd been good men. There was no reason for Claire's actions, he thought. Perhaps she is . . . insane.

He stripped his clothes off and took a quick shower, turning the water as hot as it would go, as if that would somehow wash away his complicity in the murder of two loyal officers, and friends.

When he was dressed in clean clothes he sat behind his desk and began to look over intel reports on the course

290

of the war. They were losing, and losing heavily if the reports could be believed.

How in the world have we allowed ourselves to get to this point? he wondered. We 've gone from the premier nation in the world to one not much better than a third world country.

Jesus, he thought, remembering the almost gleeful look in Claire's eyes as she brutally murdered Max and Broad-hurst, maybe she has gone round the bend.

A light knock at the door broke his reverie. "Yes, come in," he called, welcoming any interruption that would give him an excuse to stop looking at the Intel reports and their clear evidence the USA was going down the tubes.

His secretary peeked through the door. "I have a call on line one, Mr. Warner."

"Who is it?"

"He wouldn't give his name."

"What do you mean, wouldn't give his name? Did he say what it was about?"

"No, sir. He just said he had vital information about the war, and that he needed to talk to you."

"OK, Sally. I'll take it."

As she closed the door behind her he picked up the phone, wondering who would be calling him with information about the war.

"This is Otis Warner," he said.

"This is Ben Raines," the voice said, as if Otis received calls from the opposing general every day.

"Raines? What can I do for you, General?" Otis asked, wondering if this was some bizarre plot by Claire to test his loyalty. Sweat broke out on his forehead, as he remembered the way Maxwell's body was blown apart by the .45 slug from his own gun.

"I have it on good authority that you are the only one of Claire Osterman's advisers who has consistently opposed her war effort."

291

"It's true, General, that I was initially against us going to war with you, but I've since come to realize-

He heard a deep chuckle. "No need to pussyfoot around with me, Otis. I'm not going to tell Claire we talked, so you don't need to try to cover your ass."

"Get to the point, General. Why have you called me?"

"I have some information that I think you need to know, information I gave to Claire a few days ago and she evidently ignored."

"And what would that be, General?"

"I called to tell you the vaccine you got from Dr. Ishi is worthless. He gave us the real vaccine."

Otis felt his heart jump up into his throat, and for a moment he had trouble speaking. Could this be the truth, or was Ben Raines just bluffing?

"What. . . what do you mean?"

"I mean that you and your citizens are not protected from the plague bombs that Claire ordered dropped in the recent raids on my country. You should realize, Otis, that when the plague starts to spread, as it is sure to do no matter how hard we try to contain it, you people in the US are going to pay a terrible price for Claire's ambition."

"And you informed President Osterman of this?"

"Yes. I offered her the chance to end the war, with no reprisals from us, and she either didn't believe me, or chose to carry on for her own personal reasons."

Otis's mind was working frantically, wondering if what the general said was true, and why Claire hadn't informed her cabinet of advisers of the offer, and the information about the vaccine.

"Why on earth would she do that?"

"You know her better than I do, Otis. Personally, I think the lady is insane."

"Assuming what you say is true, why are you telling me, and what do you expect me to do about it?"

"First of all, you should check with your medical ex-

292

perts about the vaccine. By now, they should be realizing the vaccine is worthless."

"And if I find it is as you say?"

He could almost see the man on the other end of the line shrug. "What you do with the information is up to you, Otis. But you should know, in spite of the fact we are winning the war and you will be completely destroyed in a matter of months, we at SUSA are not monsters. We have no wish to wipe out the United States. We merely wish to be left alone, for each of our countries to go their own ways."

"Are you making an offer of peace?"

"Yes. We are prepared to stand down our attacks, withdraw our troops from your country, and to share the vaccine and whatever medical assistance you need if you call off the war."

"What about reparations?"

"There will be none. The boundaries of our countries will remain the same as they were at the beginning of the war. The UN may insist upon Claire and General Maxwell standing trial as war criminals for their use of biological weapons, but we will not press the issue, so it will probably not come to much."

"The question is moot as concerns Maxwell," Otis said. "Claire shot him today."

"What?" Ben asked. Evidently, his spies hadn't had time to tell him of the executions.

"Yes. She shot them to death."

"It's worse than I thought. The lady is mad."

Taking a big chance, hoping his phone wasn't tapped, Otis agreed. "I'm afraid you're right."

"Is there any way you can . . . gain control of the government? Do you and the other advisers have enough power to do that?"

Otis shook his head, as if Ben could see the gesture. "No, I'm afraid not. Claire rules with an iron fist. All of

293

293

the headquarters staff is completely loyal to her. If we tried to take over, we'd all suffer the same fates as Maxwell and Broadhurst."

There was silence for a few moments as Ben thought over this latest information.

"What about a coup?"

Was Ben reading his mind? Otis had been thinking the very same thing.

"It would have to be done very carefully, and if we failed, it would mean our deaths."

"Better the bullet than the plague," Ben said gently. "At least, you'd go out trying to save lives instead of condemning half your people to a horrible death."

"You're right. Something's got to be done. I had no idea Claire knew about this when she ordered the dropping of the plague bombs."

"If we here can do anything to assist you-

"No. It's our country, and our leader. I'll think of something."

"I'll call you back in a few days to see how things are going," Ben said.

"When you call, use the name Pax," Otis said, "Claire has ears everywhere, and I don't want her to know we've been talking."

"Pax-like in peace, huh? I like that. You take care. The fate of your country is in your hands."

294

Ben Raines was at his desk, going over Intel reports on the progress of the war, when Mike Post knocked on the door and entered.

"Mornin', Mike," Ben said. He was in a good mood. His talk with Otis Warner had gone better than he'd hoped, and he had a feeling that Claire Osterman's reign as President of the USA wasn't going to last much longer. With any luck, Warner would somehow find the balls to oust the crazy bitch and end the war which was causing so much pain in both their countries.

"Good morning, Ben."

"I just talked with Dr. Lamar Chase, and he's very happy with the performance of the plague vaccine. About the only ones who've come down with the disease are those who were too hardheaded to take the preventative shots."

"Yeah, that is good news," Mike said, but his face didn't look too happy to Ben.

"What's wrong, Mike? You look as if you ate something that didn't agree with you," Ben said, not willing to let Mike's gloomy disposition spoil his day.

"This is wrong, Ben," Mike said, flipping a sheet of paper onto Ben's desk.

Ben picked up the paper and began to read. As he read, the hairs on the back of his neck stirred. "This is a transcript of a radio transmission from Buddy," Ben said.

"Yes. It came in early this morning, before anyone was here who knew the import of what he was saying."

295

"Damn. It says here that one of his lieutenants, Gordon Walker, was killed by some FPPS in a village near the Indiana border."

Mike nodded. "Wasn't Gordon a longtime friend of Buddy's?"

"Yeah. They'd been in the service together since they were both knee-high to a grasshopper. Buddy was best man at Gordon's wedding last year, right after we got back from the Africa campaign against Bruno Bottger."*

"You'd better go on reading, Ben. It gets worse."

Ben finished the letter and slammed his hand down on the table. "Shit! He says here he's going to go into Indiana and try to take Claire

Osterman out."

"Uh-huh. And look at who he's gonna use to help him."

"Oh no. He's coordinating the assassination attempt with the cell of Freedom Fighters just north of Indianapolis," Ben said. He looked up at Mike. "Hasn't he been informed that the cell he's using has been compromised?"

Mike shook his head. "No. We only found out there was a traitor in the cell last week. What with the bombing and all the excitement of trying to get the vaccine made and given to our citizens and soldiers, Intel hasn't gotten around to notifying all the field commanders of their findings."

"That's bullshit!" Ben exploded, his eyes flashing.

"Hey, Ben, they've been kinda busy lately. They sent out a notification to all of the Scout units in the area, but Buddy's unit is over three hundred miles to the north. No one figured he'd contact them without letting the others in the area know about it first."

Ben held up a hand. "I know. I'm sorry, Mike. Buddy always was too impetuous for his own good. Always cutting corners . . ."

296

Mike smiled. "He has some big shoes he's trying to fill, Ben. He wants you to be proud of him."

"Yeah, the curse of a successful father is a bitch. Is there any way to get a message to him before he leaves?"

Mike wagged his head. "No, I've already tried. As soon as the intake officer showed me the message I got on the horn. They said he'd already taken off in a small plane for the rendezvous point, and there's no radio in the aircraft capable of receiving a long distance transmission."

"OK," Ben said, accepting the inevitable. "Let's see if we can contact the nearest Scout team. Maybe it's not too late for them to meet the plane and get him out of there before Osterman's people get to him."

"I'll get right on it."

"And Mike, if this goes bad I want that traitor taken out, as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir."

Claire Osterman's lips curled in a malevolent smile as she read her own Intel report concerning Buddy Raines and his plan to attack her home base.

"Well, well. Just what the doctor ordered," she growled. She glanced up at General Wilford Hall, the man she'd promoted to take Leland Maxwell's place as Commander of the USA armed forces. He was not a great tactician, but he was a confirmed ass-kisser, and could be counted on to do exactly what she ordered, no more and no less.

"Willie," she said, "I want you to get the best men available and have them transported immediately to the area where Ben Raines's son is

expected to land."

"You want him terminated, Madam President?"

"No, not under any circumstances. He's much too valuable an asset to kill. I want to look him in the eyes while he's questioned. Then I want him broken, so that Ben Raines will know it was his own son who gave us the

297

297

information we needed to destroy his army and win the war."

Hall knew in his heart that no matter what information they gleaned from the young Raines, the war was not going to be won by the USA, but as a career officer in the army he knew better than to contradict his commander in chief.

"Yes, ma'am. There are a couple of men that are perfect for a job such as this. I'll see that they're stationed at the appropriate place immediately."

"Oh, Willie?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Did you attend General Maxwell's funeral?"

"Why, uh . . . yes, ma'am."

"Good. Then you know the penalty for failure."

"These men won't fail, Madam President. You have my word on it."

"More than your word is riding on this, Willie. Your ass is on the line. See that I'm not disappointed."

Bob Angelo saw the single engine plane land on an airstrip hidden deep in the Indiana forest. It came down without running lights, an older Cessna painted camouflage green and brown. If the intelligence they had was accurate, Buddy Raines would be on board, son of the famous Rebel general, preparing to lead a strike team toward the heart of the USA's military inventory, including bombers and an array of tanks being prepared to launch a major initiative into the heart of the SUSA Rebel stronghold.

Angelo and his American partner had been lured out of hiding in Sicily by a huge offer of money. In spite of a number of attempts to get at General Ben Raines, commander of all Rebel forces across the North American continent, he had somehow eluded assassination and cap-

298

ture, even when the assassins were very good, on a world-class level, men such as Chris Bradley, Gerald Enger, even Hans Bosner, one of the very best.

But Bob Angelo had never failed to complete an assignment, and Ron Storm, a displaced New Yorker, was almost as good at reading trouble

before it arrived. Storm was brutal, yet cunning in every respect. Angelo did not worry, so long as Storm was covering his back.

"Looks like our information was correct," Angelo said to a man lying behind a tree only a few yards away. "That'll be Buddy Raines, the son of the mighty general of the SUSA armies himself."

"What a goddamn joke," Ronnie Storm said, "calling a bunch of hoodlums with guns an army, or a goddamn government. Raines is a damn fool. He ain't nothing but an outlaw who took advantage of a bad situation. He's a damn thug, is all he is, a thug with a bunch of stupid followers. This is gonna be easy, Bob. I'll damn near feel like we're stealin' the money from President Osterman. They're all a bunch of idiots."

The plane taxied to a halt at the end of the airstrip, and its engine went silent.

"So is Raines's son," Angelo replied, lowering his voice, for they were very close to the plane. "I hear Buddy ain't no better than his old man, and he ain't nearly as smart."

"Did you ever read that stupid old Tri-States Manifesto?" Storm asked.

"Nope. I wiped my ass on a copy of it one time while we was down in Georgia. Ran out of toilet paper."

"You ain't missed nothin'. Biggest bunch of bullshit ever put on paper."

"I didn't know you could read, Ronnie."

"Screw You, Angelo. I can read as good as anybody. I read all that shit written by Ben Raines. It went something like this-Freedom, like respect, is earned, an' must be

299

299

constantly nurtured and protected from those who would take it away from the people."

"Sounds like communism to me," Angelo replied, watching two men get out of the small Cessna.

"It gets worse. Raines goes on to say how it's the right of every law-abiding citizen to protect his or her life, liberty, and personal property by any means, without fear of arrest or criminal prosecution. The right to bear arms is essential to maintaining true personal freedom. Have you ever heard such bullshit in your life? Most people in this country don't know which end of a gun to put the bullet in, and it'd take 'em all week to find the trigger. Raines can't be that much smarter than the rest of 'em."

Angelo grunted. "His boy, Bijddy, had better hope he has a gun. It'll be the only chance he has to keep from going to an early grave."

"How come we don't just shoot the son of a bitch from here?" Storm asked.

"Because President Osterman and her advisers want to ask him some questions. We're being paid to bring him in, so they can question him."

"Questions? What kind of questions?"

"About the flea bombs."

"Have you been drinking, Bob? Nobody puts fleas in a bomb, What the hell good would it do? Fleas come on dogs. Nobody puts 'em in a fuckin' bomb. What the hell's wrong with these people?"

"They were sick fleas, Ronnie. That's what I was told. Bombs full of sick fleas."

"You gotta be shittin' me."

"Fleas that had some sort of plague. That's how come we took those shots last week. It's to keep us from getting sick on account of the fleas."

Angelo raised his night vision binoculars to study the two shapes emerging from the plane.

300

"Do you see him?" Ronnie asked, his mind back on the business at hand.

"I sure as hell do. Let's go, and remember not to make any noise."

"Is it OK if we rough him up a bit?"

"Hell, yes," Angelo growled, coming to his feet. "It's always a help when you bust up a prisoner... just enough to get him to cooperate."

"What if he makes a run for it?" Storm continued, raising his rifle as they began creeping through a dense stand of tall oak trees.

"Shoot him in the leg. Hell, shoot the son of a bitch damn near anywhere, just so you don't kill him. We're getting paid to bring him in so they can question him."

"I gotcha, Bob. A stiff-a corpse-don't give up too many answers."

"You're goddamn near a genius, Ronnie," Angelo muttered as they started toward the airplane in the dark.

"What the hell?" Buddy Raines felt the cold steel of a rifle barrel behind his head.

"Stay real still, shitface," a deep voice warned. "Otherwise I'm gonna blow your skull all over this cow pasture. Your daddy won't be able to find enough pieces of you to be worth the trouble of burying you."

At the same instant, a gunshot went off near the tail section of the Cessna. Pilot Roger Delaware's spine snapped when the bullet passed through him.

He groaned and slumped to the grass on his rump, then he toppled over on his back.

"Why did you do that?" Buddy asked, swallowing bitter bile when it filled his mouth. "Roger was a pilot. He wasn't carrying a gun."

"In case nobody told you, Mr. Raines, this is a goddamn war."

Buddy turned to his captors. "It takes a gutless bastard to shoot an unarmed man," he snapped, staring into the

301

301

strange blue eyes of a man in a black beret with a deep scar running down his face.

It was the other man, the man who shot Roger, who swung the butt of an automatic rifle into Buddy's jaw, lifting him off his feet.

He landed on his back in blood-soaked grass, with his mind reeling.

"Nobody asked you for your goddamn opinions, asshole," the man said.

Buddy rubbed his jaw and sat up slowly, seeing flashing lights from the blow to his face. "Okay, you yellow sons of bitches," he said, biting down around each word. "What is it you want from me?"

The man who struck him with the gun butt took a step closer, a leer on his face. He glanced at his companion in the black beret. "Did you hear what this chickenshit just called us, Bob? He said we was sons of bitches. He was talkin' about my mama, an' yours too."

"Maybe Mr. Buddy Raines needs a few lessons in proper manners, Ronnie," the second man said.

"Here. Hold my rifle. I'm gonna teach a little school before the APC comes to pick us up."

"Don't take too damn long about it. Somebody might have heard that gunshot."

Ronnie grinned. "I won't need but a minute ... maybe two ... to teach Mr. Raines some manners."

"To hell with both of you," Buddy said, midway through a jump to his feet.

He was struck again by a crushing blow to the top of his scalp, folding his knees like cardboard. He went down in the grass on his face, gasping for air, knowing his mission to lead a strike force against USA headquarters had backfired. He wondered how these men had known where they would land the plane. Was there a traitor in their midst?

302

A powerful hand seized his right wrist, while another took the pistol from his holster.

"Are you a right-handed man, Buddy?" the one named Ronnie asked.

"Fuck you," he groaned, trying with all his might to remain conscious.

"He was wearing his forty-five automatic on his right hip, Ronnie. Means he is damn sure right-handed. How come you're too dumb to notice shit like that?"

Ronnie did not answer. Buddy felt a vise-like grip encircle the fingers on his right hand.

"How does this feel, Mr. Raines?" Ronnie asked, his teeth clenched as he bent all four of Buddy's fingers backward at an unnatural angle.

"Damn!" Buddy hissed, struggling against the pressure as a heavy weight landed on his back and shoulders.

"How about a little more, Mr. Buddy Big Shot Raines?"

Gristle popped in his knuckles. An involuntary shriek of pain came from his throat.

"Hurts, don't it?"

"Fuck . . . you," he gasped, promising himself that he would not give the location of the Rebel force away, no matter how much these two men hurt him.

More pressure, and he heard the small bones across the back of his hand snap like green kindling. Tears trickled down his face.

"Where is your daddy's new headquarters, Buddy Boy? An' how come them fleas ain't making you sick?"

"I don't know what you're talking . . . about. Go fuck yourself. I have nothing more to say."

"Nothing more to say?" A short laugh. "We'll see about that, Mr. Raines. My money says you've got plenty more to tell us."

"Fuck... you, asshole," he stammered. Then pain rendered him unconscious.

303

303

* * *

He awakened in a tiny cell with no windows. A plump woman dressed in battle fatigues stood next to his cell door as a uniformed soldier came toward him.

"Make him talk," the woman said, and now he recognized her from television news coverage. She was President Claire Osterman, political and military leader of the USA.

"Hello, Sugar Babe," Buddy croaked from the corner of the cell where he was lying on a cot.

Her eyes narrowed, and her lips pressed together in a tight line. "You don't know me well enough to call me that, pup."

He glanced at her uniform. "All dressed up for war, huh?" he asked, letting scorn show in his tone of voice. " 'Course, I notice your fatigues don't have any dirt or blood on 'em." He chuckled, "Hard to get dirty ridin' out the war behind a desk, huh Sugar Babe?"

"Somebody busted his hand pretty bad, Madame President," the soldier

observed. "Then they drove eight-penny finishing nails underneath his fingernails. He's hurt pretty bad."

"Good. Break the other fingers. Do whatever it takes until he tells us what we want to know."

"Then what do we do with him?" the officer asked.

Osterman smiled. "Take some pictures of him, and make sure the blood shows up real good. I want to send them to his father, with a note telling him how his weakling son betrayed everything he stood for. Then, keep him here. I'm gonna see if I can't trade his worthless carcass for something very valuable from Ben Raines. We'll ransom the son of a bitch to his father."

"And after that, Madam President?"

"Have his body dropped from an airplane over SUSA headquarters in northeast Louisiana. I hope his corpse

304 304 William W. Johnstone

lands in Ben Raines's backyard, the no good son of a bitch! Let's send Ben Raines a message . . . that we've stopped fooling around."

305

Otis Warner's stomach felt as if it were full of ground glass. Ever since Ben Raines's call, he'd been worrying over what, if anything, he could do to end this stupid, destructive war. He'd always been a thinker, not a man of action. Even as a child, he'd been overweight and something of a nerd. It was in politics that he'd found his true calling. He was a natural schemer, and had discovered he had a talent for organization and for getting other people to see things his way. In his years as adviser to President Osterman, he'd always tried to use his skills to keep her from making mistakes based on her somewhat naive political philosophy.

As a matter-of-fact, he thought, he was much more closely aligned with the SUSA type of government than the outmoded, unrealistic Socialist Democrat form Osterman had chosen for the USA. He, unlike Claire, had no illusions about the basic nature of people. If they were allowed to get what they needed without having to work for it, most would choose the easy path of welfare and governmental dole rather than labor.

His feelings had been borne out. Even before the disastrous war Claire had embroiled them in, the treasury of the US was almost empty from paying people to not work and trying to give everyone the same standard of living whether they were productive or not.

In countless meetings, he'd pushed and fought to make

306

her realize she was on a foolish course. He'd achieved some small victories, and many large losses-the worst being when she ignored his pleadings not to enter a war with SUSA, a war he felt sure they could not win.

Now, the time had come to put up or shut up, he thought. Ben Raines had

dumped the fate of his nation, a nation he loved dearly in spite of its mistakes, into his lap. He had to figure out some way to change the government's course of action, by changing Claire's mind or by replacing her as head of the government.

He opened his desk drawer and took out a bottle of antacid. Pouring a handful of tablets out of the bottle, he dumped them all in his mouth and began to chew, trying to ease the burning in his gut.

Though not a man of action, he was the quintessential politician, and over the years had amassed a cadre of men and women loyal to him rather than to the president. He had his allies in all branches of the government and the armed forces, men and women he'd nurtured over the years, doing favors for them and otherwise helping them in their careers so they knew on which side their bread was buttered. Now he just had to figure out how to best use them to achieve the end of the war.

He opened a secret compartment in his desk and took out a small black book. In it were the names of people he'd helped over the years, people whose loyalty he could count on. As he thumbed through the pages, a name jumped out at him.

Joseph Winter, colonel in the intelligence department of the army, had been born Solomon Weintraub. Otis, realizing the poor chances for a Jew to succeed in the new Socialist Democratic state, had arranged for him to assume a new identity many years ago. Since then, the young man had risen through the ranks of the armed services, because of his natural talent for intelligence work

307

and because of Otis's constant behind-the-scenes help. He would be the first one Otis called on.

Joe arrived in his office less than ten minutes after his phone call.

"Hello, Otis. How are you?"

"Not so good, Joe," Otis answered. He glanced around the office and raised his eyebrows. "I've been thinking it might be time to have my office exterminated. What do you think?"

Joe smiled. "There's no need for that, Otis. Though there are 'bugs' in here, I review all the transcripts myself from the advisers' offices, so it's safe for us to talk."

Otis nodded. He knew Claire was probably bugging her own staffs' offices, and it was nice to have confirmation. Somehow, knowing how devious and deceitful she was made it easier to do what he was planning.

"Have you seen the transcripts of the phone call I received yesterday?"

Joe wagged his head. "Not yet. I only review them once a week."

"Grab some coffee and sit down," Otis said, pointing to the urn in the corner of the office. "I've got a lot to tell you."

Joe Winter listened to Otis's rendition of his conversation with Ben Raines without commenting, but he couldn't hide the expression of disgust on his face when he learned that Claire had gone ahead with the

bombing, knowing her citizens weren't protected by the vaccine they'd all taken.

When Otis finished and leaned back in his chair, Joe asked, "What do you intend to do about what you've learned?"

"I have no choice, Joe. Somehow, I've got to stop Claire before she destroys the entire country. Raines assured me he'd provide us with the correct vaccine if we removed Claire from office and sued for peace."

308

Joe nodded, thinking. "There's something else you ought to know."

"What's that?"

"Ben Raines's son, Buddy, was captured the other night while attempting an assault on our compound. He's being held in an underground prison cell over at the airbase."

"Is he ... is he all right?"

Joe shrugged. "Other than some minor injuries, some broken fingers and ribs, he's in pretty good shape. But Claire has turned him over to the FPPS for interrogation, which means he won't be healthy for long."

"What does she plan to do with him then?"

"She wants to get some military information concerning placement of SUSA installations and defenses. Then she said something about trading him to Raines for something she wanted."

"I'm afraid she doesn't know Ben Raines very well," Joe added. "From all the intel I've seen, the man is a straight arrow. He'd never betray his country's interests for anything, not even to save the life of his son."

"I agree." Otis stood up and poured himself another cup of coffee, his brow furrowed in thought.

He leaned back against his desk as he talked. "Do you have any ideas on how we might... get rid of Claire?"

"Well, to be successful, we're also going to have to remove General Wilford Hall. He's a hard-liner just like her, and it won't do any good to eliminate Claire if we leave him in charge of the army."

"Agreed. Go on."

"We might have a chance in the next couple of days. Hall and Osterman are planning a trip to several of the nearby bases, a sort of good will appearance by the president to do an inspection of the troops, for morale purposes. They're planning to fly to the bases in an executive jet, a five-seater. I've been asked to provide security for the trip."

309

"Excellent," Otis said.

"One of the mechanics in aircraft maintenance is a friend of mine. He's Jewish, and has been passed over for his last two promotions, even

though I've managed to call in some favors and keep him on duty."

"Does he know of your background?"

"No. He thinks I'm doing it out of fairness, because he's the best mechanic over there."

"Do you think he could arrange for the plane to have . . . mechanical problems on the trip?"

Joe smiled. "If he agrees to do it, he can make the plane do anything he wants. He's a mechanical genius."

"Good. Talk to him immediately. Explain all you need to about the vaccine. Maybe that'll convince him of the necessity of what we propose to do."

"I'm sure it will. He has a large family, so he'll want to protect them from the plague."

"Now, I need you to get me in to see Buddy Raines, before the FPPS can do too much damage. Can you arrange that?"

"It'll be tricky, but I'll see what I can do. The problem will be doing it without Osterman finding out about it."

Joe Winter and Otis Warner approached the cell holding Buddy Raines. Winter walked up to the pair of guards in front of the cell door. "Take a break, fellows. Go get some coffee. Mr. Warner wants to talk to the prisoner."

"\fes, sir," one of the guards said, saluting.

After they'd left the room, Otis put his hands on the bars and spoke to the man lying on a bunk across the cell.

"Mr. Raines, I'm Otis Warner, senior adviser to President Osterman."

Buddy opened one eye, the other swollen shut from the beatings he'd taken.

"Hello, Mr. Warner. I'd offer you some coffee,

310

but. . ."-he spread his arms-". . . as you can see, my room is rather short on amenities."

Otis smiled. He was glad to see they hadn't been able to break the young man's spirit.

"How are you doing, Buddy?"

Buddy held up his right hand, swollen almost twice its normal size and covered with dirty bandages. His left cheekbone was cut, and dried blood covered his face. "I'm peachy, Mr. Warner. The hospitality your guards have shown me is remarkable."

"Can You keep a secret?"

Buddy's torn lips curved in an ironic smile. "I have so far. Why do you

ask?"

"What I'm about to tell you could get us all killed. I need to know if you can hold out for another twenty-four hours."

"I think so, as long as they keep using fists and clubs instead of drugs. Why?"

"I'm working on getting you out of here, returning you to your father. I intend to try to end the war, and I want you to know, so you won't lose hope and talk to the FPPS."

Buddy got painfully to his feet and shuffled over to the bars. "Don't tell me any more, Mr. Warner. Do whatever it is you're planning, but don't let me know the details. I'll hold out as long as I can."

Otis reached through the bars and patted Buddy on the shoulder, causing him to wince with pain.

"Good man. Keep the faith, Buddy. With luck, all this will be over in the next few days."

Buddy nodded, tried to smile, and walked back to his cot, his back a little straighter with the news.

311 Forty

Claire Osterman and General Wilford Hall entered Otis Warner's office without knocking.

He looked up from his desk. "Oh, hello, Claire. General Hall," he said, trying to look unconcerned even though his heart began beating a staccato rhythm and his mouth became dry. He wondered if they'd somehow found out about his plot.

"What can I do for you?"

"I understand you paid a visit to our prisoner, Buddy Raines, yesterday," Claire said, her face serious.

"Why, yes. When I learned of his capture, I thought I'd try to reason with him. Get him to tell us what he knows without the necessity of beating him half to death," Otis said, trying his best to appear nonchalant.

"And did you succeed?" she asked, scornfully.

He shook his head. "No. It appears the boy is as stubborn and obstinate as his father. I even tried to appeal to his patriotism, telling him he would save thousands of lives by ending the war sooner if he told us what we needed to know."

"I don't appreciate your meddling in matters that don't concern you, Otis."

Otis stood up, his face beginning to flush. "I don't really care whether you appreciate it or not, Claire. As a member of the government and one of your advisers, I felt it was my duty to try to help out as best I could," he

312

said heatedly. "As far as I know, the USA is not a dictatorship yet. The rest of us in your cabinet also have a duty to help end the war if at all possible, and we still, no matter what you seem to think, have a say in the running of the country."

Claire smirked, her face turning nasty. "Well, we'll see about that, Otis. I have to leave on a tour of our bases, but when I get back we'll have a meeting of the cabinet and talk over what you've just said."

"I welcome the opportunity to discuss the course of the war with you, Madam President."

"Oh, we'll discuss much more than that, Otis. We might even discuss your future in the government, and whether you have one."

"As you wish, Madam President."

"Come on, Willie," she said to the general. "Our plane is waiting."

Otis followed them outside and watched as the small jet took off. As soon as they were out of sight, he rushed back to his office and had his secretary arrange for a meeting of his advisory committee for after lunch.

When he hung up the phone, Joe Winter came into his office.

"Well, it's done," he said.

"Your friend agreed to sabotage the plane?"

Joe smiled. "When I told him about the vaccine and what was going to happen to the country because of Claire's actions, he was angry enough to agree to anything. I told him to make sure the plane didn't go down until it was over rough country. That way there's no chance of a rescue attempt."

"I'm having a meeting of the senior advisers after lunch. I want you to be there. And wear your dress uniform."

"Why?"

313

"You'll find out. Just don't be surprised at anything you hear."

"OK."

The five-seater jet carrying General Wilford Hall and President Osterman was proceeding along its flight path without any signs of trouble when the engine gave a giant cough, sputtered, and ceased operating as it belched a cloud of smoke.

The plane shuddered and shook like a dog having a seizure, and the nose dropped into a screaming dive.

"Goddamn! What's happening?" Osterman yelled, terrified, flinching as the oxygen mask above her head dropped to dangle before her face.

"We're going down," General Hall hollered. Wasting no time, he released his seatbelt and ran to the rear of the aircraft. He jerked open a cargo door and pulled out a pair of parachutes.

Hurrying as fast as he could, he pulled Claire to her feet and strapped her into the chute. He pushed her to the rear door of the plane and yelled in her ear. "Pull the cord as soon as you're clear of the tail."

"What cord?" she asked, frantically searching the straps on the chute's harness.

Hall put her fingers around the D ring of the harness, tugged the door open, and shouted, "Good luck, Madam President," before shoving her out the door into the howling wind shear.

As he turned to pull on his chute, the plane exploded in a giant fireball, lighting up the sky for miles around.

The men were gathered in Otis's office-Harlan Millard, Andy Schumberger, William Carroll, and Bobby Fisher. Carroll and Fisher were very junior, and Otis knew the men he had to convince were Millard and Schumber-

314

ger, both of whom were spineless yes men who'd agreed to anything Claire said in the past.

Harlan cleared his throat and looked around nervously. "Why are we here, Otis? I'm a little nervous about meeting without Claire being present."

Otis smiled his most reassuring smile. "Why, Harlan? Are you afraid we might be charged with treason for carrying out our sworn duties?"

Harlan blushed a bright red. "Uh ... no, it's just that Claire always likes to be present at our cabinet meetings."

"What about you, Andy? You scared, too?"

Schumberger shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant about the whole thing, even though everyone present knew he was frightened to death of Claire Osterman. "Not really, Otis. I am a little confused as to what you hope to accomplish by this meeting, though. No matter what we decide, the president has to agree to it or it won't mean a hill of beans."

Just as he finished speaking, the door opened and Colonel Joe Winter walked in, his face grave.

Otis glanced up, his eyebrows raised. "Yes, Colonel. What can we do for you?"

"I'm afraid I have bad news, Mr. Warner," Joe said.

"What is it?" Otis asked, although he knew. He'd told Joe not to come in until he'd heard the news about the president's plane.

"President Osterman's plane is down, and reported missing."

"What?" several of the men present all said at the same time.

Otis held up his hand. Now was the time for him to assert his leadership of the group. "Hold on, everyone." He turned his attention to Joe. "Am I to understand the plane carrying President Osterman and General Wilford

Hall has been shot down?"

"No, Mr. Warner," Joe said, playing his part to perfec-

315

tion. "Evidently there was a midair explosion. There was no sign of enemy activity, and there are no signs of survivors."

"Has the wreckage been found?"

"\es. It is in an inaccessible part of the mountains, so no landing has been attempted, but on the flybys there is no sign of life."

Otis sat up straighter in his chair and looked from one man to another, slowly, his face grave. "Gentlemen, I'm afraid this changes everything." He glanced over at Joe. "I'm sure all of you gentlemen know Colonel Joe Winter, chief of our intelligence services and second in command to General Hall."

Though this last wasn't exactly accurate, Joe being several steps down on the chain of command, Otis was certain none of the advisers present would be aware of that.

"Since we are engaged in a very difficult war, I suggest we waste no time in filling the president and general's jobs."

Harlan, his face ashen, stared at Otis. "What do you have in mind?"

"Since President Osterman abolished the position of vice-president, replacing the office with this team of advisers, and since I am senior man present, I will take over the presidency until such time as we can have elections by the voters."

When Schumberger opened his mouth as if to protest, Otis interrupted him. "I further suggest that we promote Colonel Winter to General, and have him assume command of our armed forces, before SUSA learns of the vacuum at the top."

Both William Carroll and Bobby Fisher saw which way the wind was blowing, and noticed the sidearm on Winter's hip.

"Yes, I definitely think that is the prudent thing to do,"

316

Carroll said abruptly, smiling at Otis to show him who his friends were.

"I second the motion," Fisher chimed in, not to be outdone in currying favor with the new leader.

This left Harlan Millard and Andy Schumberger in most difficult positions. If they disagreed, and Otis ended up being president, they were dead in the water. So, they took the easy way out. Both nodded. "Let's make it unanimous," Harlan said.

The others all stood up and rushed to shake Otis's hand, then the new general's.

Otis took command of the meeting. "I think the first thing on the agenda

should be to notify all of the general staff of the president's demise and of my new position, along with that of General Winter's new command."

The cabinet members nodded as they rose to go and spread the word of the new order of things in the USA.

After the room had cleared, Otis looked at Joe. "Well, General, we've done it."

"Yes, sir, Mr. President," Joe answered with a smile.

"I'd advise you to go immediately to command headquarters and make sure you consolidate your new position. That means getting rid of anyone who might be a threat, or who might think they deserve your new job. Replace any you suspect of not being completely loyal to you with people you can trust."

"Yes, sir. As soon as I saw the direction your meeting was taking, I began to make a mental list of those who needed to be ... reassigned, so to speak."

"Get back to me as soon as you feel secure, and we'll discuss what has to be done next."

"Yes, sir," Joe said, saluting smartly before exiting the office.

317

Otis Warner sat on the cot next to Buddy Raines. "Mr. Raines, I have already spoken with your father. We have worked out some terms agreeable to both of us concerning the immediate end of the war."

Buddy looked at Otis, disbelief in his eyes. "You mean it's finally over?"

"Well, there are some loose ends to be tied up and some tough negotiating to do, but for all intents and purposes the war is over. We have declared a bilateral cease-fire as of midnight tonight, and President Jeffreys and I will meet in a neutral place to work out the details."

"When will I be going home?"

"Right now," Otis said. "I'm sending you home on a jet, and on its return flight it will be carrying crates of vaccine against bubonic plague and a team of medical specialists to help us treat those already infected."

"What about President Osterman?"

Otis glanced over his shoulder at General Joseph Winter and smiled. "She is dead, Buddy. Her reign of terror is over at last."

318

Claire Osterman, her face swollen and misshapen from a broken jaw, her left arm hanging at an unnatural angle, and her left ankle swollen to twice its normal size, limped into a clearing around a small shack in a deep, mountain forest.

A man and woman, thin to the point of emaciation, dressed in clothes

that were little more than rags, came running from the door to help her.

"God Awmighty, miss," the man said in a thick accent, "you look like you lost a fight with a grizzly."

Claire tried to smile, but a dark pool opened at her feet and she dived into it.

Claire awoke with a nasty taste in her mouth, feeling as if someone were laying a branding iron on her leg and arm.

"Where . . . where am I?"

The woman who'd met her outside was leaning over her, bathing her face with a cool washrag. "You're in our home, lady. You've been asleep for nigh onto three days now."

"Three days?"

"Yes. We didn't find no identification on you, so we don't know what to call you."

Claire hesitated. She didn't want to reveal her identity until she found out just who she was with. For all she knew, she might have been rescued by some Freedom

319

319

Fighters. She figured her best course of action was to fake amnesia until she knew the lay of the land.

"I can't remember. My ... my head feels kind of funny."

"No wonder. You look like you took an awful beating."

The door opened and the farmer walked in, a shotgun cradled in his arms. "She tell you her name yet?"

"No, Paw. She don't remember nothin'."

The man just grunted and turned to leave the room.

The woman leaned down and whispered, "Paw said he thought you looked a lot like that crazy woman president, Osterman, but I told him he was wrong. What would a president be doin' way out here all alone?"

"You said crazy woman?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Ever since that bitch took over run-nin' the country we ain't had enough to eat, nor no medicine for our kin that took sick. We lost one of our boys to pneumonia just 'cause of that woman's foolish war she got us into."

The woman looked over her shoulder and whispered again. "Paw said if'n you was her, he was gonna shoot you dead, so I'm glad he was wrong about who you be."

Claire closed her eyes and feigned sleep, her mind working at fever

pitch. She wasn't clear yet. She was going to have to use all of her skills of trickery and subterfuge to get out of this alive. Of course, she reasoned, they'd be sending search parties for her any day now, so she wouldn't have to pull the wool over these bumpkins' eyes for too long.

320 WILLIAM W. JOHNSTONE has done it again . . .

Introducing 2 New Series:

THE LAST GUNFIGHTER

and

CODE NAME

THE LAST GUNFIGHTER:

THE DRIFTER

February 2000

CODE NAME: PAYBACK