

Green Haze

by

Robert P. Fitton

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It was one of those wild investigative stories, cast in an isolated wilderness beyond the high desert, a hundred and sixty miles out of Los Angeles. Roy Garrison was suckered into this type of arrangement a hundred times before during his twenty-year span on The Dispatch. The Wednesday phone call was too crazy to even make it into his weekly column. He knew the scenario all too well. A man or woman calls up, and with intense emotion in his or her voice, hints something dreadful has taken place, and Garrison is the only one they can turn to. Why not call the authorities? The answer was quick and the same every time: Talk of a cover up and nobody trusted the authorities.

Garrison gazed out his car window. The chiseled mountain peaks were stark against the cold sunset skies and shadows crept across the talus. As night spilled over the chilled desert floor, every twisted mesquite branch, every rock strewn terrace and

treeless slope only heightened the isolation. The town was dropped between saw toothed mountains and a range to the east. Incandescent bulbs popped on across the flat stretches like awakening fireflies pulsing on a summer's eve. The asphalt split west through the range toward San Francisco and skirted the smoother hills east to Las Vegas. Somewhere on that highway, according to his source, a van containing highly toxic organic compounds had flipped over just days before. One of the vials must have opened and some guy was dead from Viral Endoplasmic Disease, VED, a virus that ripped apart the DNA in cells. His calls to the Center for Disease Control went unanswered until yesterday when they said not to panic. It was an isolated case and the investigation was over. But the dumbest thing was their denying the van turned over outside of town. That, according to his source, was a fabrication.

TALL TALES WERE SPUN BY THOSE WITH POWER. TWENTY YEARS OF CRANKING OUT STORIES POUNDED THAT INTO YOUR HEAD. OFFICIAL LINES WERE GOSPEL. THE ELEMENT OF TRUTH DIDN'T MATTER. IT WAS HOW THE DAMNED THING PLAYED OUT AND THE ATTITUDE SPREAD ACROSS EVERY

GOVERNMENT AGENCY, EVERY CORPORATION... ANYONE WITH POWER. THIS WAS THE NEW MILLENNIUM. POLITICAL CORRECTNESS WAS EVERYTHING.

Garrison shifted his old green MG at the traffic sign and slowed to twenty miles per hour. A rusted yellow sign indicated speeders would be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. That meant spending a long night in a cinder block little jail cell staring at some little dictator who called himself the Chief of Police. Already he missed Los Angeles. Except staying at home was an invitation to telephone bouncers, hounding him about his max-out credit cards and his bookie might call and tell him he had pushed his tab to the limit.

A green neon sign flashed in the twilight, leaving a red blotch in his eyes as he gazed at the northern mountains.

ROADSIDE DINER

The MG's little tires kicked up the parking lot dust as he pulled in and parked between two pickup trucks. Four hours on the road and his stomach tightened into a twisted hunger pit. He stepped into the cool air and stretched his tense frame. The light

inside the silver metal diner glowed against the deepening blue sky. People were jammed at the counter and in the booths and a moving mass of gray cigarette haze hung across the place.

Garrison reached back in the MG, packed his microcasette, cigarettes, and wallet into his pants pocket. He put on his faded Angels hat and strutted across the gritty parking lot. This town was probably like any other town, full of gossip, unjustified rumors, and a cast of rowdy locals seeking notoriety. He stepped back as a family exited the diner and the father held the aluminum framed door open.

" Thanks."

Garrison was comfortable in noisy joints like this. He lit a cigarette and sat at the end counter stool. Before he began asking questions, he ordered the meat loaf, gravy, mashed potatoes and carrots. He grabbed a folded, reread local newspaper on the scratched Formica and scrutinized every article for word of the overturned van. When the steamy plate arrived he had found no reference to the van.

MRS. LYNETTE CAMPBELL. THE LADY SOUNDED LIKE A DAMNED RELIABLE SOURCE ON THE PHONE. ALL THOSE COLLEGE DEGREES AND SAYING THAT SHE

HAD SOMETHING ON HER COMPUTER CD. SHE EVEN WANTED MY ITINERARY, SAYING IT WAS CRITICAL I TALK WITH HER BEFORE I SAW RICHARD IN SAN LOUIS OBISPO. WELL, WHERE THE HELL IS THE VAN STORY, MRS. LYNETTE CAMPBELL?

" More coffee, sir?" The pink uniformed waitress held a glass pot of swishing dark coffee. Garrison nodded his head. She poured and looked at his hat before throwing a couple sealed cream containers on the counter. " Angels? You from L.A.?"

" Depends."

" Oh?"

" I left town: Armed robbery."

She held the pot, but did not look sure if he was serious as she smiled and quickly backed away.

HOW TO MAKE FRIENDS AND INFLUENCE PEOPLE, ROY. NOW YOU'VE GOT TO START THE BULLSHIT WITH STRANGERS.

He went back to the paper, chewed up his food like a high speed grinding machine but found nothing until he came to the obit page. Then he sipped the bitter coffee, added another cream and sugar, and ran his finger over the death notice of a guy named Grover Moses.

DIED FROM A SUDDEN VIRAL ONSLAUGHT

Garrison tore around the write up and raised his brows before stuffing the paper in his shirt pocket. The waitress returned but kept her distance as she rattled off the desert selection. Garrison ordered the tapioca pudding with whipped cream and nuts. He nixed any thoughts about asking her for directions to the Campbell place.

" Excuse me, I'm looking for the Campbell place." The old man next to him, a few days beard growth now stubble on his pasty face, squinted. Then he just stared. " The Campbell place. I have an address of Rawley Road West."

The old man shook his head. " Yeah, cross town. Left at the 76 station. About a mile in."

Garrison held the coffee cup. " You hear anything about a van over turning out here the other night?"

" Rumors.."

" Yeah?"

" Nobody seen no van cept Grover."

NOBODY CEPT GROVER. ALL RIGHT, HERE YOU GO, ROY. THIS IS IT. THIS IS THE BIG STORY THAT'S GONNA BAIL YOU OUT. BIG BAD GROVER SAW THE VAN AND NOW BIG BAD GROVER HAS DIED OF SOME MYSTERIOUS, SUDDEN...

" Grover's dead."

" You tell me, Mister."

Garrison nodded as the waitress brought the green clear bowl full of tapioca and whipped cream. There was a single cherry on top, pierced with a toothpick. He pushed his cold spoon into the whipped cream and tasted the cherry sweetness first. " Grover Moses, right?"

" You gotta be a reporter. Yup. You gotta."

Garrison laughed again as he popped the cherry between his teeth. It was both sweet and bitter. " Yeah, yeah, it was Grover Moses. And he died of the plague, right?"

" Hey I ain't no scientist." He pushed his plate forward, pulled out a wrinkled five-dollar bill and placed it under the corner. Then he stood, looked down at Garrison and pointed. " This here is a mighty small town, mister. If a van tipped over, there damned well would have been somebody who saw it..."

Garrison finished the tapioca but watched the guy all the way out to his truck under the glowing neon sign. That old man just made the most valid point he had heard thus far. With all the open space and the tiny town population, why did only Grover Moses see that van? He wiped his faced with the paper napkin. Was this a fluke or was he onto something up in this little nowhere town?

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The old man's directions were perfect. Garrison turned at the illuminated orange and blue 76 station sign and headed along a narrow, half paved road to the north. No street lights were out here, but his headlights bounced across the rocky valley floor ahead. The weathered board fences led directly to a long, metal cross cut gate, which had to be opened manually. The smooth rock and wood post house was built on two levels up the hill. There were a number of expensive cars parked near the barn out front.

Garrison cut the motor and got out quickly. The air was cold and silent as he crossed the barnyard to the wide farmer's porch, protruding from the stone facade. A single porch light was left burning. He had told these people he might first go to his brother's San Louis Obispo house, but Richard was busy at his restaurant. Mrs. Campbell was surprised when he called two hours ago and said he was popping in. Discrepancies came out when people were caught off guard. This was one story Hobson would demand he get right.

He thought about returning to the car for his jacket, but opted to cross the porch planks to the wood door. The quietness bothered him as he looked back toward the MG and the barn. He turned, lifted the heavy eagle brass knocker and banged the tarnished striking plate several times.

Half a minute later, a thin man in a red plaid shirt answered the door. He had a kind face, big brown eyes and a look of recognition. " You, Garrison?"

" I am he..."

" Ed Campbell. Come on in, my wife's been waiting for you. We thought you were going to San Louis Obispo first."

Garrison had to think, as he stepped into glossy, varnished log foyer, whether this was the beginning of an important story or just another excursion to a small town with large imaginations. The place smelled like cedar chips. " Nice house you have here, Mr. Campbell. What do you do?"

" I work for the railroad. My wife is a lawyer here in town. Handles all the hard luck cases you might say."

Mrs. Campbell appeared in the knotty pine dining room to the left. She was a tall woman with permed brown hair and wore a

denim shirt and jeans, a thick silver necklace. Garrison figured she was forty, younger than Campbell and still attractive. She had a soothing smile as she walked around a long family style pine table.

Garrison felt as if he should take off his cap. She extended her thin hand and her green eyes became intense. " Mr. Garrison, I had thought you-

" Would be in San Louis Obispo. My brother got tied up."

" Then we'll give him another copy," said Ed and she nodded.

" Copy of what?"

" Not important now. See, I think time is of the essence. I haven't called you up here, away from you job and your home, because of a frivolous accusation."

" Got me off the hook from my creditors."

" What was that?" she asked.

" Nothing. Just a personal thing."

" Most of the press people I've called have written me off as a prankster. A left wing nut lawyer who defends the dredges of society."

" Credibility problem."

" Maybe." She motioned him into the dining room. A teenage boy with headphones dangling to a CD player asked her something and then left. Garrison handed her his card, containing all his relevant phone numbers.

She looked down the handwritten numbers and nodded. They sat down in the dimly lit room. On the wall was a huge map of the area and a large green arrow pointing to an area outside of town. " We have a problem, Mr. Garrison. A man in this town died of Viral Endoplasmic Disease. We had some people from the CDC fly in from Georgia."

" I talked to them."

" Cover-up." said Campbell.

" You think so?" asked Garrison.

Mrs. Campbell half closed her eyes and pushed her thin lips together. This woman looked as if she was under pressure. She moved her head slowly from side to side, veered over to the map and extended her index finger onto the arrow.

" There was a van that tipped over right here. At two-thirty am, April 15. The one witness who saw it is dead."

Garrison raised his thick brows. " I read that-"

" He died of Viral Endoplasmic disease!"

" You're talking about Grover, right?"

" Yes. Grover Moses."

" The CDC said there was nothing to suggest that VED out there," said Garrison.

" Somebody's pressuring them," said Ed.

Garrison moved the chair back, stood and walked over to the map. The arrow pointed at a flat area with no houses or buildings. He aligned his thumb and index finger to the scale of miles and set them on the map. This spot was six and a half miles out of town.

" Okay, I'm game. Prove this thing to me, you're a lawyer."

She looked at her husband. Up close, the tension was visible across her pudgy cheeks. " Moses saw the overturned truck when he was coming back from work. There's a borax facility sixteen miles up the highway. He left work at two. He spotted the van and got out. There was a man standing with an AK-47 who warned him very calmly to stay away. He used the words, ` It's too late for me. Don't you get it..."

Garrison was not sure that Moses had told her the truth.

" Then what happened to the van, Mrs. Campbell?"

Her eyes opened and her hands moved around as she spoke. Garrison noticed she was breathing rapidly. " Grover naturally complied. He went back to his car and drove on. But as he passed the overturned truck, he noticed something in the rear view mirror."

" What?"

" Military vehicles. Two of them. So he stops. He sees these guys dressed in white plastic leap out of the trucks. They shoot the first guy with the AK-47 and load his body on the truck. They spray something and then surround the whole thing with a massive plastic tent."

Garrison was beginning to doubt the story. Her shaking hands and twitchy right eye made him suspicious. He sat down at the table again as she continued.

" They begin taking wrapped canisters out of the plastic tent and brought them inside the first truck."

Campbell leaned to Garrison and tapped his arm. " This is the incredible thing."

Garrison nodded and looked back at Mrs. Campbell.

" Then they spray the tarp and the van again with some kind of aerosol. Grover wasn't sure. He told me they removed the tarp, put it in the truck. Then the second truck moves the van inside. They close up the tractor-trailer and leave the way they came. What do you think of that, Mr. Garrison?"

" Well, I don't know what the hell to think. If CDC came in here and went out there..."

" Yes, they would find nothing as far as the VED. But I've had the charred remains tested. There are traces of Mortoxin, a highly deadly chemical. "

" Then tell them."

" They want disease, they don't want chemicals."

Garrison sat again, propping his elbows up on the pine table. He tightened the crow's feet around his eyes and pushed his bottom lip into his teeth. " But he died of VED, correct?"

Mrs. Campbell, her presentation over, sat down. She nodded her head, leaned back in the creaky chair and exhaled. " You don't understand, Mr. Garrison. We have other proof that can undermine everything CDC is saying."

" I understand."

" You don't believe it, do you?"

" Well, it sounds plausible. What I require is that proof. You have one dead witness and secondly, why would some van be carrying VED along the highway?"

" Obviously, it was the military. Moses saw the military trucks. They cleaned it up and got out." She stood and pushed her fingers back through her curly hair. " Listen, that's the story. If you don't want to look into it. Then don't. I've said my piece."

" I didn't say I didn't want to look into it, Mrs. Campbell. I just said I need the proof. I can't go writing off on a tangent without proof."

" Yes, I know."

She looked at her husband and he turned to Garrison. " Mr. Garrison, I'm a railroad man. I've got ten more years and I collect my pension. I'm the last guy who wants to open this can of worms."

Garrison wanted a cigarette.

Mrs. Campbell looked Garrison in the eye. " What I've accumulated is on my computer. It is significant enough to get you going in the right direction."

" Let me get my tape recorder," said Garrison.

Mrs. Campbell's face was tense. " Okay, get your recorder, Mr. Garrison. I thought you had a computer."

" Back in my office I do." He looked at them standing before a huge rock fireplace before he returned to the car. " I intend to go forward with this story if I have proof, but..."

" But?" asked Campbell.

" But I have to be sure of what I'm doing. A van tips over, maybe a military van. VED is spread into the desert near a town. Somebody's going to elaborate lengths to cover this up."

Lynette nodded. " Oh, I know that very well."

" Okay, let me get my recorder. Just don't expect things to be printed in my column until I'm damned sure of what I'm doing."

" Mr. Garrison, you'll have a copy of-

" I'll be right back."

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He did not even hear the sound of peepers or a barking dog as he stepped onto the farmer's porch. He crossed the yard to his car, parked adjacent to the barn, and opened the door. For a moment he sat, staring at the red metal barn facade and grasped his recorder.

WELL, ROY, THIS THING IS GETTING INTERESTING AND YOU'RE DEFINITELY GETTING SUCKED INTO IT. THIS WOMAN ALSO HAS INFORMATION ON HER PC. YOU NEED A COPY OF THE CD ALONG WITH YOUR OWN NOTES. THIS STORY MIGHT BE YOUR BIG BREAK. THE WHOLE WORLD WOULD WANT TO KNOW IF THESE BASTARDS FROM THE MILITARY WERE SPILLING VED ON THE HIGHWAYS.

He held his recorder near his mouth and clicked the record button. The stillness of the night clashed with the developing story. " Okay... these are the notes recorded at the Campbell house, April ninth. The woman claims that one man, Grover Moses, died from

VED contracted from an overturned van outside of town. She further says that the military cleaned up the mess, killed a soldier and drove the whole thing away in a large tractor-trailer. All military vehicles." Garrison pushed off the button and wondered what else he should add.

" This woman is a lawyer and probably left wing. She-

A bright flash cut the darkness and halted his dictation. The light was followed by an intense rumble, the car rolled, and was lifted. Garrison's bones were shaken and the rear window was pulverized by a raft of debris. He was thrown to the floor and dropped the recorder as a secondary blast rocked the car.

He looked upward. The barn's red aluminum sheets were covered with an intense, wavy orange light. After another sharp blast, he ducked down again and waited for the explosions to end. He tried not to think of the Campbells inside the house. Covering his head as the minutes passed, he heard a fire crackling. He held the passenger door handle and slowly pulled himself up over the side window.

Flames flickered brightly over the dirt and along the barn. Through the open rear window heat pushed inward like a desert

breeze at midday. A central fire emanated from the few remaining glowing and charred vertical timbers, against the night sky. Sparks snapped, spun and rose in huge stream bursts into the darkness.

Garrison sat up and grasped the driver's side handle. He moved the lever and kicked it open with his heel. Then he backed out of the car and placed his feet securely on the ground. He held the open window and stared aimlessly at the carnage. Shielding his eyes with both hands, he took a few steps toward the heat. Even the farmer's porch was obliterated. Then he sprinted away from the inferno.

Sirens sounded back toward the main road and bright blue and red lights darted across the fields. The headlights approached near the Campbell's entrance road, police cruisers moved rapidly through the gate, and skidded into the yard. All the doors popped in unison and a slew of cops descended upon him.

One of them shouted as reached Garrison. " Who the hell are you?"

" Roy... Garrison."

They pinned him against the car and lifted his wallet from his pants pocket. They pounded against his ribs and rifled his front

pockets. Then other cops ran into the barnyard and trashed the MG.

" Hey, what are you doing?"

From behind he heard a countrified voice. " Shut up!"

" He's a reporter for the Los Angeles Dispatch."

They twisted him around. The fire's brightness hurt his eyes as two of the cops pushed his wrists against the cruiser roof.

" You tell us what you're doing out here, Roy Garrison from 1454 La Cienna, Los Angeles, California."

" Story."

The blonde guy inches from his face had putrid breath and constantly grit his yellow teeth. His wild blue eyes reflected the blaze. Then he pushed the butt end of his hand into Garrison's chin, uncomfortably folding back the bead stubble. " You blew up this house, didn't you, Garrison?"

" No."

" Run this moron on the computer!"

A second cop took Garrison's wallet back to another cruiser. Garrison was too frightened to say anything. Fire trucks and an

ambulance raced up the highway now and swung onto the dirt drive.

" Okay, you tell us what happened out here, Garrison."

" Story about the VED. I was inside and-"

" And you just happened to be outside when the place went up?"

Garrison nodded. The fire truck engines strained as they moved across down the lane, stirring up the dust around headlights. The cop interrogating him spoke with two plain clothes guys. The trucks stopped a few feet away. Fireman leaped off the running boards and pulled long black hoses and equipment from the truck.

" Why were you outside, Garrison?" asked the cop.

" My recorder. I went to get my recorder."

The cop took two giant steps toward him and held his shoulders. " Damn it, I knew these people. You're telling me you just happened to be outside here? Come on, Garrison, I'm not a blithering idiot!"

Garrison tightened his brow. The firemen pointed the first metal hose nozzle and a blast of water sputtered and then arced

into the night sky. Great water gushes landed on what was left of the Campbell ranch. " Listen, I was dictating into my recorder."

An older cop, walking from the MG, held up the recorder.

" He's right, Ronnie. It's still running."

Ronnie looked at Garrison. He crossed the yard, said something to the cop in the cruiser and moved over to one of the firemen. The continuous pumping engines and the steady water stream spewing over the flames drowned out his animated conversation.

He pointed toward Garrison. The other cops loosened their grip on Garrison, but blocked any movement. Garrison feared this story was beyond him now. Someone blew up the Campbell's house and he narrowly escaped death. Now he could smell the dank charred wood hissing in the desert air and the diminishing flames still lit the area. Other cars arrived. The police already had backup cruisers and had set up a checkpoint.

A few minutes later Ronnie returned and brought Garrison toward the cruiser. Both men got in behind the cage screen. Ronnie's face was contorted as he thought and balanced his

forearms on his propped knees. " You didn't have anything to do with this, did you, Garrison?"

" As a reporter, I'd ask the question, what if I did?"

" Don't be a smart-ass. You ain't out this by a long shot. There's FBI personnel en route in choppers out of San Francisco. Nobody is taking this lightly."

" I understand."

" So, you came out for your recorder and the place blew up?"

" Yes, sir."

" Okay, you're working on the VED thing. I think Grover's story was bogus. Grover was a guy who always saw conspiracy."

" Somebody might want this story squelched."

" You know something we don't, Garrison? There's all kinds of rumors floating around this town, most of which came from Grover Moses. Vans overturning with vials of the VED. What did Lynette tell you about that?"

" They were about to elaborate on the story. She had more information. That's why I was getting my recorder. But it doesn't mean jackshit now, does it?"

Ronnie nodded. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a cigarette pack and shook it so that three or four fresh cigarettes popped toward Garrison. Garrison pinched the cigarette and placed it in his mouth. Ronnie flicked a lighter, illuminating the cruiser for a few seconds and steered the flame toward Garrison's cigarette. He lit his own filter tip and blew the smoke from his mouth. " Something is wrong. Have you considered someone was after you?"

" Yeah, I considered it."

" This is just a small town, Garrison. I'm just some local cop who's lived here all his life, but if I were you I'd be mighty scared. Sometimes you gotta back off. It ain't worth it. Power will crush you, man. You know anybody in power or anyone who wants to kill you?"

Garrison paused and smiled. " My ex-girlfriend."

Ronnie grinned through the cigarette in his teeth. He raised his brow.

" Women can be bitches." He stroked his chin and gazed toward the fire.

WOMAN CAN BE BITCHES, BUT NOT LORETTA. I BLEW THAT ONE. THIS STUPID COP IS JUST LIKE ME AND WAY OVER HIS HEAD. SOMEBODY JUST MURDERED THAT CAMPBELL WOMAN, HER HUSBAND AND SON. AND YOU'D BE IN THAT RUBBLE RIGHT NOW, ROY, IF YOU HADN'T GONE BACK TO THE CAR. WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE?

Ronnie's last question echoed in his head. Who the hell was behind this and why did they want this story stopped? He wanted to phone this back to Hobson, but why would his boss run some story about a house exploding in a remote desert? Who would read it? And he had nothing to expand the story. He savored the cigarette, but was mesmerized by the dying flames ahead.

Ronnie said nothing more and opened the cruiser door a few minutes later. Garrison sat in the rear seat under the watchful gaze of two younger cops. The fire was waning now, the night darkness returning, but he had no answers.

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They took Garrison's tape but gave him back the recorder. He quickly repeated his previous thoughts on a new tape but added a summary of the explosion and his subsequent questioning. He feared these facts would have little intrinsic value right now, nor was it likely these recordings ever be used in any article without more proof and the Campbell's computer data was on a CD, now melted down to a charcoal glob somewhere in the debris.

It was past midnight and he was standing with Ronnie and the fire captain when he heard helicopters in the sky. Over the mountains a single spotlight shot across the desert as green and red lights blinked behind. The big boys were arriving, yet he still had no answers.

Even before the helicopters landed he heard Ronnie talking about the FBI sending out some agent named Keaton. Garrison, raising his hand to the bright spotlights, watched the choppers descend.

BRUCE KEATON. FIFTEEN YEARS AGO I KNEW KEATON IN L.A. IF THEY WERE TALKING ABOUT THE SAME KEATON. ALL THOSE LATE NIGHTS COVERING THE SLEAZIEST STREET STORIES. WE HELPED EACH OTHER WITH INFORMANTS, LEADS AND LISTENED TO MUTUAL PROBLEMS. IT WAS A DIFFERENT WORLD BACK THEN, BRUCIE BOY. I WENT TO THE DISPATCH AND YOU WENT TO CHICAGO. NOW YOU'RE IN SAN FRANCISCO AND I'M THE ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY-EIGHT THOUSAND IN DEBT AND ALMOST DEAD IN THAT BLAST OVER THERE.

The chopper doors opened and Ronnie pointed to a ruddy little man with sandy dry hair and pug nose. The gray eyes and tight face made his old friend look a bantamweight in contention. In fifteen years Keaton had weathered well.

Ronnie straightened his tie and moved across the yard to meet Keaton. Garrison's stomach was knotted. He could not bluff his way through any interrogation with a professional like Keaton. As Keaton and his agents spread across the yard, Garrison held his recorder.

YOU WOULDN'T BE HERE. BRUCE, IF THIS WASN'T DAMNED IMPORTANT. YOU KNOW SOMETHING.

Ronnie pointed at Garrison as he walked Keaton toward the cruiser. Keaton stopped, leaned forward for a moment and smiled. Then he stepped ahead of Ronnie and extended his hand. It was a firm, callused grip. "What goes around, comes around."

"Bruce..."

"How are you, Roy? Damn, it's good to see you. I think..." He looked over at the demolished house. "Alive... It's been a long time."

"Alive is correct."

Keaton again studied the smoldering ruins. "You're one lucky son of a bitch, Roy."

"Always was."

Keaton smiled. He had crooked little teeth. "Yup, you always were."

"These people were have been murdered."

"We'll have to reserve judgment on that."

"I have a gut feeling about this one." Garrison grinned when he saw Keaton mouthing his words. "Well, I do."

"Let's talk. Coffee's coming. I'll make sure yours is black."

" You remembered. I'm touched."

" I never forget a phone number or the way somebody likes their coffee. How's Loretta?"

Garrison winced, not expecting that question. He shook his head. " We broke up almost five years ago. She moved out of my condo."

" Sorry, Roy. I didn't know."

He looked his friend over. Keaton's hair had become gray but his skin had the same weathered look.

Coffee did arrive a few minutes later, probably from the diner in town. Keaton spent the next fifteen minutes talking over old street cases and did not even mention the explosion.

" Now, I understand you have your own weekly column. All those nights at Rosina's paid off, Roy."

" We shut that place down enough times. It's a convenience store now."

" Come on..."

" Hey, I've toned down my late night hours."

" And here you are."

YEAH, HERE I AM, BRUCE AND WHAT THE HELL DO I TELL YOU, OLD BUDDY? AND WHAT DO YOU KNOW? DAMN THIS WHOLE THING. THERE ARE FORCES ALL AROUND US. YOU KNOW THAT, BRUCE.

" I was briefed on the radio by the local cops, Roy. What happened? Did this lady call you?"

Garrison explained how Mrs. Campbell regularly read his column reprinted in the local paper and thought he would have the means to look into what she perceived as a massive cover up. He turned on his recorder, Keaton smiled, and he went through everything, sometimes waiting while Keaton conducted his investigation. It was after two and he was half asleep in the cruiser's rear seat when the car started. One of the younger cops was behind the wheel as Keaton climbed into the front seat and the rear door closed.

Keaton asked nothing more about the blast or the VED as they headed back toward town. He was talking about football with the young cop. Garrison had opinions but remained silent. He looked out the window, across the dark desert and waited for the Keaton to begin the grilling again. They pulled into the diner, the only place still open at this early hour.

Keaton brought Garrison up to the counter alone while the cop waited in the car. He ordered a piece of Boston Cream Pie and a cup of coffee for himself. Garrison lit a cigarette and got another black coffee. After some small talk, Keaton ate the pie and wiped his lips. His serious gray eyes and his sustained silence had Garrison uneasy.

" Roy, I checked out the reports I received from the local cops."

" Which reports..."

" The overturned van. We've been aware of this thing for a few weeks. The CDC assured me it was doubtful if such an event really took place. I was about to contact Lynette Campbell myself."

" What about the military vehicles or the Mortoxin?"

" Bogus." He shook his head and gulped the coffee. " Grover Moses was just wrong."

Garrison leaned closer and kept his billowing cigarette smoke away from Keaton. " Mrs. Campbell had the material tested. There was Mortoxin in the soil."

" Oh, come on. I know this lady's background. She's a kook lawyer, Roy. You know better... I don't find any evidence that

would indicate a van flipping out here. I read the CDC report. Either someone is running a classified operation, which I doubt, or there was no van."

" Option Two. Bingo. Classified operation."

Keaton pushed his empty cup and saucer down the counter.

" No, no, no. My people have checked with all the intelligence agencies. They would tell us if they were doing something like this."

" Would they? We're talking about VED being transported on public road and turning over on public roads and killing some guy. They're not going to tell you piddle!"

" Listen. Roy, you and I go back a long way... And I know how you value your sources. Where did they get this information?"

" Moses himself. Through Campbell."

Keaton nodded and crossed his arms as he rotated on the stool. " I think this van thing was conjecture on Moses's part; as if his pending death needed justification."

" Bullshit. What is VED doing in this hick little town? These top level guys could do their song and dance and you would not even know it."

" Obviously, you'll get this back to your paper."

" Can I?"

" Wait until the fire marshal's office or my people tell us exactly what happened. " Keaton placed his hand over his closed eyes as he slowly shook his head. " Roy, I would prefer that you print nothing. Just drop this."

Garrison snuffed out his cigarette in the glass ashtray. Then he spoke slowly and worded his answer precisely. " I think this thing is of great importance. I don't know exactly what is going on but I sure as hell don't want to drop it."

" Then hold off."

" *Bruce...*"

" Roy, damn you..."

" You know something else you're not telling me!"

" No, I know as much as you do. Just hold off." Keaton sipped on the coffee and squinted. He looked as if he could lose his temper.

" My car is wrecked. I'm supposed to be at my brother's place in San Louis Obispo, I'm a hundred and fifty-eight thousand in the hole."

" I know that."

Garrison looked at his friend. " Oh, you checked me out
didn't you, *old friend?*"

" I had to."

OF COURSE. RIGHT. WHY DOES THIS HAVE TO BE KEATON OUT HERE?
ANYONE ELSE I WOULD TELL TO SCREW OFF.

" All right, I'll wait. But I'll tell you that I have a gut feeling
about this."

" So, do I. So, do I." He put his hand on Garrison's shoulder.
" You're doing the right thing. Roy."

5

Well-defined steel blue clouds hovered in the dawn skies above the silhouetted peaks and the desert floor brightened in the early morning light. A single shiny red fire truck remained on the Campbell property. The ranch house fire was long since extinguished, but the sooty smell remained in the cooler air. Garrison had not slept. A fresh, unlit cigarette hung from his mouth as he swigged another cup of black coffee around five-thirty and then rubbed his stinging dry eyes.

" Hey, Roy. They have something."

Garrison looked up and nodded. Then he finally lit his cigarette, put on his angel's cap and poured the coffee into the sand before he stepped from the car.

The fire marshal had just brought his men back to his long maroon sedan. Keaton, his tie loosened and some of the FBI guys were standing around the smoldering rubble. A small blue flame spewed upward like a blow torch from where the porch stood less than twelve hours ago. Keaton waved Garrison over.

" Natural gas line, Roy."

" Oh?"

" Ruptured."

Garrison chucked the cigarette and squatted next to the persistent thin blue flame. He stroked his chin and looked up at the FBI agent. Keaton's face was placid, but Garrison knew he was thinking about the odd coincidence of a gas line blowing up just as the Campbells were discussing the VED. But Keaton said nothing as Garrison slouched. He tried not to think about Ed Campbell, his attractive wife and teenage boy in the charred remains of that ranch house.

" I won't pursue this until I get the word."

OR UNTIL I FEEL LIKE I'M GETTING SCREWED AND YOU KNOW THAT, KEATON. THEN THE STORY GOES TO HOBSON AND IS PRINTED IN THE DISPATCH. WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE?

Keaton walked around his men and shook Garrison's hand.

" I appreciate that and I'll be getting back to you, Roy. We have to explore more channels on this." He pulled Garrison aside. " I'm going to call in the gas company."

" Good move but what do you think right now?"

" I don't know. There isn't enough information and, frankly I feel like I'm getting the run-around. If I can't get any information, then I'll have to drop it."

" You sound like a reporter, Keaton."

Keaton smiled. " Insulting me will only get you in trouble."

" Who would try to block you?"

" That, my old buddy, may be the crux of this thing."

6

John counted seventeen rings before he picked up the pay phone. He faced the highway as a wide tractor-trailer barreled by the phone booth and back toward the mountains.

Craig Grafton's cool voice finally answered. " Grafton... What do you have, John?"

" I have distressing news, Craig. Garrison was in his car when the place went up. He's still alive."

Even this news did not seem to unnerve Grafton. " Okay... What was his demeanor?"

" He looked scared." Another car whizzed by the phone booth and disappeared into the night. " Bruce Keaton has been questioning him. They went into town and later came back."

" Good man, Bruce Keaton... What did Garrison tell him?"

" Nothing of value. Just that he came up here because of the Lynette Campbell's story about the van overturning."

" Your earlier report indicated that Garrison heard about the removal, the trucks, and the use of the chemical agent... Is this correct information?"

" Correct. I thought he was in the house when I blew the gas line. I'm sorry."

" That's past, John. I only want to know what we're going to do now. Was there anything mentioned about something called Green Haze?"

" Nothing. Nothing. Those words were not mentioned. I'm sure of it."

" I see." Grafton spoke with others in the background. Options were discussed. " Where is Garrison now?"

" Still out at the ranch. You want me to kill him?"

" No, not necessary."

" But he knows about the clean up!"

Grafton paused and voice remained calm. " Yes, he does. But that's all he knows. You have stated that Keaton cut the story and Garrison agreed to that action. Is that correct?"

" Yes."

" Then we shadow Garrison."

" I don't think that's wise."

" I didn't ask for that opinion," said Grafton. " If we eliminate Garrison, the consensus here is that his paper will pursue it because of the explosion. There is too much opportunity to draw unwarranted conclusions. If he becomes a liability, John, he'll be taken care of. Let's watch him and see if we can get further information about who knows what we're doing."

" Understood. I will check in tomorrow."

" No, I will be out of town for some time. Check in with Cam Pritchard when you have something. He will handle this now."

" Okay."

" One final thing."

" Yes?"

" Lake Shar is blue in summer."

" Lake Shar?"

" That's all... Good luck, John."

John set down the phone. He did not understand the reference as he looked away from phone and to the Campbell ranch three miles north. Rather than follow Garrison it would have been easier just to kill him.

7

St. Augustine, Florida

April 15

Sam kissed Nina one more time and gazed into her wild blue eyes. She looked like a bunny when she smiled and her wispy blonde hair surrounded her wide face and tanned shoulders. A week in the sun had darkened her long body but left silky skin beyond the bikini lines.

" You, Mr. Peters, are tempting me again."

Sam kissed her again. " That's the idea."

The phone rang and he closed his eyes. Then he reached for the end table phone and pulled up the receiver, but stayed on top of Nina. Someone on the other end was telling him they were supposed to checkout tomorrow morning. He set the phone down and left it off the hook.

" Who was it, Sam? "

Sam thrust his body forward and enveloped his mouth tightly around her moist lips. One more time before supper and he could tell she wanted him. He did not want to miss, getting in every moment of pleasure before the drive back to Iowa.

* * *

He dressed in his shorts and light tank top. Nina wanted to lounge in bed before supper, but he needed photograph the intense sunshine through the darkened blue clouds to the west. His goal was to match his photo with the old postcard of the bridge extending back to St. Augustine. He grabbed his cameras and several rolls of film.

" I'd like to shoot you in this light, Nina. Why don't you tag along?"

" And ruin the postcard shot? " She smiled a gentle smile.
" You go ahead. Get some good shots..." He walked around the bed and kissed her forehead. She slowly ran her fingers along his beard and nodded. " We needed this time."

" Away from the baby?"

" I miss Jason."

" You've talked to him every day. Although at age one I don't know if I was taking incoming calls."

" He understands."

Again she smiled. She looked so more rested than a week ago when they arrived out of a blinding Tennessee snowstorm.

" Think you can still go back to teaching school?"

She pulled the covers over her head and her voice was muffled when she talked. " No... I don't want to go back. Let's stay here forever."

Sam yanked the covers back and peered across her perfectly proportioned, smooth body. " You're talking me into it."

" We could stay here. You can free lance and I could find a position."

" It can be arranged, Nina."

She touched his nose. " Never mind. I'll call Domingo's. Reserve that table we like along the river. Say, six?"

" Sounds good." He moved toward the door but held the knob.

" Remember one thing."

" What's that?"

" I'm not done with you yet." He pointed at her.

She rose naked to her knees and threw the pillow across the hotel room, but he managed to scoot out the door. He walked down the corridor to the window overlooking the St. Johns River. The sunlight against the steel clouds was extraordinary.

He smiled and moved downstairs. This vacation had surpassed their expectations. Both of them were pushed to the edge when they left Marquette. His photography business was not doing well last winter, which was not helpful to Nina at home with the baby. The tiny studio on Front Street was lacking in customers probably due to his own foibles. He liked shooting landscapes, not people. Without the money from her aging parents they would never had taken the vacation.

Sam adjusted his camera strap as he walked into the lobby. He again toyed with the idea of moving down here. Nina's would update her teaching credentials but her recommendations were strong. Maybe they could settle along the beach, he could do more outdoor shooting like today, and not face the cold harsh winter.

He pushed open the glass doors, squeezed past some of the bellhops moving suitcases into the lobby and stepped into the outside humid air. His green Saab was parked below the third floor room. The bike rack was still attached. For a second he thought about taking the bike out of hotel storage, but instead unlocked the Saab and decided to drive.

The hotel was not far from the shore or the river. Before he headed back to the city itself and photographed the river and bridge, he wanted more pictures of the beach. He pulled onto the highway, but quickly shifted and turned down to the shore. The bright blue ocean horizon was neatly drawn between the fluffy green fauna. He composed photographs in his mind as he moved along.

Iowa had nothing like this white sand beach. Nina's father once owned a small speed boat they used on the lake, sometimes water skiing away from the rough shore. He parked the Saab and his bare feet sizzled on the asphalt until the soft sands soothed his skin. Being able to sink his feet into these sands whenever he wished was an enticing prospect.

He shot more pictures of the gulls along the steady surf. But the dunes intrigued him, too. He sat for a moment in the high grasses and thought of Nina's engaging smile. They were married six years and she was still his best friend. He had close friends, old and new, but Nina was his confidant and he trusted her judgment.

As he moved back to the Saab, he checked his watch. In three hours he and Nina would be sitting in the twilight, at a small candlelit cafe table overlooking the river. He backed around the parking lot and took the side road leading back to the city. Again, he dreamed about living down here. Having the city adjacent to the natural beauty would allow them to enjoy a more cosmopolitan atmosphere than Marquette, as well as the historical sights and natural shoreline beauty. A photography studio would flourish in an area with a larger population and tourists.

The bridge was up ahead. It was not the typical steel girder, stark structure, but had spires along each section, detailed with light poles hovering over the graceful span. He took out the wrinkled postcard from decades in the past. Hues were colored, giving the card an antique appearance.

Sam turned onto the river road's shoulder, shut off the car and stepped outside. Walking into the late afternoon sunshine along the river bank, he smelled the salt sea air as water moved slowly below the bank. He changed lenses, lining up the city and he clicked the shutter several times. When he returned to his studio on Front Street, he would sort through the hundreds of shots and place the best ones in the window. Maybe the townspeople would appreciate a far away place.

8

Grafton walked ahead of Schultz and Tillman to the crest of the bridge. He leaned over the concrete railing, faced the blue waters and studied every boat and individual along the shore. This was welcome break from the long intense meetings.

In a few hours he would leave for Africa. Green Haze had gone extremely well and would near completion within a month, maybe sooner. He was tired of the pressure, the duplicity and the lack of reward. Now was the time to leave agency and his fast, highly charged lifestyle.

Twenty-four years of similar operations, constantly putting his life in danger, had altered his consciousness. No longer did he possess unquestioning zeal. Corporations called it burnout and somebody had sensed it. Three weeks had passed since a short blonde haired woman sprinted by him while he was jogging outside Washington. The words were all operation code words.

LAKE SHAR IS BLUE IN SUMMER

As she ran back to the main road, he increased his pace, but she outdistanced him and was gone.

The same words came alive again at a Montreal dinner party last weekend. This time, an acne scarred British arms dealer named Roland James used the same phrase and Grafton promptly escorted him onto the outside balcony. He gazed over the snow covered city's twinkling lights and then pinned the guy against the wall. James did not flinch until Grafton threatened him with his Lugar. James revealed a huge chipped tooth as he smiled and said he would make Grafton rich.

" Any objections to that?" asked James.

Grafton should have either shot him or brought him in for questioning. But he said nothing, which may have allowed him to interpret the silence as a tacit consent. He not only allowed James' return to the party, but let him disappear. Grafton later checked James' employment record with various agencies, numerous governments, and his penchant extorting large sums of money. His last known employer was an arms merchant who sold to rebels in Russian Chechnya. James had taunted him with the promise of

money, never saying exactly what he wanted Grafton to do, and Grafton had not stopped him.

James was involved with the Chinese and currently working in with the rebels fighting in the east African country of Pangaea, in the middle of the Green Haze operation. It was long suspected the Chinese wanted a sphere of influence in east Africa and now they were going after him to accomplish their ends.

Schultz, his thinning curly blonde hair and glasses walked briskly with the chain smoking Tillman. It was odd to see Schultz in a bright blue party shirt and shorts when he usually wore a suit. A slight wind ruffled his hair as he neared the bridge crest. Grafton glanced back toward the beach area.

Schultz's crackling voice filled the ocean air. " Craig, you don't look like a damned tourist. We dress down and you wear a turtleneck and sport coat. It's seventy-two degrees."

Grafton produced the hint of a grin and gazed down at Schultz's scrawny white legs. " Here he comes, varicose veins and all."

Tillman, wearing a black running suit with bright green trim, choked on his cigarette. " Touché, Bill."

" Adds to my image." He patted Grafton on the back as they turned toward the river. " Come on, Craig, lighten up. We're in good shape now. This thing has gone forward despite the screw ups and nosy reporters."

Grafton raised his left brow. " Garrison is on his way to his brother's house in San Louis Obispo, according to John. No calls to the newspaper; no stories."

" You can thank Bruce Keaton for that," said Tillman.

Grafton nodded, leaned forward. He scanned the boats and river banks. Green Haze was high risk and even on an innocent bridge stroll he trusted no one. " Warren, we are going to need more money."

Tillman hunched over as he inhaled. " Tell me how much and it will be there."

" The Lord of High Finance... The jogging cigarette smoker."

" Neiman-Marcus retails this suit out at three hundred dollars."

Grafton stared across the river. " You get what you pay for."

Schultz chuckled. " My wife shops K Mart."

" With your salary?" asked Tillman.

" I'm wearing the blue light special."

Grafton leaned on the wide barrier. " I believe it."

Tillman nodded, took a drag on the cigarette, and tossed it over the bridge. He exhaled as he spoke.

" What about the last shipment, Craig? Was Manville pleased?"

" Everything was unloaded at the Lake Shar base. They should have more than enough weapons for the final push to Aagos." Grafton watched a small pleasure boat cut the clear waters under the bridge. " Our problem is not with arms, it's with Manville. Manville is an egotistical tyrant who makes poor military judgments. Unfortunately, we have to deal with him to accomplish our ends."

" He can't be worse than President Umbutu," said Tillman.

" There are reports all over the media about the human rights thing. People who have just disappeared."

" Much of that is our own dissemination. Umbutu isn't a military man, he's a politician," said Grafton.

" It's General Seville who seems to understand the country. I read an interview in the Times. This man is not stupid."

Schultz leaned around Grafton and faced Tillman. " He was educated at Columbia."

Grafton nodded. " That interview was arranged to undermine Umbutu. Oddly enough, many of the abuses you allude to are not linked to Seville. Umbutu has his own private force. I agree, Seville is the best man. There are reports I've seen that he may be trying to make foreign contacts."

Grafton slowly turned and looked across Tillman's compressed face and dark eyes. " As I alluded to, we are at the point, Warren, where we need to start stockpiling the cash and building up reserves, which means accelerating the flow." He turned to Schultz. " Bill, that means wrapping up your end."

" I understand."

" You must be confident that Umbutu will fall," said Tillman.

" I'm leaving for Pangaea tomorrow morning. Keep your ears open and don't panic by what you see on the media. We will contact you, Warren, once the Manville government is in place. Once we reroute those oil fees, your people should see a long term situation that is very profitable."

" Do you have a time frame, Craig?"

" No more than two weeks. Under no circumstances do I want you in Pangaea before I personally tell you. Is that clear?"

" Understood."

" We do have some domestic considerations that I hope will be cleared up. Cam Pritchard is handling that now. A summary of an FBI report states that the reporter, Garrison, had been questioned after an explosion in California. It mentioned the van and the VED. Apparently, Garrison was following up on the story with the people whose house was blown up."

" I hope the hell you have someone on that guy," said Schultz.

Garrison was now a liability. It was enough that he might uncover things about Green Haze, but that discovery might start people looking at Grafton's activities. " He's all done."

" Good," replied Schultz.

Grafton creased his brow and looked forward, past some of the boats.

" It's up to Manville once everything is place. We've done our job. Be prepared, Warren, to leave when I contact you and once you're in Aagos we'll set up the country's finances. That is one of the first things I want in place."

Grafton was still consumed by the Chinese connection and intrigued, not just by the money possibility, but by what they might propose. His old zeal was renewed by the challenge of sweeping around his own agency's operation successfully. He looked across the river. In the underbrush a lanky dark bearded guy snapped pictures of the bridge. "What the hell is that?"

Grafton quickly stepped away from the barrier and they followed him.

"That man has a camera."

He squinted and pulled out his radio. "This is Grafton. Below the bridge on the south side. There's an individual shooting pictures along the bank. Looks harmless, but I don't want to take the chance. Ruin the film and get out of there."

An acknowledgment came after a quick static burst.

Grafton moved forward and squatted. He peered between the bridge abutments. The guy now faced the city and took more photographs. Then he walked up the river bank and opened the door to a new green Saab. From this distance it was impossible to see the license plate.

"He's leaving!" yelled Schultz.

" This is Grafton. Guys, our photographer friend is departing the area in a green Saab."

The radio cracked again. " We're stuck, Craig."

Grafton leaned over the edge and almost lost his balance. A large food truck unloaded crates at a restaurant along the water. He turned back to the Saab, now moving along the river road.

Schultz hit his fist on the barrier. " Damn, we don't need this! Suppose that guy works for somebody."

" We don't know that," said Grafton, but his thoughts were fixed on Roland James.

The radio sounded. " Craig."

Grafton held the radio. " Go ahead."

" An Iowa license plate. We only have the first two numbers. Five Six. "

The Saab disappeared into the bushes. Nobody knew about this meeting except Tillman and Schultz. He had to hope that this bearded guy was a tourist snapping nature shots. " Take those two numbers. Contact who you need to in Iowa. Have the computers match up a green Saab to those first numbers."

Schultz faced Grafton. " I don't like this, Craig."

" No need for panic. Nothing's happened. Panicking over nothing is a waste of energy."

Schultz rubbed his hands together. " We need to get out of here."

" What about the Saab?" asked Tillman.

Grafton stared at the river bank. " They'll get him, Warren. It won't take long."

9

Sam flipped his directional and veered into the post office lot. He removed a film mailer from the glove compartment as his camera automatically rewound the film back into the canister. With a red felt tip pen he scrawled out the developing particulars on the envelope, but paused at the return address lines. On the way back to Iowa, he and Nina would stop in Kentucky at Griff's house. Sam wrote his college friend's name and address across the mailer. He removed the last canister from the camera, placed it in a black plastic holder, sealed it inside and deposited it in the mailbox outside his window.

He checked the time on his dash digital as he drove away. In a few hours he would bring Nina to dinner. Maybe tomorrow they would spend time the beach before they drove back. It would be the last Florida diversion before returning to Jason. Even though Florida was idyllic, he longed to hold his son in his arms and get back to life in a small Iowa town.

* * *

Nina had just returned from the hotel's boutique. Her blonde hair was pulled back and she wore a casual white pleated dress, tapered in the front, with thin straps over her tanned shoulders. Her perfume was light. It would always remind him of their last night in St. Augustine.

They were seated near the water where they had dined all week. The bus boy leaned over and lit the glass enclosed vanilla candle, centered on the linen white tablecloth. He poured water from a chilled pewter pitcher into the tall glasses. Later, Sam requested twenty-year-old Champagne. The waitress arrived with the cloth wrapped green bottle. She unleashed the cork, Champagne burst out and she slowly poured the bubbling drink into crystal pink goblets. " I'll give you time to select."

Sam waited until she left. He smiled at Nina, lifted his glass and gazed into her crisp blue eyes. " May St. Augustine ring eternal."

" You really want to move here, don't you? The down side is being away from everyone we know and the family. The school. I've been there almost ten years now."

" By plane it's only a couple of hours. But really moving here..."

She nodded slowly and they both turned toward the river. The bridge's lamp globes glowed now at sunset and the city lights were beginning to twinkle. They enjoyed a quiet dinner, both aware of departure's sadness, and with great spontaneity recapped their time in Florida. After the meal they strolled along the river and talked on a park bench before taking the Saab back over the bridge to the hotel.

They held hands and listened to a new age CD as Sam drove slowly down the isolated road. Ahead, bright blue and red lights flashed across the hotel's brick facade and swimming pool. He maintained his speed to the end of the road but downshifted as the flashing grew brighter.

Three police cruisers were parked diagonally in the hotel parking lot. He brought the car to a halt about a hundred yards from the lot. There were no officers in the forward car. A small

crowd of hotel staff and patrons had gathered midway down the building and the third floor sliders were shattered.

" Sam, that's our room!"

They ran from the car, across the lot and into the lobby. At the front desk a younger girl tried to reassure frightened customers.

" What happened to our room?" yelled Sam.

She looked up and with a scowl. " Excuse me?"

" Never mind." Sam tried not to run ahead down the main hall. They hurried into the stairwell, scrambled to the third floor, and he pushed open the fire door. He held her hand and sprinted down the narrower hall toward the three cops posted outside their room.

" I'm Sam Peters. This is my room, what happened?"

The cop yelled into the bedroom. " Sergeant... Peters is here."

Sam pulled Nina through the doorway. Inside, more cops hovered like mourners at a funeral near the overturned beds. The room dresser drawers were removed and emptied and the suitcases and their clothes were gone. The sergeant, an older bald

man in a brown suit, raised his hands into the air. " They took all your stuff, Peters."

" My cameras..."

" You've been robbed, buddy. Hope you have good insurance."
Sam double-checked the room as Nina trailed behind.

" Sam, all our things. Everything we've bought!"

Sam moved toward the sliders. " What kind of a damned hotel is this?"

" It happens. But it was only this room. You have something specific here? You know, something valuable?"

" My camera equipment and film." Sam looked through the broken glass. Outside the parking lot two men were in his car and the trunk was popped.

" *What the hell is this?* "

The men looked up as the sergeant rushed onto the balcony. They ran from the Saab and scattered across the road. " Those two men, by the Saab! Get them!"

Sam rushed out to the railing as other cops burst into the parking lot. The two men produced submachine guns and rapid gunfire popped in the night air. Cops were mowed down. The

sergeant grabbed Sam by the shirt and yanked him back inside as the outside stucco facade and window glass was eaten up by bullets.

" Sam!" Nina crawled on his stomach. " Sam, what's happening?"

" Who the hell are you people? What have you done?" The sergeant rose, his gun pointed upward, looked down the hall.

" We'll go down the back way and leave through the lower level. This is a professional job."

Sam took Nina's hand across the room. They were near the corridor when more bullets flew. The sergeant was hammered back, his body pummeled and his eyes glazed. Sam froze but quickly closed and locked the door. He pulled Nina, her white dress now sprayed with tiny blood dots, back to the slider. " Sam, we can't they'll get us in here!"

" This way."

He opened the connecting door and raced into the adjoining suite, but as he nudged the door shut, the other room shook with an intense barrage. She wrapped her arms around him. " What did we do? Who are these people?"

A brusque voice muffled through the closed door. " Kill them, damn it. Green Haze is threatened!"

Green Haze had no meaning. He brought Nina to the balcony. " I'm going down. When I get to the second floor, go over the edge and I'll pull you down. The same thing down to the first."

She nodded as he vaulted the balustrade, gripped the lower rail and swung his body down around to the second floor balcony. Nina was already over the edge when he heard commotion in their original room. He caught her body in his arms.

" Sam, we-"

Sam covered her mouth and motioned with his head. Voices sounded above as he crawled over the second floor aluminum railing and leaped onto the first floor concrete patio. Nina followed him along the first floor room windows. The gunfire stopped, but it was only a matter of time before these people figured out they had fled.

She grasped his hand as they rounded the corner and sprinted down the asphalt. " Sam, what the hell is this?"

" I don't know! We're caught in between something here, Nina and I don't know what it is!"

" Where can we go?"

He shook his head and pulled her toward the back of the building. They ran to a long white tractor-trailer truck parked near the loading bays. The rear doors were open and a metal board connected to the dock, but there was no one unloading the truck.

" Get in the cab."

" What?"

" I said get in the cab, Nina!"

She ran by him, climbed up the high running board, pushed back the chrome handle and squeezed inside the huge elevated cab as Sam turned the keys. The mighty engine rumbled and Sam moved the stick shift, thinking back to his college job with the moving company. The truck nudged forward like a cargo plane on a small runway.

" This may only give us a few minutes. Let's just get out of here!"

She was pressed against the high green vinyl seats and cried. Sam looked back in the mirror as the truck bucked across the parking lot. The metal connecting plate fell off the dock and

crashed loudly onto the asphalt. He was able to maneuver the vehicle away from the hotel and over the side street curb.

" Somebody messed up, Nina. They messed up. They've taken us for somebody else. Green Haze. What the hell is Green Haze?"

" We... we would have been dead now, Sam. What did we do? What did we do?"

" Nothing," he answered and steered toward the woods.

" That poor man... the sergeant."

Sam drove past several slab residences and into a tropical thicket. The river ripples reflected the truck lights ahead. They were about a mile downstream from the bridge when he steered north onto a narrow dirt road. In the mirror other headlights shined on the treetops.

The road was narrow and the overhead branches scraped the cab roof and truck body. They were only a few hundred yards from the river when a car raced around the corner. " Damn! Come here, Nina!"

" What now?"

He checked the mirror again. " We have to jump and head for the river."

" No, just get back to the highway!"

" There is no highway! If we don't jump now and we're dead!"

He opened the door, the brush and grass whipped by as the engine echoed through the thicket.

" I'm scared, Sam!"

Sam grabbed her arm, leaned forward, but lost his grip. He went sailing out of the truck and landed on the grass. As he rolled over the truck moved for the trees ahead. Headlights shone tracked them from behind. " Nina!"

She jumped seconds before the rig rammed into a thick row of trees at the turn. Sam sprinted toward her as she dove into the brush. Cars approached. He found her scraped and bleeding, but cogent as he hoisted her up. They ran between the brushes. The lights brightened as the bridge, and the city materialized beyond the thicket. The pursuing cars skidded behind the crashed truck.

Bright light now streaked through the trees, cutting shadows in the dust. He heard a quick pop and instantaneously the truck went up in a swirling orange fireball.

" Oh, my God!" cried Nina, raising her hands to her mouth.

" The river, Nina. We have to swim it!"

They ran to the bank and dove into the murky water. He felt a few stinging cuts as he hit the cold current. For a moment they were taken by the flow, but he clamped his hand on her dress and steered a course toward the bridge less than a mile away. The smoke from the truck explosion pushed out across the water and the woods were ablaze. Sam frantically towed her toward the bridge across the dark river.

The men from the hotel were probably sifting through the truck wreckage now. Why were these people after them and why had they taken everything from the room? At least five people were dead at the hotel. Some like this would be a major story on all the networks, yet they were trapped. As he swam forward in the water, dragging Nina with the current, he wondered if they would ever be safe again.

Almost half an hour later, he reached the bridge pillars. He helped Nina around the concrete support, away from the current, and then hoisted her on the sloped cement. "Nina..."

"I'm all right."

She lay against the round column. "We have to get to the police."

But he was not sure that was the best idea. Whatever was happening was important. It had to be important. No one would send in guys with machine guns unless it was a big deal. The sergeant had said it was a professional operation. Sam raised his hands as if he were praying and balanced his chin as he weighed his options.

Across the river, where they had crashed the truck, several small spotlights now swept the river. " My God, they just don't stop, Nina."

She peered around the support and back to shore. " They'll find us."

" No, no they won't, but we're not going to the cops. Something like this is too big. They're plugging off those cops like target practice! We have to run. Stay on the run!"

" Where do we go?"

" Griff will know what to do."

Sam looked out over the water. A number of men stood on shore next to the lights. The trick was getting out without being seen, keeping the support between them and the lights. Or just

head for shore. They would have a chance to survive once they were out of the water and away from the city.

He held Nina and again moved down river, keeping behind the support. Each stroke through the water became arduous now, but the mighty river pushed them along. It was important they come ashore away from the bright city lights along the boulevard. Sam swam with the current, toward a half lit city park beyond the road. The support wall came closer as they floated through the water and he finally grasped the stones.

Sam scurried up the edge and pulled Nina over the top. They both staggered across a small gravel walk and onto the grass. For a few minutes, he breathed rapidly, his aching ribs thrust into the ground and tried to fathom it all. He rolled over and held her hand. From the park he saw the bridge and the distant spotlights. Someone would order a pursuit now and spare no expense until he and Nina were dead.

10

The night was endless and the full moon inched over the ocean horizon's silver waters. Grafton sat alone in the darkened cabin, engines humming through the skies, knowing this jet was taking him back to a volatile situation. He had danced around the Chinese intention from the onset and would feel the pressured after he landed in Pangaea. There was no guilt concerning his consensual inaction. He was prepared to let the whole affair unravel by itself and take him away from his career and the surrounding maelstrom.

He worried more about what was happening domestically. He needed the Garrison and Peters fiascoes squelched until he cut the Chinese deal. The people in Florida had messed up. The mission had been simple. His men were supposed to confiscate everything in that St. Augustine hotel room and wait as the Saab approached. Once Peters and his wife had left the car, his people should have removed everything from car and had the contents flown north for evaluation. That part was successful yet there was no film of the

bridge. The four developed rolls showed half exposed old shots from Iowa and a trip to Illinois during the winter. No photographs of the Peters trip to Florida were in the batches. Peters must have developed other film by mail, which meant the whole bridge incident could be resolved by intercepting his mail back in Iowa. The bridge photographs would be removed with the negatives when they arrived.

Dealing with the hotel incident was a larger problem. Four officers were dead, the hotel damage was steep, and the Peters were missing. The locals had arrived too quickly and the Peters must have seen the damages. Unfortunate such mistakes could trigger a such massive blunder.

The wall phone rang. Still in thought, he continued gazing over the ocean and then picked up the line. " Yes."

Charley McCabe spoke from back in the office. " Edgar Mitchell will be calling in ten minutes."

" Thank you."

He set the phone back on the wall. Now the incident had escalated, as he thought it would, all the way to the Director's office. Edgar had worked with him for years in Asia. They knew

each other and understood how things could become messed up. Edgar would expect a new plan of action. Grafton picked up his spiced tea, pressed down on the bag with the spoon and let the steamy aroma soothe his face. He sipped the full taste slowly.

A story would blame the Peters for the hotel killings. Five teams of strategists scanned computer banks for any background deficiencies on Peters or his wife. Once something was found, it could easily be twisted. With weapons planted in the woods and witnesses found, the onus would shift to the local and state authorities. The Peters would not have a solid defense.

He took the phone in his hand and dialed back to the office.

" Give me Kurdis, SPO."

He waited and lifted the tea to his lips again as the infinite moon lit ocean raced under the jet. The other option, which every man in the field along the east coast understood clearly, was to eliminate the Peters as soon as possible.

" Strategic Planning."

" Grafton."

" Craig, this guy doesn't even have a traffic violation. His wife is a goody-goody school teacher. They're active in local town

groups and even go to church. They have one child, a one-year-old boy. Both families are clean. I am finding nothing."

" Then we need to search deeper and, if necessary, construct something. The farther back in the past, the better. Maybe during their years in college. If we need to take that baby and use it as leverage..."

" I understand, Craig. I've been told Edgar Mitchell is involved in this now. Shall I be expecting a call from him?"

" No. I will handle Mitchell. Get me good news before I land."

" Okay."

Grafton cut line and dialed Florida. He was connected on a high frequency microwave band directly to his units in St. Augustine.

" Paul Willis."

" Status, Paul."

" Craig, we are observing just as you ordered. Ten minutes ago, the local station began feeding transmission to CNN. The feed will be broadcast at the top of the hour. We have it if you want to see it."

" Not necessary."

Willis described the activity near the river after the Peters crashed a stolen truck. All personnel were evacuated back into the city. The bridge was soon cordoned off by the local police. A web of state and local officers began a precise, well orchestrated search along the river. A consensus was building and rumors indicated the Peters might have something to do with the shootings. That was exactly what Grafton wanted to hear.

" What do you think happened to Peters and his wife?"

" We think they must have attempted to swim the St. Johns. They could have drowned, Craig or-"

" That would solve a multitude of problems."

" Or let's assume the most bizarre and postulate that they actually made it across the river."

Grafton lifted the tea and furrowed his brow. Even though both individuals were young, Not going to the police indicated a poignant assessment of the real situation. They were regrouping. Or they were dead.

" Where would they have gone?"

" We have people at the airport and so does the FBI, Craig. I can't believe they would be so stupid to fly out."

" The question, Paul, is where they are headed and how they are traveling." He looked at the illuminated blue wall clock. It was nearing the top of the hour. Edgar's call was overdue. He may have been waiting, also, to watch the cable feed. " Call me in an hour or when warranted, Paul."

Grafton picked up the remote and quickly activated the panel monitor. CNN was running a brief weather summary for the continental United States. He brought the tea to his lips and let the orange-spiced flavor spread upward into his sinuses.

Now they were switching to the lead story. His lips tightened and he swallowed the tea. The network logo appeared in the lower right portion of the screen and a clear shot of the hotel was now broadcast around the world. So much more was riding on this.

" Good Evening. You're looking at the Morrenze Hotel in St. Augustine, Florida, scene of a tragic shoot-out earlier this evening. Four police officers are officially listed as dead and three additional officers have been medi-vaced to a Jacksonville Florida hospital where their conditions are unknown at this point."

The screen showed the hotel room's demolished interior. Things were much simpler when news was not instantaneous.

Now, they were zooming in on the balcony bullet holes throughout the stucco. Grafton was convinced, as he glanced at the panel phone, Edgar Mitchell was viewing this same broadcast and that was probably delaying his call.

The news anchor turned and leaned his shoulder toward the camera. " This is what we know right now. A hotel room, number 389, was ransacked earlier this evening. A broken slider prompted a hotel busboy to contact the night manager. When the manager and hotel security arrived on the third floor, they found a room emptied of it's contents. Local police were called into investigate.

Don Ellis talked to the hotel night manager."

They cut to a video shot of the local reporter holding a microphone to the nervous hotel manager.

" Mr. Munde, what happened to cause the shooting and the death of the officers?"

Munde's dark eyes darted. " The occupants of room 389 returned to the hotel and parked their car outside. They must have seen the broken slider or the local police." Munde appeared tired. " They headed up to 389."

" Now, we have heard that at this time someone broke into the car outside."

" Yes, that is true."

" When did the gunfire start?"

" Right then. It happened so fast. We all thought we were going to be killed."

There was a long pause and it was clear this manager was not going to say anything else. The reporter faced the camera.

" The names of the occupants of this room are being withheld. They fled the scene and their whereabouts are unknown right now. Whether they prompted the shooting or in anyway instigated this incident is unknown."

Grafton nodded and looked toward the panel phone.

" Good."

Edgar would call now. Eight seconds later the phone rang.

" Craig, this is Edgar Mitchell." His voice was strong and convincing. " I have just viewed a-

" I saw it, Edgar."

" We have just concluded a two hour meeting on this and how it relates to the operation. I think having Kurdis construct

something is the most viable plan right now. If these people are still alive and go to the police, we need to diminish their credibility. What do your people tell you? Are they alive?"

" Unknown. It depends if they crossed that river. I think did occur because they're gone. But we'll have to wait until daybreak to determine that. All our people are back in the city and the search is being conducted by state, local, and the FBI."

" Good. We're lucky we didn't lose anyone. Stick with the plan. Once your plane is down, we will have Umbutu scrambling. The administration's support for Umbutu will wane once they think the Pangaea government is trying to kill the Deputy Director of Defense Intelligence. Best case scenario is they send some one in to take him out, which will save us the trouble."

" True. Once they down the plane and the rebels save me, it will elevate Colonel Manville in the world community."

" And sink Umbutu. Reports indicate more rebel advances today. They are within thirty miles of Aagos."

" We're almost done. Let's see how I do with the F-16."

" It's a risky venture, Craig, but you're the guy." Mitchell paused and Grafton peered out the cabin window. " I want

something on this Peters couple within the hour. I don't care what we have to say, just make it stick."

" Agreed. I'll call you."

" We're all screwed if we don't contain this. You know that and I know that."

Grafton set down the phone. He brought the hot tea to his lips again. Kurdis would have something very soon or maybe Cam Pritchard would wrap the whole thing up. But they had to address the larger implications. Everyone involved Green Haze was ruined if they were caught running around the Administration and all efforts to destroy Umbutu and United States credibility would be undermined. The operation would culminate in success and the objectives met if his people could control both the Peters and Garrison situations.

11

Garrison woke early. Thoughts of the explosion back in the valley had haunted him all night. He was unsure what he was going to do. Promising Keaton not to write anything was not prudent. Whether he wrote anything now or saved it for later, he was not going to just let this thing go. Two people who were investigating an overturned van dumping out a lethal virus, and their son, were dead. A man who contracted VED was dead. What was that van doing in the desert? Where was it headed?

Garrison sat at the table again and raised his brows. " You need a wife or a housekeeper."

Richard set down the frying pan and nodded. " Maybe."

" Don't make the mistake I made with Loretta."

" That was a mistake, Roy." He motioned toward the open patio doors.

" Let's enjoy a morning in paradise."

Garrison stepped onto the outside patio overlooking the mountains. A glass table with its own landscape of eggs, bacon,

sausage, toast and cereal looked like the patio in Richard's restaurant. He sat on the white vinyl patio chair as his brother set a steaming coffee pot on the table.

" You'd never know you owned a restaurant, Richard." His brother smiled as he scooped an omelet onto Garrison's wide plate. " You expecting about a dozen other people?"

" I know your appetite, Roy. You'll take care of all this in no time."

" You're right. You still working all those crazy hours?"

His brother flipped on the patio TV set. " I've tried to cut back, but you know how it goes."

GOOD FOR YOU, RICHARD. AT LEAST YOU OWN THE RESTAURANT AND NOT PUTTING IN HOURS FOR SOMEBODY ELSE. ALL THOSE YEARS BOUNCING BETWEEN ALL THOSE DIVES.

Garrison thought back to when they were kids. How Richard would always cook something in mom' kitchen or on the outside grill. By the time they were teenagers his mother was not cooking at all and did not until the day she died eight years ago. He tasted

the perfectly prepared omelet and was savoring the flavor as blood spayed images of a hotel room came on the little TV screen.

" What the hell happened now? Another terrorist group?"

" Cops were killed in Florida. Looks like the mob or something, Roy. Ask you paper to send you down there."

" I have my own problems." Garrison let the well-buttered toast mush between his teeth.

" You haven't said much about what brought you up here. I know you've been physically exhausted and distressed since you got here." Richard sat down with him and poured a grainy cereal into a glass bowl.

" I am tired and I don't even know whether I'm going to run with the story. A couple were killed just after I interviewed them two nights ago. I was right outside the blast. Natural gas."

" Was it?"

" I have my doubts. They were onto something, Richard. Did you hear that story about the people dying from VED in the desert?"

Richard crunched on the cereal and nodded. " I think I read something about that."

" Keep this under you hat, but these people reported that a van containing VED did overturn. The guy who claimed to have seen it, died of VED. He said military vehicles appeared and cleaned up the whole thing. I was kind of skeptical until the damned ranch house blew up. Not only that, Richard. If I hadn't gone out to the car for my recorder, I wouldn't be here now."

Richard continued to eat the cereal. He set down the spoon and rested his chin atop his propped arms. " Roy, how many times have you put me through this? At first I used to freak when you told me about some of the characters you went after back in the city. Getting shot at. Landing up in the hospital so many times over the years. But you always managed to squeeze out of it."

" Richard this is big. I can feel it. If I break this story..."

" If, if , if. Roy take care of yourself when you get back. Start writing a society column or something."

" Okay, you'll see."

They talked about the old days back in New Jersey. Garrison would try to plan out some kind of reunion every time he saw Richard but the plans inevitably fell through after he returned to Los Angeles. When they finished breakfast, Richard gave him a tour

of the lush, manicured grounds. If the extent of new shrubs and flowers were an indication of the restaurant's viability, Richard must have had a good year.

" Dad always talked about a restaurant, Richard." They walked up the long crushed stone drive. " You're fulfilling the dream."

" Dad would have liked my place." He stopped by the black and white mailbox that looked like a cow. Inside was a stack of letters, bills, and junk mail. He closed the box and headed back down the driveway. " We re-did the bar, Roy. Looks like something out of the 1890's."

" Good, I could use a drink."

Richard smiled and thumbed through the mail as he walked. Garrison looked at the massive array of shrubs lining the house.

" What's this?" He held up a brown wrapped square, no more than five inches from corner to corner. It was addressed to Richard but postmarked from Merced, California.

THE CAMPBELLS. MERCED. GOD ALMIGHTY. WHAT THE HELL DID THEY MAIL UP HERE?

Garrison said nothing for a second and held out his hand. His confused brother put the package in his hand. Garrison attacked the tape furiously, ripped the brown paper and pulled out a CD in a plastic case.

THEY SENT THAT COMPUTER JUNK UP HERE BEFORE I WENT TO MERCED. THIS IS THE BIG ONE, ROY. THIS IS IT. I NEED A COMPUTER.

" You have a computer, Richard?"

" No, my computer is at the restaurant."

" I need to get to the computer now. You have no idea what this could mean. This is the break I've been looking for."

* * *

Garrison was not sure if somebody was tailing Richard's Mercedes. Maybe he was getting paranoid because he had a CD threatening to break this VED thing wide open. He looked down the city street and thought someone kept pulling a brown sedan out of traffic when Richard slowed. For twenty minutes Garrison played a guessing game and made Richard take an alternative

route. He gripped the CD. That CD was formatted with something important.

YOU'LL HAVE A COPY OF... YOU'LL HAVE A COPY OF... YOU'LL HAVE A COPY OF... WHAT ABOUT THE VED? WHY WAS IT BEING TRANSPORTED? WHAT THE HELL ARE THEY DOING WITH IT? PEOPLE WHO WOULD BLOW UP A HOUSE HAVE NO MORALS, ROY. THEY'RE PROBABLY INFECTING PEOPLE SOMEWHERE. I NEED TO CHECK THAT OUT. VED OUTBREAKS. ANYWHERE...

Maybe Lynette would have explained the VED if had returned to the house and spoke with her again. But now she was dead. She had mailed this, not knowing if Garrison would go to his brother's house before coming to Merced.

He turned again. " I swear to God that somebody is following us."

" I've felt that myself but I haven't seen anyone."

" They have to be watching me. Take a right. Just evade them."

Richard nodded and they rolled down a constricted lane. Buildings zipped by as Garrison focused behind. Once out on the

main road, Richard went left. The restaurant was just ahead. They spun into a small lot across the street. Garrison scanned the sidewalk and they hurried toward the rear kitchen area. As they entered the building he saw no sign of a trailing car nor people watching outside.

Richard brought him into the business office next to the coat room. He leaned over, booted up the computer system and motioned his brother to the desk.

A picture of San Francisco, taken from across the bay, filled the screen with a dozen aqua icons. " You get this thing going, Roy. I'm going to just walk through the restaurant."

Garrison nodded as Richard headed inside. He pulled the chair across the room, removed the CD from the case and quickly inserted the it into the drive. The green light lit and he quickly clicked the mouse to the run position. He typed in the D drive and the monitor filled with formulas and colorful three-dimensional representations of elaborate chemicals.

The next few pages were easier to understand. He had viewed the structure of Mortoxin, the agent that Mrs. Campbell had claimed was used in the desert to kill the VED. He still had to read

slowly, but he was able gain a general understanding how this chemical killed the virus, but it deposited a poisonous residue. Somebody must have neutralized the chemical and further cleaned up that mess.

He flipped to the next section, entitled, Pzyak Compound. More graphics unfolded in brilliant colors before him.

WHERE IN GOD'S NAME DID SHE GET THIS STUFF? YOU HAD TO BE CONVERSANT IN COLLEGE CHEMISTRY. THIS WAS BEYOND ANYTHING MR. ROY GARRISON, AVERAGE REPORTER WITH FOUR YEARS AS USC WAS GOING TO UNDERSTAND. TIME TO CALL IN THE PROFESSORS AND THE BRAIN TRUST.

It was more confusing as he delved deeper.

" What the hell am I supposed to do with this advanced chemistry bullshit?"

Garrison shook his head when his brother returned the room, but Richard, who college major was business, soon crossed his eyes at the screen. Neither man had the chemical or pharmaceutical knowledge to understand the composition of this compound and how it was used. And this was only the beginning

of the contents of the CD. Somebody called Richard out front and he was probably glad to leave the complexities on the screen.

PZYAK COMPOUND. PZYAK COMPOUND. YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A BIOCHEMIST, ROY, TO KNOW THAT'S THE KEY. IT'S SLANG FOR ALL THAT GOOBLEY-GOOP ON THE CD. PZYAK COMPOUND. WHO MANUFACTURES PZYAK COMPOUND?

He leaned back and closed his eyes. Finding out the manufacturer of both Mortoxin and Pzyak Compound was critical. But he still kept coming back to the disease itself. Reasoning this thing out might give him more perspective. He visualized a map of California. Bakersfield was less than two hundred miles from Merced. Who would be driving with vials of VED up through the valley?

" Richard! I need a map of California!"

One of the waiters came into the office. Garrison looked up from the monitor. " Tell my brother, I need a map of California. "

The guy nodded and left. Where did the van come from and where was it going? All the basic questions were vital. And why was it traveling anywhere with that stuff loaded in back? This was

an important story, but he needed help with all his facts before he dared submit anything for publication.

The waiter returned to the office. " This is California. South on one side. North on the other."

" Great. Thanks."

Garrison unfolded the map across the desk. He ran his finger up the green interstate line to Bakersfield. Merced was on the other side and he quickly flipped the map. Then he planted his finger right next to the mountain range outside of town. Without looking up the map, he moved his finger along the interstate again, checking the various mountain ranges and state roads off the sides. He knew he was almost as far north as San Francisco when he saw a military access road. To the east was a thin red perforated line and stamped in bold letters was what he had been looking for:

DEMPSEY-CULLIN RESERVATION

A number of base roads and a long airstrip were printed on the map. He looked back down to Merced. Grover Moses said the

vehicles arrived after he witnessed the van accident. Then the whole entourage headed back up the interstate. It was impossible to gauge accurate time frames. Under normal conditions, the reservation was an hour and a half away from Merced. So, they brought the van up to the base or back to the base. He was not sure if Hobson would run with a story about the military. Especially if it was classified.

IT MUST BE CLASSIFIED, ROY. THEY JUST BLEW UP A HOUSE YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO BE AT AND KILLED PEOPLE LOOKING INTO THIS THING. HOW COULD TRANSPORTATION OF VED NOT BE CLASSIFIED? STUPID IDIOTS.

" Find anything?" asked Richard.

Garrison turned. " Yeah, I'm starting to find out bits and pieces. I need to start checking the papers and find out if there have been any outbreaks of VED."

" Related to that van?"

" I don't know, Richard. And I have to find out who manufactures the chemicals listed on the CD."

" Better you than me, brother. Listen, I have to go downtown. I have a meeting with the union. Are you staying?"

" Yeah, if it's all right."

" Good. I'll be back in a few hours. We'll have something to eat and maybe catch a show tonight."

Garrison nodded. " In the meantime, maybe I'll try the local newspaper."

" You want a ride downtown, Roy?"

" No, no, I'll get on line... The net."

Richard paused, crinkled his brow and shook his head as he put his hand on Garrison's shoulder. " You study your stuff on the computer."

" I can get right into The Dispatch's files if I have to. Thanks for the use of the computer, bro."

" Be my guest." He briefly looked down at the map. " I hope you don't get in this too deep, Roy."

Garrison looked up. " Me, too."

He folded up the map once his brother had left and sat back in front of the screen. This whole thing made him more nervous with each passing minute. He closed the program, pulled the CD and placed it in the plastic case. Then he stuffed it in his back pocket. The computer screen changed back to the San Francisco

wallpaper and he clicked the Internet icon and prepared to link into his paper's computer. He casually leaned back in the chair, rubbed his eyes and waited for the connection.

The modem sounded, but something shook the building and knocked things off the desk. The short lived nature of the shock convinced him this was not an earthquake and leaped from the chair. He heard commotion outside the room and immediately thought of Richard. His thoughts were filled with images of the Mercedes blowing up and his heart flew out of control. He darted into the restaurant, but did not go to the front door. Something made him turn and move upstairs toward the storage loft.

When he reached the top of the stairs, machine gun fire erupted in the office below and he heard what sounded like the computer screen imploding. He did not move when the firing stopped. Someone, maybe Keaton's people, had followed him. Downstairs desk drawers were opened and things crashed to the floor. They were searching for the CD.

He checked his pocket. Whomever was downstairs quickly left. Garrison thought it wise not to move and feared his brother might be dead outside. He did not hurry back down the stairs until

some of the restaurant personnel came running into the office. Bullets had torn through the office walls and the computer had, indeed, been destroyed.

" Damn!"

" Mr. Garrison! Your brother is dead! He's dead! They blew up his car!"

NOT, NOT RICHARD! NOT RICHARD! THIS IS MY FAULT, DAMN IT! THIS IS MY FAULT, RICHARD!

Garrison's mind overloaded. He still felt Richard's hand on his shoulder just minutes before. Richard's face back at breakfast faded into an odd scene of Christmas morning when they were nine or ten years old. There were brightly wrapped presents back at his parent's old New Jersey house. He closed his eyes and prayed Richard had been spared any pain.

" Listen Carefully." He kept looking toward the doorway. The machine gunner could easily come back. " I need you to get me away from here. Now!"

" Follow me out the entrance."

" No, I'm afraid someone will hit me. Get me out of here without being seen."

The waiter nodded and motioned Garrison out of the room. They went down a darkened side corridor and ended up in the kitchen. His brother's touch would not go away. They were nearing the back entrance when the door flung open and he looked a red headed middle-aged guy with an automatic weapon squarely in the eye. The gun slowly moved upward. Garrison tightened his mouth and prepared to be hit. But the waiter plugged him with a small handgun. The guy and the automatic weapon fell to the corridor floor.

" Damn!"

The waiter picked up the rifle as the busboys pulled out the linens and uniforms from a canvas laundry cart. Garrison hopped inside. " Get me the hell out of this area. To a bus or taxi. Out! Just keep pushing this thing!"

Someone threw some of the laundry over his body and the cart rolled across the bumpy tiles. They slowed and bright sun glowed through the canvas sides. Then the rollers hit the asphalt, producing a low-pitched hum as they gained speed. He sensed they

veered right. For ten minutes he awaited for the onslaught of machine gun bullets, but nothing happened.

The blue sky above hurt his eyes when they removed the linens. One of the busboys reached into the cart and helped him out. In broken English the kid spoke about a bus stop across the chain linked enclosed baseball field. Garrison nodded, checked for the CD and then sprinted across the street. The busboy and man in a white uniform, probably a dishwasher or cook, scattered.

Garrison jumped the fence and ran behind the stands. All the while he kept peering over his shoulder but there was no sign of any pursuers. Waves of grief were interspersed with old images of Richard. They wanted him dead because of what he knew or they thought he knew, which signaled he had that stumbled onto something significant.

He squeezed through a small opening in the fence. When he reached the bus stop, he stayed away from the bench and hid behind a telephone pole. For fifteen minutes he was a potential target and was about to break into a run when he heard the bus's engines at the road fork.

But something happened back at the laundry cart across the baseball field. Two men in jogging outfits, carrying guns alongside their sweatshirts, pulled out the linens and then tipped the cart over. Garrison stayed behind the pole as the bus chugged up the hill and finally came to a stop. He walked slowly across the sidewalk and up the bus stairs.

Once he had paid the fare, he rushed to one of the side windows. The two joggers had hurdled the first chain link fence and were sprinting down the first baseline toward the outfield. The bus had not moved and some older lady up front was arguing about her change. He clenched his fists and his stomach churned. The two men now concealed their weapons and neared the right field sideline fence.

They leaped the fence as the bus started up the hill. These guys might catch the bus at the next stop. They turned on the sidewalk and raced like Olympic runners along the cement. But the bus gained speed and had about a hundred and fifty yards on the two guys. Garrison moved up the aisle and leaned downward to the rear window. They were still racing after the bus. He shuffled back to the front. " The next stop. Where is the next stop?"

" What was that, sir? You really have to sit down."

" The next stop."

" Oak and Pleasant."

" Where?"

" Right over there, just hold your horses! I have to stop at the light!"

Garrison leaned down again and peered over a five-corner intersection.

" Run the light."

" What?"

" I said run the light!" He reached in his pocket and pulled out a hundred dollar bill.

" I'll be fired if I" The driver stared at the bill. " On the other hand we have to keep the patrons happy."

He pushed down the accelerator, cars swerved and horns blasted. Garrison looked behind. The two guys had not reached the hilltop. He put the hundred in the driver's uniform pocket as the bus slowly pulled to the stop.

" Thanks."

Garrison pried open the doors himself and jumped to the cement. He rounded the bus, crossed between the houses, fell to the dirt several times, but scrambled back to his feet. His side muscles ached as he scaled the fences and crawled through shrubbery, but the jogging pursuers were gone. He moved down the adjacent street hill. The two men would have caught the bus and he would be dead now, just like Richard if the bus had stopped at the light,.

THEY KILLED RICHARD, THE BASTARDS. THE NO GOOD BASTARDS. DEAD, HE'S DEAD... RICHARD! JUST LIKE THEY KILLED THE CAMPBELLS. WHAT ARE THEY DOING?

Garrison kept running even though his legs cramped. He could not stop and had to assume these people were still behind him. The CD jiggled in his pocket as he raced down the sidewalk like a runner nearing the end of a marathon. He had to call the paper before it was too late, talk to Hobson, and get some protection back in Los Angeles.

12

Grafton peered out a military helicopter window. He would be met by General Seville but was uncertain about Seville's loyalties. From earlier reports he had strong suspicions the General was talking to power brokers. It was paramount to gauge the General's intentions as things changed rapidly with the rebels advance less than thirty miles from the city.

Aagos's harbor, indented from the deep blue ocean, was dotted with football field sized black and red oil tankers of various registries. At this height the dark oil well derricks formed an intricate network across the horizon. The massive oil refinery works were south of the capital. He thought of everyone, vying like wild dogs after the oil stored in the huge white tanks. Foremost in his thoughts was the inevitable course set in motion with the Chinese. They would pursue him before he breathed the city's tainted air.

The chopper swung near clean-faced modern skyscrapers, most built within the last ten years, and older buildings were stained with industrial pollution. Decrepit shanties were crammed into every square inch of red soil and a fleet of dilapidated buses and battered automobiles pulsed along the roads and highways.

To the east were a few traces of black smoke in the sky but no immediate explosions. Umbutu's forces were unable to check the rebel advance inland and the Pangaeian President, who spoke to him less than forty-five minutes ago, was worried. Other reports claimed Seville had pulled government forces back to defend Aagos. Grafton was unsure how this move related to the Chinese influence.

Edgar Mitchell had insured Grafton's official mission was in place. He would depart Aagos in an F-16 tomorrow morning. The flight path, structured as recognizance, had already been transmitted to Colonel Manville back at his mountain base. At exactly 10:15 a.m., local time, he would push the ejection button, and parachute to a point fifteen kilometers west of Lake Shar and the mountain camps. At 10:19 rebel forces would down the F-16. Their

competency in launching missiles was the weak link. He had been assured by Mitchell of thorough training outside the country.

The news from the United States was out of his control and causing concern. It was very possible Garrison had a computer copy that might open everything to outside forces and at this point he was not sure whether the Peters had drowned in the St. John's River. The state police had divers out there all day yesterday. He had issued commands beyond that assumption, advising the FBI and adjoining states to have their people on alert. Not so subtle accusations about the Peters' complicity in the hotel shoot out were floated through informants, although the news services had not yet fully picked it up. The ripples would be incalculable if either Garrison or the Peters allowed the press to start digging. The helicopter circled one of the tallest buildings, a smooth white concrete facade structure built by Diversified International only three years ago. All of the government offices were housed behind tiny windows on the forty-fifth and forty-sixth floors, although the Presidential palace was located north of the city on the bay. The city faded as they descended and finally touched down on the roof's concrete pad.

Grafton looked out his window perch and grabbed his briefcase. Seville and Umbutu's envoys stood near the elevator doors. He had to convince these people the United States was firmly behind their government despite rebel threats. Agency policy was just the opposite. The engines were cut and the blades slowed.

He worried about the flamboyant Manville and how his theatrics might put the everything else in jeopardy. But his contacts with Colonel Manville were no longer the trickiest part of this trip. Whatever deals he made with the Chinese needed gingerly treatment. His career, no matter what happened, had now ended because he hesitated when approached by operatives. He turned, checked his Lugar and placed it back his shoulder strap.

The hatchway was lowered by one of the guards and Grafton moved ahead. Standing ten feet away was Ian Summer, the U.S. ambassador. A white man and two black men, all wearing military fatigues. Seville, in full military dress, circled around them.

Grafton walked with his hand extended. " General Seville."

This tall black man, his ego almost as large as his six foot five inch frame, smiled, his white teeth glistening as he shook

Grafton's hand. Grafton suspected the General, who might end up as his own ally in this wild scheme, was betraying Umbutu by not pushing the rebels back, but he doubted Seville was yet cognizant of Grafton's contacts with Chinese agents.

" Pleased to see you, Craig. Pleased to see you."

" You're looking well, General."

"I wish I could say the situation warranted such a description. Things do not look good here, Craig. I have to leave in half an hour."

" Is Aagos going to fall?"

" I don't know. If siege is laid, we can hold out for months. Nothing has hit the city and we still hold the high ground above the plains." He shook his head. " Everything is in abeyance."

Grafton nodded. It was within his power, once he began his recognizance mission, and had landed behind the lines, to dictate troop deployments to Manville against Seville, all the while he bargaining with the Chinese. He stared at Seville, contemplating what role this man would play in the next few weeks as events unfolded. He could end up as ruler of this country.

" May I present my Secretaries Piltz and Balfred." Grafton quickly shook their hands. " And of course you know Ian Summers."

" Our roving ambassador." Grafton smiled but he did not trust the son of a bitch. Three of his men had been betrayed by Summers in South Africa five years ago, but nailing Summers would have breached security.

" Craig, good to receive a high level operative out here."

Grafton squinted. Summers looked out of place in the military fatigues. All the men followed Seville toward the doors ahead. " My reports, General, tell me that the rebels have captured three village towns near Evoninka."

" One town has fallen, but they hold three. The battle rages as we speak." That was for show. " Your survey flight will leave at nine-thirty tomorrow morning. You will be flying the only operational F-16, Craig. We just are not receiving the spare parts from your country. We need to discuss more planes and more parts."

" I don't set Congressional policy, General. But I would like a look at the situation."

" These rebels do not understand that this country is on the rise. Oil production is soaring."

Grafton spoke quickly. " So are prices per barrel."

Summers and Interior Minister Piltz produced quick phony laughs. Piltz was making millions by skimming off Umbutu's tariffs. Grafton kept thinking of Colonel Manville's promise to get the prices down. Seville's policies, if he were to obtain power, were nebulous at this point.

They were marched by military guards into the elevator and descended into the skyscraper. Grafton sensed the duplicity as he looked at them and knew why he had not thwarted the Chinese overtures. He was tired of judging every man, summing up and accessing situations, and living in perpetual fear for his own life.

The car slowed and the doors rumbled open. Across the darkened corridor was a lavishly decorated set of suites overlooking the bay. From this angle none of the shanties were visible. The corridor doors were closed and Grafton sat alone, across from the others at a long teak table.

This was not just a meeting, laden with Pangaeon propaganda, but Seville's own brand of nonsense interspersed with

overconfidence. Grafton would hear the government line about the necessity of keeping high price levels because of the war against the rebels. It was all a game just like Seville's colorful fake military medals shaking on his green uniform.

Grafton produced a clear image of the country's topography in his mind. The fallen village was exactly thirty-two kilometers from the city along the main highway. Seville should have already counterattacked. Instead, he said the rebels were under armed and incapable of ever reaching Aagos. Leaning back in the chair, Grafton longed to leave the liars and the double crossers behind. He would assume a nameless identity on some remote Aegean Sea island and never be heard from again.

* * *

Once back in his suite he checked for bugging equipment. He located three crude devices deposited around the front room and the bedroom. By coming to Pangaea alone, he had not only boosted his credibility with Seville, but he fostered the illusion the

General was in control. He furthered the illusion by allowing them to listen his communications.

He walked to the window. At night the city looked remarkably modern, the poverty shielded in darkness. Out at sea the oil platform's red lights blinked slowly and the yellow tanker beacons crept across the still waters. He counted sixteen tankers and fifty-seven platforms. Those platforms were built by British companies and had been appropriated by Umbutu after he seized control.

The tiny transmitter inside his ear beeped softly. He leaned closer to the window. The eight o'clock satellite transmission commenced and the news was not good. Cam Pritchard rapidly lost his grip as events escalated. Garrison was still on the loose somewhere in California and the news media was circulating a story about the Peters drowning in Florida. Grafton needed to speak with Chinese envoys soon. He left his orders intact for both situations: Garrison and the Peters would be killed on sight.

13

Sam tucked the morning newspaper under his arm and carried coffee and donuts across the Kentucky truck stop. He and Nina wore baseball caps, stolen at a rest area in Georgia and their wrinkled clothes had now dried. The sheer panic of the last two days had not subsided and his stomach tumbled like an electric clothes drier on a perpetual cycle. The hotel shoot out was now a national news story, yet Griff still agreed to hide them in Paducah. The intrigue seemed to tantalize Griff as if he were involved in some college prank.

Sam was constantly thinking about St. Augustine and was convinced larger things were happening. Nothing else he owned or he and Nina did on vacation, other than snapping the bridge pictures, would have caused such a violent incident. On the phone Griff was oblivious to the photographs' importance.

Containing Nina was another problem. On numerous occasions, he prevented her from calling her parents back in

Marquette. She often screamed in the night, worried about Jason's safety and feared everyone would think they were dead. Sam figured the phone lines in Marquette were tapped and the town was inundated with press and others asking questions.

Nina creaked opened the phone booth door and set the coffee on the stainless steel shelf. She bit ferociously into the jelly donut. Her crystal blue eyes were bordered with thin little red blood vessels. He wiped the sugar off her chin.

" How long until Griff gets here, Sam?"

Sam looked down at his still functioning watch. " This thing is thirteen years old. When they said waterproof they meant waterproof." Nina just stared into space. " I give Griff another half hour."

" Can we call from his house?"

" Look... Let's regroup at Griff's."

" How the *hell* do we get out of this? I worry about our baby! People that think we're dead! I worry about us!"

As her hair whipped in the gust around and he steadied her shoulders. " Nina, we're going to make it. I don't know how,

but we will. Once those pictures are at Griff's house, we'll find out what's so important to people are trying to kill us."

" It might not be the pictures. Maybe we saw something at the beach or at the hotel. That next room..."

" Green Haze. That's what we heard them say." He gulped his coffee and opened the newspaper. There was nothing about the hotel on the first few pages but as he unfolded the paper, he found a wire story on page six.

" They're calling off the river search."

Nina held his hand and her voice was shaky. " I can't even believe we got out alive. If only they had left us alone. "

" I know."

" What pictures could be so bad that-"

" Could be anything. We'll have to wait." Then he thought.

" What if they think we're dead?"

" Who?"

" The clowns trying to kill us... Maybe they'll back off."

" They won't leave us alone until they find our bodies."

She finished the donut, wiped her lips and drank some coffee as she shook her head. " What difference does it make? What the

hell are we going to do? Even if we understand what happened, who do we call? How do we get help? If it's some radical group... Drug cartel. " She began crying again and he held her.

" It's all right, Nina. We'll figure this damned thing out." But he did not really believe his own words. Getting out of the path of these killers would was not easy. " If we know what we're dealing with..."

He held her in the moist air; the foggy acrylic phone booth the only shield against the outside world. Cars and trucks, spun up water clouds off the interstate. Sam saw no quick way out, but had to remain optimistic or the forces threatening their lives would consume him. At least Griff would be here soon and they would have the company of another human being.

* * *

They stood cautiously under a bus stop canopy for the next forty-five minutes. The drizzle persisted, but the constant feeling the men with machine guns would appear, frazzled his nerves. He sensed a great relief and security when Nina spotted Griff's shiny

red pick up moving into the truck stop. As they quickly ran through the rain. Sam scanned the area before flagging down the truck.

His old friend slowed and rolled down the window. " S.P., You look like hell... Both of you..."

Then he opened the door and moved outside. All three embraced near the dumpster. There were tears in Griff's dark eyes. Sam shook his hand and thought back fifteen years. He saw the young freckle faced kid named Mike Griffin, beer bottle in hand, riding up and down the elevators at the Michigan College dorm.

" Griff, after three days in the back of poultry trucks, moving vans, and on a motorcycle, it sure as hell is good to see you."

His pudgy friend, still freckle faced, looked confused and crunched his nose. " What the hell happened.? Those reports that you two were involved in that Florida shoot out."

Sam looked around and quickly ushered them back toward the truck.

" Griff, let's get out of here now."

Griff nodded and they climbed in the cab. He turned down the stereo's country music, the wipers started and he tore across the parking lot. " You said on the phone that someone was trying to kill you."

Sam was relieved inside the warmer, drier cab. " Country 103?" Griff smiled and looked over his shoulder as he pulled up the bridge ramp. As they crossed the highway, Sam held Nina's hand. " Griff, I can only guess what happened. We came back to the hotel and saw that someone had broken into the room. There were cops outside and we rushed upstairs to the third floor."

" Is that when they started firing?"

" No, we went to the room first."

Nina leaned forward as Griff zoomed down the ramp. " Griff, they took everything. All our stuff from the room."

" Why?"

" I'll get to my theories," said Sam. " Then we look in the parking lot and there's these guys out there going through the Saab. The trunk was popped and they're pillaging!"

" But why?" asked Griff.

" I think it has to do with my camera..." Griff peered over his shoulder again and merged quickly into the highway traffic. " So, the cops, of course go flying out of the hotel room and we follow them. The other guys from outside, at least I think it was them, open fire with automatic weapons. It was bizarre, Griff. We ducked back in the room, locked the door and went running into the next suite."

" That's the only thing that bought us time," said Nina.

Sam nodded. " Then they shoot up our room door. See, we're in the other room now. They run inside and we can hear them."

Nina looked at Sam. " Green Haze."

Griff tilted his head and raised his brow. " What does that mean?"

" Good question, Griffy. Good question. We heard them yelling they had to kill us or all of Green Haze is threatened."

" Sounds like a radical group."

Sam rubbed his eyes and looked at his friend. " I don't know. I've spent the last seventy-two hours trying to figure that out. It's a dead end and I don't have the information."

Sam described their escape from the hotel and the truck crash in the woods. His friend was astonished how they crossed the river and eventually escaped by hitching a ride on a huge motorcycle. Once away from the scene they were able to flag down a series of trucks and were transported hundreds of miles away.

" I was just casually shooting my rolls along the river that afternoon, Griff."

The truck moved quickly down the rain soaked highway.

" Sam thinks he photographed something to do with Green Haze."

" Or people. I remember some cars parked along the river. That might be it. I also saw some people, three men, talking on the bridge. And I took some pictures of the river bank after I switched lenses."

When silence filled the cab, Griff slowly turned up the music. Through the steel guitar twang he stared ahead. " It has to be the guys on the bridge."

" Yeah, yeah, we thought that, too. I want to know who those guys were and why they were on the bridge."

" Unfortunately, you'll have to rely on memory," said Griff.

" Wrong, Country Boy." Sam turned toward his friend. " I filled out lab mailers. I knew we were going to your house. The photographs should be arriving very soon."

" My house?"

Nina looked over. " Nobody knew we were seeing you. Everyone else thought we were coming back to Marquette on Monday."

Griff nodded and gazed down the highway. Like a strobe light the sun broke through the clouds and hit the landscape's blossoming foliage. " You guys need to call the FBI or something."

Sam grit his teeth. " I don't trust them."

" Call the news networks, S.P."

" And alert our machine gun friends?"

" That's true, but... you're trapped."

" Maybe..."

As a private citizen how would he track down the identities of three unknown men standing on a Florida bridge? If he had photographed one of the cars or someone in the city park the situation would be the same. Griff was right. They were trapped.

* * *

Griff's personality had not changed much since college fifteen years ago. He believed he could do anything. Already he was planning things with his vacant rental properties around the city. He still liked to brag and was prone to exaggeration, exactly what Sam thought he and Nina needed. Griff's company gave them an added security.

Griff was also making wild promises about what he could do with his computers. Ever since personal computers came en vogue, Griff had claimed he was an expert. Over the years Sam listened to Griff's expertise with IBM XT's, 386's, and 486's. When the Pentium chips came out, Sam could not stop his pontificating. Now he threw out buzz words and jargon Sam did not understand and kept rambling on about scanning pictures. But Sam was thinking more about survival and rolled his eyes as Nina rested her head on his shoulder.

By the time they pulled near a series of lime green and white aluminum sided triple deckers, Sam now remembered why he had

left the dorm his senior year in school and moved away from Griff's speeches. Back then he recanted a month later and let Griff move into his apartment. Maybe it was time now for Griff to return the favor.

Sam helped Nina from the truck. She looked fatigued and he suggested that they both rest. They climbed onto a creaky wood porch, opened the frosted glass doors and trudged up the staircase to the top floor.

The apartment's urethane wood floors, braided rugs, and flowery wallpaper were renovated better than he expected. The white trim was freshly painted and Griff had even placed plants around the place. Sam headed for the phone. He removed the mailer slip from his wallet and dialed the lab. But he quickly hung up and shook his head. "I don't dare check."

"I'll call you right away when the mailers arrive, S.P."

"I don't want them sitting in your mailbox, Griff. That leaves the door open." In his mind, men with guns waited behind shrubbery for that mail delivery.

"You're starting to make me feel paranoid. Have a little faith."

" I trust no one at this point," said Sam.

Nina's continued silence unnerved him. The dark circles carved under her eyes and her windblown hair gave her the appearance of a frenzied lunatic dragged off the street.

" You're safe up here and I don't see how anybody could track you down. I see you guys, maybe once a year?"

Nina's eyelids hung heavy as she nodded.

" Nina, let's get you into bed. Get some shut eye," said Sam. He brought her into the back bedroom, drew the shades and pulled back an old blue embroidered quilt. She sat on the edge, he took off her sneakers and socks and he helped her under the covers. Less than three days before they were romping in the hotel room bed, nearing the end of a perfect vacation. Now the world was closing in around them.

Sam shut the door gently and looked at Griff back at the kitchen counter.

" I really appreciate this, Griff."

" Hey, what are friends for?"

" This is above and beyond." He shook Griff's smooth skinned hand.

" They can track you down, given enough time." Griff put his hands inside his leather coat. " You don't even know who *they* are!"

" They're ruthless and want us dead."

" All because of some pictures of a bridge?" asked Griff.

Sam nodded from the window and pulled back the translucent shade. An auto body across the street was strewn with old cars inside a stockade fence and bordered by more residences along the road. The sporadic street traffic would highlight anything unusual.

" I don't know what else it could be. Nina and I live sheltered lives in a hick Iowa town. Why would someone be out to kill us?"

" Listen, I know some local people in one of my apartment buildings. Informants. Security people... They have connections."

" No, absolutely not. I told you. I trust no one."

" What about me?"

Sam smiled and hit his friend in the arm. " Especially you."

" Have I ever let you down?"

" Let's see..."

Griff grinned until wide his dark eyes became slits. " Come on, we've been friends for twenty years!"

" I'm not holding it against you." Griff leaned on the counter and had the far way dreamer's look. It was the same look he had at school when he was planning some practical joke at school like throwing paint balloons out of the dorms. " You know, we really had good times back at Michigan."

" Those days seem so simple now. Like worrying about your next date or what course you were gonna take next semester."

" You were going to open a studio in New York but you didn't want to do portraits."

" I still don't want to do portraits, but I've given up New York." Then he raised his index finger and thought. " You were going to be a broker on the stock exchange and we were going to meet for lunch in the financial district."

" Of Paducah."

Sam laughed. He had not laughed since he and Nina were at Domingo's. That seemed like years ago. " We both went back to our hometowns."

" Yeah, and you end up marrying your steady girl from high school. You're so predictable, S.P."

Someone kicked the outside door. Sam took three steps toward Nina's bedroom and wished he had a gun. With a swift knock, Griff went up to the door and Sam's heart surged.

" Who is it?" asked Griff, leaning forward.

" Mrs. Winters, I need to talk to you about the leak under the sink, Griffith."

Sam was still afraid once Griff opened the door the men would spray the place with their automatic rifle bullets. Griff slowly reached for the glass knob and turned it quickly. A small lady in a pink shawl stood with her arms crossed, adjusted her glasses and Griff gave her some line about sending an apprentice over to fix the sink. She said that she did not care who fixed the sink as long as it was fixed.

" I'll get him tonight, Mrs. Winters. I promise. If I can't get him, then call my office."

" I've been calling your office."

" Oh, well, he'll be there then." He slowly closed the door and she was gone. Griff looked startled as kept his back against the

door. " Now I know what you mean about people following you. It could happened any time, couldn't it? As I opened that door I just wasn't sure who would be on the other side."

" I wonder if I'll ever be sure again."

14

Being an only child, Pritchard liked being in charge. With Grafton overseas he handled all things domestic. Maybe when he was Grafton's age he would not relish the power the way he did right now. At age thirty-three, five years out of Yale Law School, he had risen fast and commanded a force of hundreds of men. He was a respected analyst with a capacity for bold action, but now he was in a bind that threatened his career and agency.

He walked briskly down the dimly lit corridor and entered glass walled organization room. Five senior and field logistics men were seated around small cherry wood conference table. At least Edgar Mitchell had not deemed it necessary to fly out of Washington and personally provide some impetus into the crisis. But Pritchard knew from a morning telephone conversation in his car, Mitchell was watching the domestic side of Green Haze very carefully.

He almost unconsciously pushed his hand through his curly hair, now wishing he had gotten a haircut this afternoon. They

were all studying his actions as he set his leather briefcase on the table. No doubt someone had tossed out premise about his being too young for the job. Or maybe his plans were too grandiose and rocked the conservative think tank mentality.

The large glass television monitors and map readout screens jumped with activity. Reports were coming in from all over the world. Most poignant were the explosions outside of Aagos, Pangaea. Rebels were closing in on the capital, bringing Green Haze to fruition. During the temporary lull he popped his briefcase. The domestic prognosis was not good. Roy Garrison had slipped their grasp in San Louis Obispo and likely possessed a CD prepared by the Campbells, containing detailed information surrounding Green Haze.

The second problem was the photographer and his wife. There was little doubt they had swam across the St. John's River and then disappeared. The fact two civilians were eluding a nationwide search was not looking good for his position.

He cleared his throat and Charley McCabe nodded at him. McCabe was a man who could see many facets of a problem and, unlike the rest of them, was not locked into a preconceived notion

about implementation. McCabe ruffled feathers with his sarcastic sense of humor and Pritchard liked that.

" Gentlemen." Pritchard pulled his field reports from the briefcase and set them on the table. " I do not feel as though our position is compromised at this point."

" That is a bold way to begin a briefing." Pritchard peered at Norman Sears' black-rimmed glasses and white hair. Sears forged a dignified image of an experienced brain trust member. " I hope that the facts will buttress that conclusion, *Pritchard.*"

Pritchard pictured Sears in his earlier years, when he could not hide beneath the glasses and the silky white mane.

" Garrison and the Peters have not affected Green Haze, Norman. I have just spoken with Craig Grafton in Pangaea. He is flying into rebel territory tomorrow. Before his aircraft is fired upon he will parachute to the prearranged checkpoint. Colonel Manville, himself will-"

The rotund Milburn De Villars, a hold over from the cold war, stood abruptly. De Villars hated Pritchard and was angered Grafton had taken him under his wing. He banged his fist on the table. His Georgia drawl cut right into Pritchard's stomach. " Son,

this is a domestic briefing. We all know what's going on with Craig right now. What his mission is."

" I understand that, Milburn." He wanted to call him sir. " My point is that all operations are going forward despite these domestic problems. I will address the domestic considerations momentarily."

De Villars, his chin beginning at his ears, leaned forward like a pit bull waiting to kill. He tilted his head, looked at Norman Sears and sat down. Pritchard wanted to give them both a swift kick into retirement. That day would come. It was just a matter of time. They knew it and he knew it.

" Craig will spend whatever time it takes with the Colonel... What was not discussed at your briefings was the domestic consumption of this operation. Papers have already been prepared for the media. Disinformation about the Pangaeian intentions will place the blame squarely on President Umbutu.

At the same time our people have prepared a list of Umbutu's civil and criminal abuses. The human rights people will carry this over the goal line. There is sufficient cause to bring this situation to international arbitration. President Umbutu, himself is dead

center in this. Our informants have provided substantial reports of torture and imprisonment of opponents. Secondly, if you check your briefing papers you will find an ledger sheet and the press will delve into this with their own people. We're talking about years of skimming profits out of the oil fields into the Pangaeian Presidential palace. This will sink Umbutu in public opinion polls. We have those poll results also."

He looked directly at De Villars. The information was detailed and perfectly gathered, yet the veteran analyst shuffled the papers on the table. Then he stood and activated monitor number three on his panel. " Let's put this thing in perspective, Cam."

Sears rolled a video graphic outlining the military situation in Pangaea as of eighteen hundred hours last night. In the north near Lake Shar the largest concentration of rebel forces was now marching west, toward Aagos. The newly captured towns were highlighted in red.

" I think we are all aware of the Pangaea situation, Norman," said Pritchard.

Sears did not respond. " Strategically, these towns would appear to have no value. However, with the concentration of arms

and men, they will, with the proper guidance, which Craig Grafton will provide, help secure Aagos. This is a major well-planned operation. Which is why I can't understand what's going on here in the United States! This couple and the reporter... We can't let them roam freely. They must be stopped."

" We are close," said Pritchard.

Sears grimaced again. De Villars' massive head rose like the burning sun in a stifling heat. " Mr. Pritchard... I would suggest that we get into the Garrison and Peters situation. Presently, Green Haze, and all its implications, is frankly threatened by what you do or do not do. My God, I'm worried. How do two tourists just evade all our domestic operations, not to mention the FBI and state authorities?"

Pritchard knew no matter what he said, De Villars was not going to like it. Neither would Sears, but now the more neutral Charley McCabe was ready to speak. McCabe was slightly older than Pritchard, under forty and had an open view of things. " I don't think Green Haze is threatened, Milburn." Pritchard owed McCabe for that one. " When they begin attacks on selected oil fields, Umutu will panic. Especially when they set the oil wells

ablaze. Most of the oil fires will be for our own domestic consumption and strategically will mean nothing. But it will force Umbutu to panic."

Neither Sears or De Villars were listening. McCabe detailed Grafton's second option involving pressuring Umbutu into dropping his surcharges in return for United States military aid. If Umbutu stabilized prices, the United States would turn on the rebels. But that strategy might lay the door open for other areas of influence by the Chinese and Middle Eastern power blocks.

When Pritchard finally spoke about Garrison, De Villars produced an almost imperceptible arrogant smile. "Garrison should have been killed twice. We're all aware of that. Let's look at the positive side of this. Nothing has been leaked to the press."

De Villars did not even look up as he spoke. "Has anyone speculated what was on the Campbell CD?"

"Yes, Milburn." He was ready for that question. "We will assume that Garrison knows the chemical breakdown of both the Pzyak Compound and Mortoxin."

"If he can understand it," said De Villars. "I know I can't."

" That is an excellent point. We don't want anything linked to our operations."

" My concern is Green Haze," said Norman Sears.

" We had better hope that nothing about Green Haze is contained on that CD, Norman," said De Villars. " Just the two products."

" And no names," said Sears.

Pritchard folded his hands. " Amen." The old man smiled.

Norman Sears stood, faced the group and thought before he spoke.

" We are talking about a high level operation not approved by anyone in official government. Never mind approved by our people, but what will the press do with this... bungling. This couple from Iowa should have been allowed to return to Iowa. The film should have been taken in a calmer and well thought out manner. Now we have dead local police, media coverage and two individuals on the loose. I really don't give a damn about what is on the CD. Kill Garrison. Kill the couple. Close the wound!"

Pritchard thought the situation was out of control because of Norman's Sears's convincing presentation and seniority. Sears was

not as concerned about Garrison, but wasted no words in criticizing the operation from the Campbell's house to the restaurant raid.

Pritchard interrupted. " Not to extend this argument, Norman, but our guys did their job with that gas line. The fact that Garrison happened out to his car-"

" Where was the back up? Never assume total confidence. Assume the worst, *Pritchard*."

McCabe spoke up.

" That is exactly what we are doing now, Norman. A search is underway in Iowa of all of the Peters' friends and associates. We are monitoring phone calls coming in to Marquette. In addition, our people are drawing up lists of anyone from the past. Any place they might have run, but the divers are still scanning the river in case they are dead."

" What about Garrison?" asked De Villars. " What about Garrison?"

" The same. Edgar Mitchell has made a personal plea with Roger Hobson of The Dispatch. He has agreed to cooperate fully with us. We had to pull a few strings to get him what he wants with

the FCC. But that's in place. If Garrison tries to call the paper, we've got him. People are standing by in Los Angeles. And briefing papers on his personal background and contacts over the past ten years will be on your desks within the hour. I am hoping that both problems will be solved before the end of the week. And if you're interested, Norman, we have already formulated dissemination campaigns against both the Peters and Garrison. It's just a matter of plugging in the people whom they contact."

McCabe had made his point. The meeting broke up with no more interruptions. Pritchard did not receive a handshake from either Sears or De Villars, nor did they confront him further. McCabe wandered over to him when the room cleared. Pritchard was concerned how much Sears and De Villars would disrupt his efforts.

" Feel like the faculty is against you?" asked McCabe.

Pritchard grit his teeth, almost smiling. He looked at McCabe's bright blue eyes and translucent beard stubbled face.

" Charley, I don't trust them. And I know Craig doesn't trust them ."

McCabe lit a cigarette. " Craig is cagey."

" He has to be."

" I'm hearing things."

" What things?"

" Well, I'm not sure yet. Craig may be veering from the official plan. You might want to watch him."

" Craig? Why?"

" Maybe old fashioned arrogance. Craig thinks he's above everyone else."

Pritchard closed his case and they headed out of the conference room.

" Keep me briefed."

" I will. At least you know when old De Villars is blowing stream. The same with Norman, but Craig... Craig is so good. So smooth."

" That's why Mitchell sent him in the thick of this. The Pangaeans never would suspect a high level guy like Craig would carry out a clandestine assignment. The rebels will rescue him gladly. He'll be saluted in the press as he lies like hell."

" Fun business, isn't it?"

Pritchard's lips curled. He stared at McCabe and said nothing.

Then he patted his friend on the back. " Thanks for bailing me out, buddy."

" Someone has to cage the tigers, Cam."

15

The handgun Griff gave Sam five hours ago was visible as a rough, half lit convolution atop the bedroom nightstand. Sam prayed to God he would not have to use it. He had only shot a gun once in his life, a .22 caliber when he was twelve years old during a boy scout camp out. The difference between aiming and firing at Mr. Watkin's silhouetted target and taking on those killers back at the St. Augustine hotel was enough to keep him awake.

Nina's face was deadly smooth and peaceful in the low light. He nudged her side so she stirred. Back in Marquette he slept beside her night after night as the days mundanely passed. When had he been able to step back and think about how precious she was to him? He longed to have Jason rocking in his arms again or to be slowly walking down to his Main Street studio and watch the sunlight through the trees along the way. How had things gotten so out of control? All long hours since the attack and he still was not sure whether the answers lay in the photos nor could he did

he know what actions to take or where to go. Griff had almost convinced him to use a local security person with contacts. This guy might hide them in safety while funneling any incriminating information to the proper authorities.

He stood and walked from the bedroom. Every noise outside threatened him and this house had a calliope of creaks and groaning pipes; not what he needed on a sleepless night. He shuffled onto the braided rug and gazed across the silver lit room. The counter phone was the link to the outside world. Only this afternoon he had held that receiver and almost called his father. Nina was more frantic about how her parents would take all the news reports. A new course of action was necessary once they received the mailers back from the lab. Griff had also mentioned somehow scan the pictures into the computer. His old friend claimed it would provide a good storage place.

The night passed slowly. He channel surfed, caught a brief news clip about the hotel shooting. It was all old news now and more of an enigma than a threat to the authorities. He leaned forward as a video swept the parking lot and showed yellow police lines and a shot of the Saab. Yet, the reporter summed up the story

by saying that both he and Nina were missing and presumed drowned in the St. Johns River. The report ended with the camera zooming out from bridge. By four thirty he realized sleep would elude him and stayed out in the living room. The burgeoning glow across the eastern sky transformed the outside neighborhood into recognizable forms. Griff was only six blocks away, but Sam was trapped in isolation with no exit.

* * *

He dozed in the chair between five and seven. A phone call from Griff stirred him as one of the morning news programs flipped across the TV screen. His friend was off to work but insisted he would be back home by eleven to catch the mail delivery. Sam wanted Griff to contact his security friend. Griff confessed he had already left a message with the guy's wife, and without getting into specifics about the St. Augustine affair, insisted the security guard call as soon as possible.

" I'm afraid this security guy will blow it. I feel so alone."

" You have to take the chance, S.P. You can't just stay in hiding the rest of your life."

" You weren't there, Griff." He held the phone like he was going to crush it with his hand. " You haven't been on the run from these bastards."

" Stu knows or claims to know everybody."

" You didn't tell him about us specifically, did you?"

" No... I'm trying to get him to return my call at this point."

Sam's eyes stung. They had to act now but he was afraid.

" Just don't tell him anything about Nina and me. Feel him out... I have to see those pictures. Assuming I photographed somebody who didn't want to be photographed... that's the crux of this. It can't be anything else. Damn it. Wrong place. Wrong time, Griff."

" It would be a matter of tracking down those people. Maybe talking rationally with them."

" I don't know if that's possible."

A long silence indicated Griff understood this was a very tricky matter. One mess up and guys with automatic weapons would descend over the area.

" Listen, S.P. The mail comes at eleven. I'll call you."

" I'll be here," said Griff.

" I'm sorry. I'm sorry this happened."

" Me, too, buddy. Me, too."

* * *

Nina sat with him all morning and stared at the TV. He alternatively dozed, waking with her arms firmly around him. It was his only security now. His former life, his studio in Marquette, all his clients and friends were washed away like some storm surged tide leaving only debris over an eroded shoreline. The worst part was the uncertainty. In desperation, he debated to divulge everything to Stu. But what could this guy accomplish? Taking the chance those gun-totting killers from the hotel was a risky venture. Maybe it was better to have everyone think he and Nina had died in the river. But as the days had passed, with no bodies bobbing up along the river bank, that scenario was less and less credible.

Nina was in the kitchen when the phone rang. She set down her sandwich, looked at Sam for a second and picked up the receiver. " Yes." Her face contorted as she shook her head. " What did they say, Griff? Are they sure?"

Sam crossed the room. " What happened?"

" No mailers."

" Oh, no." He grit his teeth and half closed his eyes.

" Griff wants to talk to you." She held out the phone.

" Griff..."

His friend's voice was clear and firm. " S.B., I called that lab. They insist that the mailer and prints was sent out the day before yesterday."

" Then where the hell are they?"

" I don't know... They put a tracer on it. Only after I insisted. See, they don't think it's that big a deal. They don't know-"

" I know they don't know. I just hope those bastards from Florida don't intercept this somehow. I can't take this waiting game much longer."

Griff could not allay Sam's fears and squelch the mounting frustration. He assured Sam he would personally check with the

post office later. Sam hung up the phone, but kicked the chair into the kitchen as he crossed the room. He shook his head and banged the wall. " Why did we have to be in Florida anyway?"

Nina seemed more in control. She scurried over and held him. Then she took his hand and they walked to the white tub, set on legs in the middle of the bathroom. She put in the drain stopper and turned the knobs. Water gushed from the faucet and she adjusted the temperature as the tub slowly filled. She slowly undressed him and then removed her tee shirt. This was not the act of passion like the hotel room. She grasped his hand again, but before they stepped into the tub, Sam ran back and retrieved the gun. He returned to the bathroom and put it next on a blue hamper under the window. They stepped into the massaging waters and their slick moist bodies slid against each other and down the porcelain.

He thought about Jason and simpler times as he locked his arms in place around her stomach as she rested her head against his chest. Somehow they were going to get out of this. She said nothing as he slowly moved the face cloth along her cheek and kissed her matted hair. He gazed out the window. An older

gentlemen with a shopping bag shuffled by the hedges next to the sidewalk. Sam looked at the gun and back outside. The older man continued along the sidewalk. Living this way, under constant threat, was pushing him to the edge, and he was not sure how long he could go on before he cracked.

16

The day was cold with the threat of snow when Garrison arrived in the high desert. He had hitchhiked from San Louis Obispo. Some kid in a small compact, returning from a spring vacation, brought him the last one hundred and fifty miles. All during the trip he was obsessed with the unfolding events. He had sifted it through his head a thousand times. Some branch or agency of the military had transported the VED. But who manufactured the Pzyak Compound and the Mortoxin? Lynette Campbell had linked the antidote drug with the disease.

SOMEBODY IS SPREADING THIS DISEASE AND THEN BRINGING IN THE DRUG. IT'S ONLY A GUT FEELING, ROY, BUT IT MAKES DAMNED GOOD SENSE. THEY'RE MAKING BIG DOLLARS IF THEY'RE ORCHESTRATING ALL THAT. WHO AND WHY? YOU HAVE TO PROVE IT FIRST. PROVE DELIBERATE OUTBREAKS... GOOD LUCK... AND LINK THE DRUG TO MONEY... FAT CHANCE. ... DAMN THEM.

He sent the kid into the restaurant to get supper while he ran across the rocky lot to the pay phone. He was still reeling from his

brother's death and fearing for his own life as he neared Los Angeles. The CD was still in his pocket and his anger surged. The only way to prove anything was to call Roger Hobson and get the paper working on this while he stayed in hiding. Then he would head out to Loretta's place in San Pedro find a computer. Five years ago she walked out of his condo but she might help him one more time.

He dialed The Dispatch, still trusting no one, and he disguised his voice as if he were from the Deep South.

" Dispatch." He did not recognize the woman's voice.

" Yes, Mam', would you be kind enough to connect me with Roger Hobson's office?"

" One moment."

Another line rang and he heard Hobson's secretary, Joanne, but was still afraid to reveal his identity.

" Roger Hobson's office."

" Yes, ah, Mam', Mr. Hobson, please."

" I'm sorry, Mr. Hobson is not in this evening. Whom should I say is calling?"

YES, ROY, WHO THE HELL IS CALLING? AND WHAT DO YOU ASK HER NOW?

" Oh, I see... Well, ah, let me talk to Roy Garrison then."

" I'm sorry , sir. We have no Roy Garrison working here."

" He writes a column for your paper..."

" Sorry, there is no Roy Garrison here."

" I see... Thank you."

He quickly hung up the phone and stared at the sinewy Joshua trees silhouetted against the high desert twilight glow.

IS THIS HOW THEY DO IT NOW? KILL MY BROTHER AND THEN STRIP MY IDENTITY? SOMEBODY GOT TO HOBSON. WHO WILL CARE ABOUT THIS INFORMATION IF IT CAN'T GET INTO A COLUMN? MY JOB... THEY TOOK MY DAMN JOB AWAY! IT HAS TO BE THE GOVERNMENT. SOME KIND OF CLASSIFIED BULLSHIT.

A few snowflakes brushed across his face as he stepped into the cool air. The kid's yellow compact was spewing moist exhaust into the cold evening air. He opened the door and got in the front

seat. The car was filled with the heavy smell of French fries and coffee.

" Who *are* you anyway?" asked the kid.

Garrison picked up the steamy hot Styrofoam cup. " I'm beginning to ask myself that question. Look, kid. I know you're headed to Fullerton, but I'll pay you fifty bucks if you get me to San Pedro."

" Sure." The kid bit into his burger and pushed Garrison's food across the seat. " I can use the money."

All Garrison's friends and contacts were useless now. He was in a giant chess game. Those people who wanted him dead would wait for the next move. Even the cops were a risk. Informants on the street might sell out. Going to Loretta's house, if she would let him in, was the only answer. Then he could head to one of the college campuses and find some chemistry egghead competent enough to interpret that CD.

The idea of someone removing him from the records sent his mind spinning. Who had put the word out to Roger Hobson? People read his bi-lines and columns and he could prove he worked at The Dispatch, but that was what they wanted him to do.

It was the old set-up. He was slated for death if he came running down there protesting their denials.

* * *

He trusted the kid but covered himself by being dropped downtown. Later, if some hard-nosed guy with a snub nosed gun grilled him, the kid would not know where he was headed. But they probably would figure it out. That put him on a timetable, racing against them. He had to unravel this VED and drug thing and nail those responsible before they got to him.

The air was warmer than the high desert as he started down the side streets and found Sycamore. This was where Loretta went after the relationship fell apart. All the time away, chasing stories that meant nothing now, had poisoned the relationship. He was told by a mutual friend she met somebody else years ago. As he walked alone, under the street lit palms, constantly checking behind, he knew he had let her slip away. For whatever reason, he might have fought her from leaving, but he never did.

Loretta had a small stucco atop a rising corner lot. He hurried up the cement walk, but hesitated at the red sports car in the driveway. Before he headed inside, he panned the neighborhood. Somewhere people must have worked furiously trying to find him. He marched forward. It was one of those situations requiring action and not thinking. He rapped on the screen door and heard noise inside. He saw Loretta, her hair now red auburn hair and cut short. In her pink jogging suit she looked good, better than he had remembered. The outside yellow porch light popped on. She peered through the screen and her mouth dropped as she opened the door. " Roy... are you all right?"

" Loretta... "

" Roy, you look like hell."

" Glad to see you, too. I know I'm intruding."

She kept looking him over. " What's wrong?"

" Loretta, I'm in trouble... Deep trouble."

She opened the door wider and motioned him inside. Garrison looked around the front yard as he stepped into her new surroundings. He gazed around the kitchenette with black appliances and she shut the door. She turned to him, her brown

eyes crisp and moist. He almost thought she missed him. " What happened?"

In the far room were small artifacts, music boxes and nick knacks from the past. But he did not see this so-called boyfriend. She was the woman he had once thought about marrying and she motioned him toward the red and white-checkered table cloth. They sat and she continued to study his face. In her eyes he saw a longing with no future. She slowly leaned toward him as he began the story, from the night he got the call from Lynette Campbell. Then he slowly sketched out what had happened and his suspicions about the VED and drug connection. Loretta waited through too many sleepless nights when he did not return from street reporting. But no story he had ever chased came close to this. She held his wrist as his voice cracked and he talked about what they did to Richard.

" I've stumbled onto something I can't get out of, Loretta."

" I'm sorry about Richard. I liked Richard. "

" Thanks. "

" Who is behind all this? "

" I need to get to someone who understands chemistry and drugs. If I can track down where this stuff is coming from, maybe I can figure out the larger picture. Listen, I know I'm intruding on your private life."

" If you mean my relationship with Gene, it's over. It's been over for.. awhile."

" Sorry."

" Don't be." She motioned with her open hands " Roy, listen. The only person I know remotely associated with chemistry or pharmaceuticals is Sara Humprheys."

Garrison snapped his fingers. " She worked with fish."

" Right she worked in the aquarium out in Laguna Beach. Lived in apartment 16B."

LAGUNA. WE WALKED HAND IN HAND DOWN LAGUNA, LORETTA. I REMEMBER THE SUN ON THE CLIFFS AND OUR FEET SINKING IN THE SAND. EVERYTHING WAS AHEAD OF US THEN. DAMN, THOSE WERE GOOD DAYS. NOT ENOUGH OF THEM THOUGH.

" She was a nice lady."

" Sara moved to La Jolla, the Marine Institute. If she couldn't figure out your CD, she could point you in the right direction. Or at least get you a computer."

" You don't have to help me, Loretta. I know that."

" It's good to see you, Roy. Things were getting kind of boring. I was just telling myself, gee I wish Roy would come by and be in some kind of mess that he couldn't get out of."

Garrison smiled. " Only problem is, this isn't your usual kind of mess. People are dying... My brother is dead. Loretta and... I don't want to be counted among the casualties."

17

Thin-ridged gray carpeting covered the darkened forty-first floor conference room. The long window span, overlooking the main highway cutting through Aagos, provided the room's only light. A selected group of people knew Umbutu, fearing the rebels would take Aagos, was in hiding and preparing to leave the country. Seville quickly assumed the premier role in defending the capital city. He provided everyone with intricately drawn maps and graphs, outlines of rebel troop movements. Within a few days, the General would be ready to launch a major offensive. All the maps made sense. The plan to surround the main encampments near Lake Shar and advance west was an easy but fool-hardy operation because Aagos and the government would fall long before the encampment battles.

Grafton held his gold pen between his fingers, his head propped, as if he were hanging on General Seville's every precious word. Seville, more than rest of them, might have sensed Grafton's duplicity. The General showed no indication he was aware Grafton

was working closely with Colonel Manville and the rebels. More of concern was whether Seville was cognizant of his potential Chinese dealings.

Seville let a large black man, claiming to be a munitions expert, give a report about tactical field weapons, but Grafton gazed out the window now and his mind was fixated on the next step of Green Haze. He would be inside an F-16 cockpit tomorrow morning, on a doomed flight officially billed as reconnaissance.

Seville's booming voice shook the room. " Craig, do you agree about those placements? Chinese weapons coming in across the desert?"

Grafton turned slowly as if his words were the only thing on his mind that afternoon. " Precisely, General. You contacts have done an impeccable job."

" We do not wish a confrontation with the Chinese."

" I don't think you have to worry about that, General. My reports indicate quite clearly the Chinese are not equipped for a large-scale operation. As you might surmise, they are in this for the profit as well as the good will motive. They have nothing to

lose by backing the rebels. They might have listened to Colonel Manville's rousing optimism."

Seville, his omnipresent medals glistening from red and gold uniform, stepped forward. He nodded and his dark eyes were moist. " Colonel Manville used to be a trusted aide and planner. Brave man. But now he wants only power."

" Everyone wants power, General," said Grafton.

" A man like that in power would mean the destruction of this country. What little gains we have made for our people would be lost in a seizure of power that would be catastrophic."

The shanty shacks defied the General's reasoning. These Pangaeans were crushed economically while the rich prospered in a sea of oil profits. Seville must have known that, but it was irrelevant. Grafton's thoughts shifted back to the situation in United States as some other inconsequential blowhard talked about the limited Pangaeon air force.

The fact Garrison and the Peters were not coming forward was a good sign the attacks had scared them away, but he was not so naive to think it would end there. Cam Pritchard's future hung in the balance. One slip up by Garrison or the Peters and teams

would move in. They all had to die: no exceptions. Grafton's fear persisted. All his activities, including his Chinese dealings, would become public if Green Haze fell apart because of Garrison or the Peters. He trusted Pritchard and Charley McCabe more than he did the old guard. It was not Pritchard's fault those field agents panicked and started shooting up the St. Augustine hotel.

Then he thought about canceled reception at the Presidential palace that evening. The oil fields were not yet attacked, but Umbutu was out of sight. Once Manville was in power Umbutu would be shot and the disinformation campaign accelerated. But now the Chinese had complicated the plan and may have secretly backed Seville. Grafton speculated they would next want Manville killed.

Seville spoke loudly. " Mr. Grafton, I would like you to come to my residence early this evening. Just a short visit."

" That will be no problem, General."

" I will have a driver at your hotel by six p.m."

Grafton nodded and jotted that time on his notepad.

" When do you leave on your recognizance flight?" asked the logistics man.

He turned his head. " I will be leaving at 9:19."

They all had serious yet self confident faces. Everyone present followed Umbutu and his impervious attitude to the outside world. Grafton gazed over at the peasants below, in colorful garb, moving around the shanties. Umbutu and the rest of his crowd had raped this backward country.

* * *

When he arrived at Seville's cosmopolitan home, the Pangaeon version of Blair House in Washington, D.C., Grafton was emotionally charged and ready to fly out in the morning. The limousine stopped near a mauve canopy with military markings. He looked up at the gray-green mansion's long clear louvered windows. Three uniformed men stepped to the curb, checked the area and opened Grafton's door. He quickly moved under the canopy.

Inside, an elegant woman with a British accent and sandy hair to her shoulders greeted him. She called herself Mrs. Collins. Tall and thin, she wore a flat dull gown matching the house's outside

color. She escorted him into a bright sitting room with wool carpet. They sat upon a leather settee and one of the servants brought hors d'oeuvres and a champagne on a silver tray.

" General Seville is fond of the cheese and crackers," she said.

Grafton produced a half grin since there were no cheese and crackers on the silver tray. " As am I."

He was not sure whether this was related to the Chinese proposal.

" Tell me, Mr. Grafton, does your work take you out of Washington often?"

Grafton raised one brow and studied her dangling gold and emerald triangular earrings. " Only when I am in search of hidden things, Mrs. Collins... Are you a friend of the General's or just a fixture?"

" Call me Marva. And the answer is correct on both counts. The General's wife and I are good friends. From before the revolution."

" I see."

At that moment Seville, filling his dark suit like a cake that rose over the baking pan, strutted into the sitting room with three

aides. He introduced them quickly. But Grafton memorized the names, faces and features. They were all young men; lean and at attention.

" I was thinking it might be a good idea, Craig, that you and Mrs. Collins get to know each other."

" My pleasure."

" You are gracious," she said.

It bothered Grafton he had no background sweep on this woman and he did not like Seville playing matchmaker. He was sure he had seen Mrs. Collins either diplomatically or socially when she was younger. The General was trying to somehow guide him into the Chinese thing. Seville would not be so stupid to approach him directly. There would be hints and intimations enticing him to take the bait. Umbutu, even in hiding, would have his people watching him, too. He doubted Seville was working directly for Umbutu, but he discounted nothing.

They walked into the formal dining room inundated with older historical pieces, an original Picasso and area rugs from the Middle East. " I wanted you to see my residence. It is important you not view me as a second fiddle to a Third World President."

Grafton said nothing. He could see tiny sweat beads forming across Seville's dark forehead. " You see, the President had his own way of doing things. He always has. Tunnel vision can get you in trouble. You need a world outlook. Play the various forces against one another."

" A formidable game, General."

" Yes." They passed into a tiled kitchen with towering ceilings, dozens of glass cabinets and a black slate counter top. Grafton still was not exactly sure what Seville was up to. " Umbutu says it and it comes to pass. No discussion. No alternative views. This country needs diversity!"

He brought Grafton and the wafting Mrs. Collins up a glossy wood rear stairway, sharply winding upward to an intersection of halls on the second floor. Here were smooth porcelain vases, and more paintings. An oversized gold and crystal chandelier was spread above the main stairway marble slabs.

" An impressive residence, General. You have earned it, sir."

" Thank you. I have arranged for you to spend the night."

" I feel I must decline."

Seville raised his finger as he glanced at Mrs. Collins. " I insist."

" Very well."

" And I do wish you pass onto your President the extent of Pangaeian hospitality. We are not all like Umbutu."

Grafton parted his lips. " Well, I must say I am not as privy to the President's ear as you might think."

" Modest. All men have ambitions, don't they?" He turned to Mrs. Collins. " And women."

She cautiously raised her brow. " Agreed. All men have ambitions."

Now Grafton remembered her. He had seen her in Saigon, 1970 after the Cambodian incursion. She went by the name of Ballard, wife of a guy who had made a fortune dealing on the black market with the Chinese. She disappeared when Ballard was caught and killed. Rumors abounded she had turned Ballard in and got his money. This woman liked money and high living, and she was on the prowl again.

Seville rambled for another fifteen minutes but never mentioned the Chinese directly. " I want you to remember that, Mr. Grafton. There are ways to take care of all men."

Grafton debated whether to respond at all. He had the urge to knuckle this guy up against the wall and set him straight. The Chinese needed Grafton, the only person with both the means and position to promote the Chinese ends to remove Manville. But they must have already started paying off Seville.

" You can be more direct than that, General. Don't play me for a fool."

" No, I cannot talk now. And I would not begin to play you for a fool, Mr. Grafton. They will deal with you soon. Listen to them. It will be worth your while. Soon, I assure you."

Mrs. Collins latched onto his arm and Seville continued the tour as if nothing illicit was said. It was as if the General were a child overcome with simple desires, but as an adult he was coveting what could only be won with blood. Pushing Seville into power in the middle of a popular uprising where he was despised was a neat trick. Colonel Manville and the rebel front, with his

covert support, would take this capital in days. Ubutu would be dead and so would Seville unless things changed drastically.

18

Pritchard was five miles from his Maryland home when he got the call from the office. Two people who worked in front of consoles analyzing data all day, were requesting to talk immediately about the Peters case. The call went through, clicked and he heard an Fred Schulman, a guy performing this type of technical experience since the Viet Nam War.

" Fred this is Pritchard. I hear you,"

The signal was strong on the higher wattage channel.

" Cam, John Donnelly brought this to my attention and I made the call actually to our Cincinnati office."

" What happened?"

" Some security guard named Rohask in Paducah has called FBI informants and had them run checks over the wires about Sam and Nina Peters."

Pritchard looked in the mirror and pinched his lower lip.

" Could be a police nut or something like that, Freddie?"

" Maybe, but there could be more."

" Agreed." He continued to stare at his dim image in the mirror, his glasses reflecting the oncoming headlights, and knew he was about to turn around and get back onto the beltway.

" Okay, let's do this: I want three logistics men back in my office in forty-five minutes. While I'm on my way back, I want you to check *everything* concerning Peters or his wife's background. We have to cross this guard with them."

" You sound as though you have the same gut feeling I do, Cam."

Pritchard nodded in the car. " Yeah, let's just track it down. Exhaust it. There's too much riding here." He spun the car around on the asphalt, screeching the tires as he headed back. Regrets flowed freely now. The shootout in Florida should not have happened. Grafton's guys should have gotten the bridge film and that would have been the end of it. Now two people were running scared and threatening the Green Haze Operation. He had to close that gap and at the same time get Garrison before Grafton got back from Africa.

* * *

Charley McCabe, dark mustache carved into his round face, stood with the taller Fred Schulman. He pointed at Pritchard and waved a teletype in his hand. " Cam, we have something."

" I was afraid of that, Charley." He took the yellow paper in his hand. The type was crisp and referred to the University of Michigan, graduating class from fifteen years ago. There was a brief run down of Sam Peters' campus activities from the photography club to the swimming team. " Son of a bitch. That's how he did it. Of course, he swam that river."

" We were so busy going over his Iowa life, we glossed over Michigan. Cam, we can forget everything on that page except Mike Griffith and his home town, Paducah, Kentucky."

Pritchard looked up slowly. " Well, well, well."

" And guess who this security guard works for?" asked Schulman.

" MGG Enterprises, Mike Griffith."

" Okay, let's put it together, Gentlemen." He walked out ahead of Schulman and McCabe. " What's Craig's status, has anyone been briefed yet?"

He heard Schulman's high pitched precise voice again. " The plane should be going in eight hours. Weather looks good."

" He's got balls bailing out of that F-16," said McCabe.

" Nobody ever said Craig Grafton didn't have balls," said Pritchard.

" What if somebody screws up and shoots down the plane with him in it?"

" We live in a world of things getting screwed up, Charley. Look at our end of Green Haze, trying to contain all this. After we settle things with Peters and his wife, we need to find Garrison. That is a priority. I'm not ruining my career. I want it wrapped up before Craig gets back."

" If Craig gets back," said Schulman.

Pritchard turned. " He'll be back, Fred, you can bet your next year's salary on that."

Schulman chuckled. " I don't get a salary, Cam. This is all service work."

19

Griff called before driving to the triple-decker. Sam waited at the window when his friend arrived around suppertime. With the warm bath and a few hours sleep on the couch, his mind was clearer. But he still held the gun tightly and he put his ear against the door as his friend climbed the steps. Even when Griff called from the hallway, Sam stood back and sent Nina into the bedroom before he let him inside.

Griff looked at the gun. " Don't get too paranoid, S.P. I don't think they're looking for you. I really don't. None of the law enforcement agencies have anything-"

Nina stuck her head out the bedroom doorway. " How do you know that Griff?"

Sam scanned the outside hallway, shut the door and turned to Griff.

" You've been talking to your security guy, haven't you?"

" Yeah, they all think you're dead."

Nina joined them. " What if he tips somebody off?"

" Exactly." He turned to Griff. " That's what I'm afraid of."

" You guys need to chill out. I think you should come over to my place. You can't stay bundled up here for the rest of your lives."

" I'm waiting for a call from the lab about the damned mailer. They were tracing it."

" It's past six. They're gone for the day. It will be here tomorrow. Come on, I've got pizza on the way. And I want to do some things with the computer. This Green Haze thing. Let me float that out there."

" Is that safe?"

" Anonymous web site. Now, let's have some pizza. What do you say?"

Sam looked at Nina. The urge to live a normal life again was overwhelming.

" Going over for pizza won't put us in jeopardy."

" I keep remembering those guys running out of the Saab with drawn machine guns," said Nina.

Sam nodded, but he agreed with Griff. " Two hours. Get us back here by eight. And we'll listen to what you have to say about the computer. Can you input the photos into the computer?"

" Oh, yeah, I can do that... Transfer them with the FTP software to the site and let them sit. You're talking world wide web, S.P."

He looked at Nina. " Let's go with him, Nina."

A large crease formed between her brows as she nodded.

" Eight o'clock, Griff. Show us the computer and then we're back."

* * *

Griff's scanner looked like a small, flatbed photocopier and worked in conjunction with the computer to duplicate whatever was placed on the inner glass surface Griff said he could store photographs into the computer memory or send them to web sites. Sam leaned over the counter as Griff's family picture in front of the Christmas tree scanned and a few seconds later some elaborate software package transformed Griff, his brothers and sisters, the kids and his parents onto the color monitor.

" How does it do that?" asked Nina.

" Who the hell knows? All I know is that it works... Watch this." Griff clicked the mouse and the picture rotated. Then he blew it up, so just his parents came into view. He took out the red eye effect from the flash and a few moments later, the tree disappeared. " Who's the photographer now, S.P.? You ought to get one of these things for your business."

" I'm living in the dark ages just shooting my landscapes, Nina."

" So, you can do this with Sam's bridge pictures if they ever arrive?"

" Yeah." He clicked the mouse again and the screen changed as the computer dialed the access number to the Internet. " We're going to put this on my web sight. I have access over the ISP."

" The what? Hey, I still have an old electric typewriter," said Sam.

Nina poked his side. " Behind the times."

Sam grinned and bit into a large slice of cheese and pepperoni pizza. The time over at Griff's place was helping them forget what had happened. They talked freely about the old days

again. Griff recounted some stories that Nina had never heard while he did some more work with other photographs, installing them on the web site. When he finished with the computer, he wrote something on one of his business cards.

www.mgg.com\
www.mg.com\
www.mt.com\
post-it

" These are some of my web sites. You can post messages where it says: post-it. And you can chat." He handed the card to Nina. " She won't loose it."

Sam grinned. " You're right... Okay, we get the relevant pictures on the site. Then what?"

" Stu Rohask will have people look at the blow ups. If we can find out who the bridge people are, we might be that much closer to reasoning this out with someone and letting you guys go back to Iowa. At the least you'll know who to talk to."

Sam nodded, stepped back and crossed his arms. " And we can give them the damned prints, even the negatives. As long as they are in the computer. "

Griff cleared the screen. The computer connected and the modem produced modulated beeps and then screeched as it connected. " If you guys want to go back."

" What are you doing?" asked Nina.

" I'll use the search engines. It may take awhile. I'm going to see if I can find anything on this Green Haze thing."

Sam wanted to know if that was prudent. Griff kept reassuring him that no one would track him down. He would find anything even remotely resembling Green Haze on the web. Sam was getting nervous again and wanted to leave for the triple decker apartment. Griff agreed to take them back and they planned tomorrow's activities. At eleven a.m. he would return

from his office and pick them up. They would drive back to his house and get the mailers.

* * *

Sam feared another sleepless night. Fatigue was cumulative and they snuggled under the covers within minutes after Griff brought them to the third floor.

" Sam, I don't know any more. I don't know..."

" A hundred hours ago we were on the beach, Nina... We have to find out who those guys on the bridge are. That's the only way we're going to get out of this."

In the blackness and silence, the street lights slowly brightened outside the window. Sam gripped the gun with one hand and draped his other arm over Nina's back. Her long blonde hair spread over his shoulder.

" We've been together a long time, Sam. Except when you were away at school."

" I remember when I first met you. I was in eighth grade and you were standing across from me at the Junior High dance and I said I'm going to marry that girl."

" No, you didn't. Liar."

" You're right. But I liked your hair. It was long even then."

" So, the story goes."

" Yeah, and I thought it was so weird when I talked to you I didn't get that butterfly stomach."

" I did."

" You never told me that," said Sam, half sitting up.

" True."

" But you were always easily to talk to, Nina."

" So, what did you do? Ditch me after that dance. I didn't see you for two weeks."

" I like to keep women on the hook." Sam smiled. " We dated right along but it wasn't until later... that I really cared about you."

He told the story slowly in the cold darkness. His high school friend, Calvin Williams had wanted to go skating at the rink on the state highway. Both he and Nina were away for four years. When

he saw her on the ice, effortlessly gliding along as he slid out on his oversized hockey skates, he was captivated. She had matured not just in a physical way; although he did notice her long legs, tight white sweater and wispy blonde hair. It was the way she conducted herself when he talked to her later at the snack bar. They had both become more sophisticated with the same Junior High innocence. In some ways it was as if he had never left the dance.

Her arms tightened around him and she pulled the quilt up almost as if she were hiding from the outside world. "Damn, that was so long ago, Sam and I do love you so much. And here we are... trapped... away from Jason and everyone. On the run from forces we don't understand. I don't know how much more I can take."

He nodded and kissed her cheek. "I liked the way you kicked up your legs when you skated by."

"I knew you were watching."

He kissed her lips, crawled on top of her and whispered softly as he placed his hands along her smooth skin. "I'm still watching."

20

Sam looked up at the ceiling. The sun had risen long ago and the brilliant mid morning light across the room stung his eyes. He had slept deeply. Nina's eyes popped open and she smiled. He kissed her hair and forehead. " Why is it I think we're going to get out of this?"

" Maybe we will."

He turned and pulled his watch from the night stand. " Ten past ten." He fell back against the fluffy pillow and looked up at the ceiling. " The mail comes in fifty minutes."

" At least we can see those damned pictures. What do you think about storing them like that?"

" I don't even understand all that. I still want the prints, Nina." His stomach was pumped with adrenaline now. So many things could go wrong. Just because no one had confronted them since Florida did not mean pursuers were not lurking. He took Griff's card from the stand. " First web site: [www dot mgg dot com.](http://www.dotmgg.com)"

" Who the hell came up with this anyway? Why could it just be a number like a phone number or a name? "

" I don't understand it either." Sam set the card next to the watch. " At least Griff understands all that. He's a good guy. After all these years to just drop what he's doing and help us."

" I think he kind of likes the excitement."

" We could do with a little less excitement and a lot more Iowa. I feel bad for everybody back home, not knowing whether we are dead or alive. My father is a strong guy, but-

" My parents must be talking to Reverend Stevens. I know they are. My mother must be freaking. Poor Jason. Poor Jason. Oh, God, I want my baby back..."

They lay in bed for another few minutes. Sam rose first. And he went directly to the phone and dialed Griff's house. It was early for his friend to return, but it was worth taking the chance. Waiting for those pictures was now unbearable. He tried a second time and when the line kept ringing, he returned to the bedroom to tell Nina he was taking a shower.

" You want to use it first?"

" No go ahead, Griff will be by in about half an hour."

Sam usually took a long shower but this morning he rushed and so did Nina. As eleven o'clock approached they were watching TV and he had begun the habit of pulling back the shades to check for Griff's truck. For the next fifteen minutes, between watching Gilligan's Island and calling Griff's house.

He went back to the phone at twenty past the hour and decided to try Griff's real estate office. Three office people bounced him between phones but he soon found that Griff had left the office at ten thirty and reported he was going to his house.

" Damn!" He dropped the phone back in place and checked the gun in his pocket. " Something is wrong. Griff is supposed to be home. Let's get out of here."

He grabbed by the forearm and headed for the door. But she stopped him. " Let's suppose something *is* wrong. Do we really want to be walking right into it?"

" We need those pictures!" He pulled back the chain and unlocked the door. They bounded down the stairs. When he saw the outside light through the storm door, he took out the gun and panned the yard. From the shrubs to the side street he saw no movement; nothing unusual.

Nina leaned forward. " If somebody got him, it's not going to make any difference. If everything is all right, we can reach him by phone later."

" We're talking about my buddy out there. He could be bleeding to death in his truck."

Sam pushed the aluminum latch and the door creaked open. The fresh air filled his nostrils and they moved onto the cement walk. Again, he checked the area. His heart thumped against his ribs as he moved deliberately through the shrub opening and onto the sidewalk. Somebody could easily target them right now.

Every second was filled with the constant threat of being followed and he was not going to take any chances. He steered Nina through a series of back yards before emerging on an adjacent street. Even there, he looked for any cars waiting or people that might be out there, but everything was quiescent in the suburban neighborhood.

They linked arms down a cracked sidewalk along a chain link fence and ranch houses. The dim sunlight was giving way now to a bright sun, higher up in the blue sky, casting shadows through the burgeoning tree buds.

The pictures, obtained after hours of thought and weighing the photographic information carefully, were his best guess. He had also been through the entire trip in his mind, wondering if they had seen anything out of the ordinary. Everything happened quickly only after those pictures were shot. They would have confiscated the film in the car if he had not sent out the mailers. Those machine gun guys had swept through everything. Nothing he or Nina had bought was of any value nor of a dubious nature. Only the film was a liability. He prayed they had not figured out where he had mailed the film.

They reached the corner and he peered around a huge oak. A single compact car with an elderly woman leaning forward toward the windshield, chugged toward him. Still, he stepped back.

" I can't keep living like this, Sam." Nina watched the car stop at the corner and then they continued.

" I know. I know." Sam was still alert as they crossed the road. " I hope he's all right."

Sam approached Griff's contemporary cautiously from behind and scaled a small chain link fence abutting a row of taller green shrubs. The swimming pool covered with blue plastic was

just ahead. He studied everything across the yard and along the vertical gray wood boards. The windows were dark.

" Let's get to the mail box."

They raced along the side lawn, darting in and out rows of trees, toward a huge bush beginning to flower near the house. Griff's truck was parked behind the fence. Maybe he had just arrived. But Sam's eyes fixated on the mailbox.

" I'm going to check the box first."

" Sam, I don't like this."

He tightened his face and scurried along the fence. Like a vaulting runner, he scaled the fence just before the truck. He rushed up to the mailbox, but the metal container was empty and he retreated quickly. " Nothing."

Nina hugged against the building. " Now, what?"

" I don't dare go in from the front."

" Let's call or-"

" No, we need those pictures, Nina!"

Sam kicked in the cellar window and then unlatched it. He swept the glass away with his shirtsleeve and helped Nina inside. Then he lowered himself into the dank, half lit basement. He

gently rubbed his finger along the gun trigger. With his other hand behind Nina's back he headed for the stairs. She started to say something, but he shook his head.

The dim light gave way to darkness and he had to feel his way up the banister as she held his shirt. When he thought he had reached the top he reached for the knob, slowly turned it, and light hit his eyes. He brought Nina into Griff's front foyer.

The place was too quiet as they moved over the gray tiles. He peered around the empty living room and toward the front door's yellow sidelights glowing in the morning sun. They both turned and climbed the white-carpeted stairs up to the upper level kitchen. He dared not say anything as the gun shook in his hand. Why was the truck out there with no one in the house?

Once at the top, they slid precariously toward Griff's rear office. At the corner a man in a gray sweat shirt burst into the hall with his weapon drawn. Sam fired once. The man collapsed onto the blood splattered white rug.

Nina grabbed Sam. " My God! My God!"

Sam pulled her behind the wall, but no one else came out. Where was Griff? He scooped up the larger gun and gave Griff's

handgun to Nina. Slowly he went forward, turning into the office. His friend was in a dark business suit and a bullet had pierced the smooth skin above his Adam's apple. The computer and monitor were smashed and an empty yellow and red photo mailer lay on the floor.

" Jesus... Griff." He wept openly, backing a hysterical Nina into the hall. The dead man on the floor had a coiled earphone cord spiraling down his sweatshirt. " This man is some kind of government agent."

" Sam!"

Sam stood and retreated to Griff's office. Except for the blood all over his suit and rug, Griff looked as if he were asleep. Sam cried again, his hands shaking as he reached into Griff's pocket and dug out the truck keys. He gazed over his old friend one final time. The front door slammed against the wall as he stood. He thrust out the larger gun. For a moment he hesitated, but then he jumped into the hall and fired. Three guys in suits dove to the floor. He pulled Nina toward the rear sliders and heard someone yell as he slid the doors across the track.

" We can deal, Peters! We have the pictures!"

Sam knew better than to believe them. He and Nina raced across the deck, leaped over the railing and sailed onto the grass. His mind buzzed with options as his friend's dead body flashed through his thoughts. He ran with Nina across the yard and turned near the lilac bushes. Someone was running around the house. He gripped her hand and headed for the next street.

" We're going back."

" Use your head, Sam. We can't fight them!"

" The truck."

Short wave radios blasted around the house. He paralleled three men crossing the backyard and then ducked behind an evergreen hedge along the adjacent yard. They sprinted to the truck. She slid across the front seat as he started the engine, shifted quickly and skidded down the street.

The side windows exploded and bullets punctured the truck's metal exterior. He pushed Nina face down on the floor. In the mirror the men in the suits were lined across the road and firing as if they were at a midway shooting gallery. Sam spun the truck around the corner. Two black and white police cruisers blocked the road.

Why were the cops involved in this? He whipped the truck one hundred and eighty degrees, jammed the brakes near the sidewalk and shifted again. The cops moved out. He pushed the pedal down, almost swiping an oncoming car as he tried to out run them.

" Nina, they've tipped off the cops!"

" They have the pictures!"

Sam wove through traffic, forcing cars off the boulevard. He turned into a golf course access road and crossed onto the green itself. Nina screamed as they raced down the fairway. " They want us dead, Sam! We have too much on them!"

He felt guilty for having gotten Griff involved as he drove toward the club house and looped behind a dumpster. A bottled water truck was backed to the clubhouse's rear door.

" Out! Out of the truck, Nina!"

The truck doors flew open and they ran around the dumpster. A kid in a sweatshirt lugged two large plastic jugs into the clubhouse. They rushed up the truck ramp and squeezed behind the bottle water jugs. He positioned himself next to Nina near the front wall. At least fifty jugs separated them from the rear doors.

A short time later the kid returned and hurled three empty containers into the truck. The door rumbled downward, shutting out the light. Sam held Nina against his sweaty body as the truck, resonating with loud bass music, backed up. Hidden in the darkness, they had bought a few minutes precious time.

* * *

After the driver removed more water jugs at the next stop, Sam helped Nina through the stacks. They stepped onto the busy city sidewalk. His thoughts were muddled with Griff dead and the police now involved. They scooted off the main street and he faced Nina in a side alley lined with small boutiques.

" Nina..."

She clung onto him. " I'm so sorry, Sam. I'm sorry this whole thing happened. God, I don't know what to do."

" Those pictures were our last hope." He pretended to walk along with her as people approached. " I killed one of their people. That's the pretext they'll use. We're screwed."

" No... We can't think like that. You've done nothing wrong. We've done nothing wrong. You snapped the pictures and we know that's what they wanted. Maybe they'll back off."

" Yeah, if I hadn't shot that guy," he said.

" He would have killed us. You had to kill him."

They walked along the boutiques. " Then we get out... We just keep going, Nina. We keep going and we don't stop."

" Jason... won't have parents..."

She cried against his chest. Before he had the promise of finding out the identities of the men on the bridge. Now, they could keep running, but it was just a matter of time before they were caught and it all ended.

21

Grafton would rely on rebel timing. His jet climbed higher into the skies over Aagos, sweeping in a huge arc over the azure ocean prior to the trek inland. His mission was as clear as the orange digits counting out the elapsed minutes on the panels before him. Through the glass bubble the land horizon tilted into view again and he slowly began his acceleration east. The course was exact, the topography etched in his mind months ago. Outrage against Umbutu would be heard around the world when this jet was downed. It would bring official U.S. money to the rebel cause. Manville, with Grafton's guidance, would begin the final push toward Aagos.

All his well orchestrated planning, now seemed inconsequential. He wanted to perform his mission and get on with the Chinese proposal. Nothing had come out of the meetings with Seville and Mrs. Collins. She could smell money in the air. Some old friend, perhaps Seville, himself, must have alerted her to the deal but she

said nothing about all evening. Only later did she mention working with him, which was interesting since the Chinese had not directly approached him to consummate the deal. The longer they waited, the more people would know about it. Maybe Collins was watching for somebody else.

He was far enough inland now to see Mt. Ramoun bulge over the khaki landscape. Lake Shar, bright and blue would soon be nestled between mountain and desert to the north. In twenty-two minutes he would be ejected skyward and allow the rebels to destroy the F-16, beginning an international incident.

Anxiety continued to plague him as he studied the tapering hills along Ramoun's western escarpments. His career blurred like the green fields now moving below the jet. He had graduated from Ohio University and went to Viet Nam as a First Lieutenant. They thrust him into intelligence and he went along as a lark. But he found he was a proficient executioner of covert instructions, thriving on the danger. Being on the edge led him to the Chinese thing. Part of it was money, and being burned out, but more tantalizing was the challenge of evading those brilliant career strategists like Edgar Mitchell, who were already circumventing the

Administration. Grafton's disappearing with millions would be the ultimate coup.

He could not return to Washington once he successfully engineered Seville into power, but he was certain the powerful Umutu had no idea his chief general was plotting against him. Washington nor the oil people would have Presidential preferences as long as the oil and profits were flowing. It would be a well thought out, staged performance once the rebels threatened the wells and actually took control in Aagos. The oil interests would be finessed and a fine pressure applied once Mitchell's man, Colonel Manville, was dead. Grafton would then convince Mitchell and the others Seville was the only choice to keep the oil flowing.

The observation radar atop Mount Ramoun was a useless piece of equipment since the threat to Pangaeian security came not from the skies but on the ground. Specific landmarks along the lake were clearer now, a tiny fishing village with wooden wharves extending from the sandy shore. The village itself was obscured by the denser foliage near the water, although he could see the red soiled lake roads and the main road cut to the mountain

settlements. The rebel encampment was reached by winding pathways through the dense jungle growth up the hills.

The jet's shadow crossed a long beach spit. Fishing boats skirted the shore. The lush shoreline was once a haven for tourists staying at The Retreat, an exclusive club for the elite. Now overrun by the rebels, its abandoned lake side bars and algae laden pools were left to destruction by the local boys, supposedly fishing the lake. The jet was due within two minutes to veer east, over the mountains and above the savanna. The plan called for an elongated loop, bringing him back as a perfect target over the lake at the reduced speed.

The steep mountain ridges were like pointed rock swords below. He checked the clock and brought the craft eastward. Soldiers were in place with weapons procured by his own agency, manufactured in the Far East and funded illicitly. The jet started the swing over the savanna. In ten minutes he would be on the ground, but without theatrics. A group of hand picked soldiers would quickly whisk him to Colonel Manville's mountain headquarters.

Apprehension seeped into his thoughts. When he returned he would seek out the Chinese and define exactly what they wanted. As the jet reached it's apogee, he pondered the domestic aspects of Green Haze and how Sam and Nina Peters and Garrison, still at large, threatened everything. Those guys in St. Augustine should have gone after the film and not the Peters and his people should have killed Garrison back at the Campbells' house. He closed his eyes and prepared to eject.

He was breathing erratically like some incompetent novice. The lake was in full view, a spreading blue expanse under puffy clouds. Maybe it was guilt or the weakness of being sucked into the Chinese thing. They would now target the jet from the ground. He checked the outside the window. The landmarks were lining up almost perfectly to the computer projection and satellite photos he had memorized back in his office and the mountain bordered the foothills down to the lake and jungle.

He squelched all radio frequencies and counted down the seconds out loud as he activated the ejection mode. The bubble enclosure blew off and he was thrust into the sky. The shock was greater than he had envisioned as the jet's mighty engines thrust

forward. He floated and soon sensed a tug as the orange nylon fabric fluffed above him against the blue sky.

The jet moved slowly westward like a riderless horse through the sky. As he held the chute straps ground flashes preceded smoky trails shooting upward. The sleek silver jet was hit below the fuselage, splintering into a fiery mass spreading outward across the sky. Larger chunks within the expanding black smoke, careened toward the ground.

He gripped the straps and his legs swayed as he scanned the ground now, but he was farther west than he had anticipated. Manville's people would visually track the chute and a low wattage beacon would give them his exact location.

He had jumped into situations like this so many times. The important thing was staying clear of the trees and he steered the straps, bringing his body on a direct course between the bushy clusters. He sauntered across the air currents toward the tops, brushing the wispy branches as the sunlight faded and he sank into the jungle morass. The undergrowth rose upward and he tensed his bent legs. He hit the dense bushes hard, snapping a few branches with his boots as he thumped against the forest floor.

The chute was an orange tangled mass and the rope lines were twisted in the branches. He snapped loose, scrambled to his feet and quickly wiped his scraped cheek on the fabric. Removing his gun, he retreated to a tree clump on the hill. The radio beacon was activated. It was now a matter of waiting.

* * *

One hour fifteen minutes had passed and confusion would abound in Aagos and possibly in official Washington. Enough witnesses would confirm the explosion and coupled with Mitchell's disinformation, Umbutu would be accused of shooting down a United States diplomat. He smiled for a moment as he looked up the hill. This incident, its true nature only known by a select few, would reverberate around the world. The jungle silence was broken by noises beyond the orange chute. He fanned the gun as he turned. A small patrol circled out of the foliage and weapons were pointed at him. He counted nine unfamiliar men, some of them Oriental, clad in the camouflaged rebel uniforms, following Roland James toward the tree clump.

James wore a camouflaged cowboy hat held in place by a tightened brown cord under his chin. " Little off course."

" You..."

James smiled, revealing his chipped yellow tooth and bright red gums.

" Are you ready for retirement, Craig?"

Grafton was in no mood for small talk. " I give you less than half an hour before Manville's people arrive here."

" Understood. Does the name, Chun Suun Waan mean anything to you?"

Chun was a high level Chinese operative in the African theater. His nefarious background extended back decades and over the globe. " I know who he is. What's the deal?" Grafton looked at the distracted Orientals, their guns still trained on his head. " Tell your hired warriors to lower their weapons."

James yelled out something in Chinese. Then he casually lit a cigarette, put his foot up on the tree trunk as he grinned at Grafton. " Nervous, Craig?"

Grafton thrust his leg into the air, cracking James' shoulder, the gun went flying, and he hooked his forearm around his neck

and tightened the hat cord. James' men lifted their weapons as Grafton pointed his own gun against James' temple. " You don't taunt me, you understand that, you little blood sucker?"

James' red face reflected abject fear as he nodded and produced a choking garble. " I... under... stand."

Grafton took his gun and released the cord. " Now, you tell me the deal or I'll kill you right now."

" Five million American dollars in a Swiss account."

Grafton kept the gun at his head. One of James' men moved his rifle. Grafton fired, knocking the guy to the jungle floor. Then he swung the gun back into James' skull. " You call these bastards off!"

He yelled in Chinese and they dropped the rifles.

" Do they want me to bring Seville to power?" James hesitated and Grafton pulled the hat cord again.

Grafton held the cord, but not as tightly. " They do want Seville in. You can convince the U.S. of that, but you have to get rid of Manville."

" Interesting." That would be another nifty trick. Killing Manville was an easy act, but selling Seville to Mitchell would be

harder. Grafton pictured Seville escorting him around the mansion last night. The most difficult problem would be convincing the rebels Umbutu's general was now their leader. Only Grafton was in the unique position to accomplish that end. " You tell Chun that I don't even talk to you unless that five million becomes twenty-five million. I want two million up front in Aagos before I do anything and I want Swiss account numbers, which I *will* verify. If any of those conditions are not met, the deal is off. You got that?"

" Yup. But how do I find you?"

" You found me out here." He then grit his teeth. " One more thing. Who is Mrs. Collins and who is she working for?"

" I don't know a Mrs. Collins."

He ground the gun into James' temple. " Wrong answer."

" Okay, she's working for herself."

" What does she know?"

" That I don't know."

Grafton let that answer simmer. Then he dragged the gun back and tucked it inside the leather strap. James moved his head around and rubbed his chafed skin. He said nothing more to

Grafton and headed toward his men. The patrol picked up their weapons and filtered back into the jungle.

A new life had opened up before him. In the Pangaeian wilderness he had proposed a deal allowing him to disappear forever. His career meant nothing now. It would be an arduous task to get Manville in power and then kill him. He would need to sell Seville both to Washington and the rebels. Grafton leaned against the trees. This was no set up. The five million had only been the first offer and he was convinced, given the profits to be reaped, his proposal was just a routine money transfer for Chun. He began to dream of places around the world. He would plan his disappearance perfectly, establish a new identity and live a life without the constant pressures of life and death.

22

The chirping birds hidden in the bushes beckoned Garrison back in time as morning broke. Combined with the smog layer east of the city, the San Pedro air produced a brilliant crimson display across the morning skies. Loretta listened so patiently last night when he told his story. It felt like the old days.

He watched her earlier as she poured the almond blend into the coffee filter. But the old days were gone. He was running for his life now and ever-persistent thoughts of sudden death preoccupied his thoughts more than the loss of her relationship. When they were together, he had wanted to come and go when he pleased and expected her to fall in line. It was only now, with forces poised to kill him, did he realize he was not fair to Loretta.

As she finished brewing the coffee, he stared at the clear CD case, the obscure chemical formulas invisibly stored in bits and byte. Examining the contents and reviewing it with someone competent in chemistry was not just an intriguing part of an investigative story. Garrison was in a battle for life, knowing he

had to find the source of these compounds and link them to that van in the desert. He was in impossible positions before and leveraged people, commonly called blackmail, into seeing things his way.

SHE LOOKS GOOD. SHE NEVER COMPLAINED AND YOU THREW IT ALL AWAY, YOU MONKEY. BUT SHE'S SHIFTED GEARS. NO WAY SHE'D GIVE YOU A SECOND CHANCE. SHE GAVE YOU A HUNDRED SECOND CHANCES. YOU'RE RIGHT IN THE THICK OF MORE PROBLEMS. JUST LIKE BEFORE. SHE STILL LOVES YOU, ROY, BUT THERE AIN'T NO WAY SHE'LL TAKE YOU BACK. IT'S TOO LATE AND YOU PROBABLY WON'T SURVIVE ANYWAY.

" How was the couch, Roy?"

Garrison turned. She had that same misty morning look he had taken for granted all those years they were together. " I was so tired I could have slept on cement."

She handed him the coffee mug, light, two sugars just as he liked it. " I did some thinking last night."

" Wait... I'm sorry I burst in here. Wasn't like I came back to see how you were doing. I came back because I wanted something.

I'm sorry. " He shrugged his shoulders and then sipped the hot coffee. She always kept it hot despite the excess milk.

" I'm sorry about Richard."

He nodded and felt the anger surge. Stopping whoever was waging this campaign against him was essential and he had to decipher the CD. He turned toward the window and longed for her touch, but as he looked at her across the table, he again was aware it was not going to happen.

* * *

After breakfast, on her way to work, Loretta drove him to an isolated bus terminal off the freeway. They engaged in small talk. He hinted at returning, yet she never offered. She talked to Sara Humprheys at the Institute. Sara had located someone at the Institute with a chemical background, but Garrison was increasingly cynical about his ability to utilize the CD information.

He kissed Loretta's forehead and squeezed her hands. Tears rolled down her face as he released his grip, turned and climbed the bus steps. As he moved down the aisle he saw her through the

tinted windows, gazing upward from the terminal platform. Like him, she was probably wondering how things had gotten so messed up.

He sunk into a soft high backed seat and expected to see her gone when he looked back toward the platform, but her eyes caught his and he slowly raised his hand. She waved back and then crossed her arms over her red dress. Loretta entered the terminal and peered from behind the glass. The bus engines started and Garrison leaned back against the head rest, afraid keep looking. But he was drawn to her as the bus backed away from the concrete platform. Her image swung as the bus looped around the lot. Then he pushed his head into the seat, locked his arms over his chest and closed his eyes.

YOU BLEW IT, ROY. SOMEHOW YOU'VE GOTTA FIND HER AGAIN. YOU HAVE TO COME BACK. WHAT HAD EVER BEEN MORE IMPORTANT THAN LORETTA? ALL THOSE LATE NIGHT STORIES? LOYALTY TO THE PAPER? FINDING THE TRUTH? AND NOW YOU'RE LEFT WITH NOTHING, ROY. NOTHING.

* * *

Sara Humphreys moved her petite figure around her office desk. Her short gray hair, precisely cut matched the color of her dress, and her round silver rim glasses, beveled for reading, gave her the perfect academic appearance. She was a proper lady and in charge of several departments at the Marine Institute.

Sara walked him out of the office and up the stairs to the fourth floor.

" And how is my Loretta?"

" Loretta looks well."

She turned from above. " Are you two-"

" No, no. Loretta and I... Well, we went our own ways."

" I see."

Sara seemed to view the relationship like an old building or city fixture being torn down. " Perhaps, you'll get back together."

" Perhaps the Titanic will float back to the surface on its own accord." She was unmoved by the attempt at oceanographic humor and walked him to an office at the end of the corridor. She glanced and smiled as she prepared to unlock the office door.

" Maybe it will, Roy."

She slowly opened the door and popped on the overhead florescent lights. When he caught sight of the computer, he thought of his dead brother and the Campbells. Sara pranced across the office like a show horse, turning on the computer as she sat down.

" You may use this office as long as you want. Professor Morton is scheduled meet you here at three p.m. He can help you with your CD."

" Thank you. This is very nice of you, Sara."

She smiled as the screen ignited with color and then she motioned him to sit at the console. " It's all yours."

" I appreciate this."

APPRECIATE? THIS STUPID THING COULD BE OF NATIONAL IMPORTANCE.

" Not at all. You tell Loretta I will have to look her up whenever I get back in the area. If you have any questions, please, I'm at 3026."

" Okay."

He shook her bony hand, she smiled and hesitated. " Roy, she's really a nice girl."

Garrison nodded. " I know... I know, Sara."

" Good luck."

He listened as her heels clicked over the vinyl corridor tiles. Once the hall was silent, Garrison closed the door, locked it and rushed to the window. He peered through the old fashioned dusty wide blinds. Thick green vines and bright flowers lined the boulevard. A few cars were at the parking meters and professorial types walked the sidewalks between classes. He feared being followed and did not want to spend too much time in one place. Staying on the run would keep him alive. He would talk to Morton and then leave.

He shut off the overhead florescents and positioned himself in front of the screen. After a long breath he removed Lynette Campbell's CD from the case. He pushed it in the drive and again was confused as the same complex array of chemical formulas popped on the screen and looked at the clock. Another half an hour and Morton would be able to make sense of this.

* * *

Precisely at three, someone knocked at the office door. Garrison stood, blurry eyed and walked to the door. " Yes."

Through the wood door he heard a clear voice. " Mr. Garrison, I am Professor Morton."

Garrison nodded as relief swept over him. It was as if Morton was about to steal him all the answers to a difficult test. He unlocked the door. Morton, a tall gray haired man in a crisp beige suit, walked upright into the office. Garrison thought him snooty but well mannered. " Mr. Garrison, I understand you need some help."

Garrison nodded. " Help? I need to increase my brain cells, is what I need to do." He shut the door and locked it as Morton caught sight of the screen.

" Sara talked about a chemical formulae. I have a biochemistry background, but must say I'm quite deficient when it comes to pharmaceuticals." He walked up to the screen and set down his briefcase. " Interesting."

Morton seemed intrigued by what he saw and he smiled.
" This is Viral Endoplasmic Disease."

" Ah..."

" Deadly if not treated quickly." He sat down and clicked the mouse quickly as if he were on hyper drive and looked as if he

understood what he was viewing. " Pzyak Compound. The antidote."

" Professor, who makes this stuff?"

" I don't know, but that's easily found in any Pharmaceutical book. Or if you're on the computer, the Internet."

" Is that everything that's on this CD?"

" Yes, just a breakdown of the chemicals. Having the antidote is a very lucrative proposition."

Garrison stroked his chin. He had thought of possibility. " I would venture to think thousands could be made treating VED with the Pzyak Compound."

Morton looked up with a sly grin. " Thousands? Pzyak Compound is a very expensive treatment, Mr. Garrison."

" Is VED a common disease?"

" Sporadic outbreaks. You could find that on the Internet, too."

" Let me ask you this and it may seem stupid."

" No, no, like I tell my students, no question is stupid."

Garrison leaned forward and stared at the tiny viral strains winding across the screen. " Okay, can you breed this stuff, I mean, grow it in the lab?"

" Why would you want to?"

" That is a good question, Professor."

" Well, yes, like any type of bacteria or virus, it could be grown for vaccines or experimental purposes."

OR DELIBERATELY SPREADING THE STUFF AND BRINGING IN THEIR OWN ANTIDOTE. THAT WAS IT! THAT WAS IT. THAT'S WHY THE VAN WAS HEADING NORTH. FLY THE STUFF OUT SOMEWHERE AND INFECT PEOPLE. BUT WHY? OTHER THAN THE OBVIOUS MONEY ANGLE.

" And this thing can be deadly?"

" From what I've read, flu like symptoms, loss of fluids and consciousness within forty-eight hours and then death."

GROVER MOSES.

After a short silence, Morton looked up. " I'll be in my office for another few hours or so if you have any further questions."

Garrison nodded. " Thank you, Professor. Really."

" What's going on here, Mr. Garrison?" Morton stood, squinting at the screen. " Sounds nefarious."

" It is." Garrison walked Morton across the office and opened the corridor door. He shook the professor's hand. " If I were you, Professor, I would just look at this as a consult."

" And forget the speculation?"

" Yup."

Morton pursed his lips and cautiously nodded his head once. Then he walked down the hall. When he entered the stairwell, Garrison quickly shut the door. The Internet was the answer. Those chemicals were manufactured by somebody. He sat down at the desk and pulled the CD and clicked for the web connection. As the line dialed, he walked to the window and checked the lush foliage along the street. The modem sounded and he quickly returned to the seat. The first thing he did was to search for worldwide epidemics over the last eighteen months. He leaned back in the chair as the search engine page downloaded

OKAY, ROY. YOU FIND THE COMPANY AND YOU PROVE THEY OR SOMEONE IS PROVIDING THAT COMPOUND TO OUTBREAKS. SO WHAT? WHAT

THE HELL ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT IT? THEY'VE GOTTEN TO HOBSON. ANYONE ELSE WILL EVENTUALLY GET WORD BACK TO RICHARD'S KILLERS.

He opened his eyes and the screen was filled with options. His first action was to access outbreaks of VED on a Canadian medical web site. What he found during the next few minutes was astonishing. In seventeen places he found sporadic outbreaks of VED, all in minor cities, mostly in Third World countries. Each of the outbreaks had an accompanying story describing dozens dead, including men women and children. Twenty-four people had died in Jabalpur, India. It was odd that nothing seemed related. He clicked the mouse. The dozens were adding up to hundreds.

THE BASTARDS. WAS SOMEBODY DELIBERATELY INFECTING PEOPLE? NO CONCERN FOR LIFE...

He pulled a plastic wrapped diskette box from a shelf under the monitor and ripped open the plastic. It was time to download all this stuff. After inserting the floppy, he clicked again. More remote cities popped up with the same story: Piraju, Brazil, Njombe, Tanzania, Lahore, Pakistan... It was important to plot the

outbreaks on a world map. He was about to return to begin the downloading when one of the stories stunned him.

Pzyak Compound, manufactured by Prescott Pharmaceuticals, was being shipped in to Nong Khai, Thailand last January. Prescott was lauded for discounting the compound to local authorities. They could afford to discount it if they were selling the stuff at each outbreak site. In Merauke, New Guinea twenty-three children were killed and a total of thirty-seven in San Julian, Argentina.

THIS IS INCREDIBLE, ROY, BUT WHERE'S THE PROOF? NO BIG NUMBER OF DEATHS. JUST ENOUGH TO GET THE DRUG IN THERE. PRESCOTT COULD BE JUST AN INNOCENT BYSTANDER TO THE ACTIONS OF THE MILITARY. EVEN THE PREMISE OF THE MILITARY MANUFACTURING THIS IS SHAKEY. JUST BECAUSE THEY CLEANED UP THE MESS IN THE DESERT DOESN'T MEAN THEY WERE INFECTING PEOPLE. WHY WERE THEY TRANSPORTING IT AT ALL? AND THE OUTBREAK SITES ARE SCATTERED. NOT CONNECTED BY ANYTHING EXCEPT RANDOMNESS AND THAT MIGHT BE SIGNIFICANT. YOU'RE SO UPSET ABOUT RICHARD, ROY, YOU'RE LOOKING FOR ANSWERS.

He down loaded the entire file on VED outbreaks onto the diskette. This conspiracy would have worked nicely if that van had

not flipped over and popped open the VED vials. He tried to see Prescott's perspective. But the van was carrying vials of the VED and the military emerged out of nowhere to clean it up.

THEY TRIED TO KILL YOU IN THE CAMPBELL'S HOUSE AND THEY KILLED YOUR BROTHER. IF IT WASN'T THE MILITARY, THEN WHO THE HELL WAS IT?

He went back to the web and this time he searched for Prescott Pharmaceuticals. Going to the press would get him killed. He pushed the wood chair back over the tiles and paced the room.

GET IT TOGETHER... YOU CAN GO DOWN. YOU GO DOWN AND THE STORY GOES DOWN. YOU NEED PROOF THIS DISEASE WAS PLANTED. HOW WOULD THEY DO IT? ACCORDING TO THE READOUTS, IT MIGHT BE AS SIMPLE AS DUMPING IT IN THE WATER SUPPLY. SOMETHING IS VERY WRONG HERE.

He leaned against the window and pulled up the blinds." They killed Richard. They killed the Campbells. They have to be doing something with this disease." Then he hit the window casing. " Son of a bitch!"

23

The Prescott Pharmaceuticals site was loaded with products, specifications, and marketing literature. Forty-five minutes passed until Garrison found his first relevant piece of information. Prescott had plants and warehouses around the country, but the Bakersfield plant concerned him. A van leaving Bakersfield, heading for the military reservation would not pass near Merced on the interstate, but directly through the town on state highway 15. And Merced was between the plant and the military reservation. The information nudged him closer to the allusive proof he needed, but these were only spots on the map and linking them to Prescott or the military was tenuous.

He continued reading the marketing and product information. Pzyak Compound was explained in both layman's terms as well as the same type of complex chemical readout Lynette Campbell had given him. Just how much additional information she had accumulated after she mailed the CD to Richard's house, was uncertain.

Garrison leaned forward in the chair, running his thumbnail along his teeth, and he clicked through the hundreds of pages of detailed information. Fatigue and stinging eyes caused him to miss paragraphs and possibly relevant information. The hunger pangs in his gut told him he needed a break. It was after six o'clock when he turned the phone book's yellow pages. Although he believed he had traveled to La Jolla in anonymity, he was afraid to leave the office. He ordered a large meatball sub with provolone, some French fries, two ice cream sandwiches and a large coffee.

Then he sprawled on the couch, folded his hands across his chest as he waited for the delivery. What was the connection? Pure profit was a good motive for Prescott, but what bothered him was how quickly the military truck arrived on the scene with the Mortoxin.

WHY NOT CALL PRESCOTT IF YOU'RE DRIVING A PRESCOTT VAN? THAT WAS THE LINK, UPROVEN, BUT GOOD ENOUGH FOR SOME FANCY SPECULATION. WHERE WAS THE MONEY FROM THE PZYAK COMPOUND GOING AND WHO HAD CALLED THE MILITARY? AND DID THE MILITARY HAVE A FINANCIAL STAKE OR CONNECTION IN PRESCOTT? THAT WOULD NOT BE ON THE DAMNED WEB SITE.

With the rap on the corridor door Garrison stood and first checked outside the window. In the twilight a small red delivery flag jutted up from the blue Hyundai still idling outside the building. He flipped off the monitor and unlocked the corridor door. An auburn haired young girl in a blue uniform held the white food bags in her hand.

" The sub, fries and ice cream sandwiches. And coffee."

" Thanks."

Garrison swiped the receipt, ripping the cellophane tape off the bag. He took out his wallet, pulled out a crumpled ten dollar bill and told to her keep the change. For a second she glanced at the blank computer screen and then at him.

" Keep the change. "

She half smiled and headed out. He longed to be that age again and removed the pressure from his life. Garrison locked the door. Then he spread out the French fries and turned on the screen again. He munched meatball and tomato sauce in his mouth as he began reading the site. Prescott was broken down into

dozens of drug related subsidies. He mixed the coffee and lifted the cup to his lips. This was going to take time.

* * *

Through the long night Garrison wandered between the couch and the computer screen. He sifted through voluminous but irrelevant information. It was 3:35 a.m. when he checked his luminous blue watch dial and rolled off the couch again. The office was dimly lit by the screen's yellow and red graphics as he staggered back to the chair and yawned. He stared at the marketing program for some decongestant drug called Corplex. Steadying himself in front of the keyboard, he tried a new approach and moved out of the consumer product section. Prescott was a public company, with stockholders and records. Perhaps a close look at the company reports might yield something.

Each of the plants around the country had separate accounting systems and income allocation. He gravitated to Bakersfield summary because of its proximity to Merced and the

VED spillage. For forty-five minutes he went line by line but found nothing and fell asleep at the keyboard.

* * *

The early morning sunrays scattered under the office door when he awoke. He stood, his stomach growling and walked to the door. The sun burst into his eyes through the corridor window span. Squinting, he leaned against the glass and stared into the courtyard. The hummingbirds hovered, wings imperceptible in the air, next to the garden feeders.

YOU KNOW PRESCOTT MANUFACTURED THE ANTIDOTE, ROY. BUT THAT'S THE ONLY HARD EVIDENCE YOU HAVE. THE MILITARY THING WITH THE VAN IS SECOND HAND INFORMATION, PROBABLY TRUE, BUT SECOND HAND. LINKING BOTH OF THEM TO OUTBREAKS IS SPECULATION. IF YOU WERE REPORTING YOU WOULD KNOW IT WAS SPECULATION. YOU WOULDN'T PRINT IT. YET YOU BELIEVE IT. YOU BELIEVE PRESCOTT OR THE MILITARY SPREAD THAT DISEASE AND CLEANED UP THE PROFITS. IF NOBODY WAS DEAD AND THEY WEREN'T TRYING TO KILL YOU, ROY, YOU MIGHT SAY IT WAS ALL INNOCENT.

" Damn..."

He spun around and marched back into the office. For a moment he wondered whether Prescott was chartered for the military in some way, but no one in their right mind would set all that up on public records. Or would they? He shook his head as he looked out the window and knew he would solve nothing with the information he had on the CD and the floppy. Having breakfast now would be the smart thing to do.

He returned to the desk, popped floppy and placed it in his pocket. Figuring this thing out was not impossible, but as he knew years ago as a street reporter, without the facts he had no story. He shut down the computer and monitor before he left the office. The sunlight along the corridor windows stung his eyes as he moved to the outside stairwell.

THIS IS SIMPLE, ROY. FIND OUT WHO RUNS PRESCOTT. THAT'S QUESTION NUMBER ONE. FIND OUT IF THEY COULD MANUFACTURE THAT VIRUS. AND PROVE THE OUTBREAKS WERE DELIBERATE. AND WHERE DID THE PROFITS GO? WHO BENEFITS? PRESCOTT... THE ONLY OTHER POSSIBILITY IS PRESCOTT IS INNOCENT AND THE MILITARY INFECTED THOSE AREAS. BUT THAT ISN'T RATIONAL. YOU DON'T GAIN A MILITARY ADVANTAGE BY INFECTING THE POPULACE OF PLACES NOBODY EVER HEARD OF. BUT YOU DO MAKE MONEY.

DAMN, PRESCOTT MUST HAVE DONE IT. THEY MUST HAVE MADE THE VIRUS, TOO, BUT IT'S ALL HIDDEN.

As he waited in a line near the McDonalds register three late model sedans turned into the parking lot as if they were surrounding the place. Who could have followed him here? He stepped out of line, dodged several patrons and pushed the front glass doors. Once outside, he leaped past cars in the drive up window line and then sprinted toward a perimeter link fence. He had prayed he would make it over that fence before they got him.

THOSE BASTARDS, THEY DON'T WASTE ANY TIME. SCREW THEM. SCREW THEM. THEY KILLED RICHARD. THEY KILLED THE CAMPBELLS.

He waited for the bullets to lace his clothing. It was one of those moments with no time to think. He vaulted the fence, trampled somebody's front lawn and passed two young kids swimming in a long cement pool.

Tires skidded back at the restaurant and the booming sound of police radio channels crackled around the neighborhood.

KEEP RUNNING YOU DAMNED FOOL. KEEP RUNNING. DON'T LET THEM CATCH YOU OR YOU'RE A DEAD MAN. ONE CLEAN SHOT WILL KNOCK YOU TO THE GRASS. UNKNOWN ASSAILANTS WOULD SCOOP UP THE CD AND FLOPPY AS YOU LAY DYING IN THE HOT SUN. MAYBE THEY WOULD POP ANOTHER ROUND INTO YOUR BACK. AND THEN THE WORK ON THE COMPUTER WOULD BE DIGESTED BY SOME OFFICE ANALYST BACK IN WASHINGTON. THEY WERE SONS OF BITCHES. THEY KILLED RICHARD.

" Halt right there!"

That was good. At least they had not fired. Five huge guys appeared on both sides of the small stucco house as if they were part of the John Wayne brigade or the remains unemployed basketball team. But they did cuff him right away. One of them yanked both the floppy and the CD out of his pockets as the others dragged him to a waiting car. The evidence was gone.

* * *

It was a one-way dialogue lasting onto the freeway and past Oceanside. He wanted to know who they were and what he had done wrong. Finally, a bulky stone faced man, who constantly chewed the inside of his mouth, turned on the radio and cranked up the speaker to some oldies station. Garrison shook his head and stared out the window.

They left the freeway south of Los Angeles and headed toward the beach. For some reason they had let him live. That was more than they gave Richard and the Campbells. They approached a marina, bright with hundreds of boats along cottage lined cove. Garrison turned away from the sparkling water as the sedan slowed and pulled into a restaurant that looked like a Mississippi steamboat.

" Do I get lunch before I die?"

The stone faced guy probably was close to chewing through his cheek.

" Why not?"

Garrison was stunned when they removed the handcuffs. They walked him inside the steamboat as if they were going to a business luncheon. For fifteen minutes he stood on the lobby's

green and blue wispy flower rug. From the hostess's wooden greeting stand he panned into the busy main room and studied the faces at every table. At lunch time their voices formed one loud buzz amidst the clinking glasses and plates. Waitress and busboys swarmed around their stations. Another dining section was packed with patrons next to a series of clean pane windows over looking the blue marina. The hostess picked up black and gold embossed menus at her stand.

" Nice of you to join us for lunch, Roy."

He recognized the crack of Keaton's voice and turned.

THAT'S WHY YOU'RE ALIVE, ROY. THE DAMNED FBI AREN'T THE ONES AFTER YOU. IT WAS BAD LUCK THEY FOUND YOU FIRST.

" Who's after me, Bruce?"

Keaton was dressed exactly as he had pictured, in a long maroon blazer, plain matching tie and gray pants. His sandy hair looked as if it was just cropped at barber shop. " You are one lucky son of a bitch, Roy."

" That's more than I can say for my brother." The tears seeped into his eyes.

" I'm sorry about you brother. Listen, I think we'd better sit down here."

" Who's behind this, Bruce?"

" Let's sit down."

Keaton marched them all into the dining room. The other guys, dwarfing Keaton, walked like secret service agents now, checking out everything as they emerged from the darkened dining room. Keaton commandeered a table where the two glass spans came together, providing a sweeping view of the marina all the way out to the ocean.

Almost instantly, a short, energy packed little waitress appeared, ready to take the luncheon order. Garrison was rattled as the agents continuously panned the restaurant. He feared something was going to happen. Memories of Richard's car blowing up still haunted him as he ordered a BLT with soup and a cup of coffee. He had not eaten since the sub last night.

" Is Loretta all right?"

Keaton set down the menu and nodded. " Very good. That is how I found you. And yes, she's fine and very concerned about you're getting hurt." The waitress picked up the menus and scurried away. Keaton propped his elbows on the blue tablecloth as the agents continued to patrol. " Roy, you're in the middle of an highly classified security problem called Green Haze."

" Good..."

" What do you mean, good?"

Garrison smiled. " I mean I've been trying to figure this thing out. I've just spent twelve hours trying to sort through a company called Prescott Pharmaceuticals."

" I know, I just skimmed the floppy disk on my laptop. I'm aware of Prescott. I know they make the Pzyak Compound, the VED antidote... There's more."

" Do they manufacture the virus?"

" Yes."

" I knew it! I knew it! Who is involved? Are they doing this for profit or what?"

" This is highly classified and you are in great danger, my friend."

" Who classified this?"

" Defense Intelligence."

" How does the VED relate to Defense Intelligence?" Keaton gawked at him, his gray eyes intense. " Damn it, I don't know what's really going on here either, Roy. My people want answers, too. "

" They're spreading that VED and then bringing in their own drug to combat it! People are dying."

" So, what can you or I do about it? I'd have to convince my supervisor to bring this forward."

Garrison tightened his fists and then pointed at his friend.

" Look, Bruce, I know I owe you for getting me out, but my brother is dead!"

Keaton's face wrinkled. " You don't understand. My capacity is limited. I have to do what I'm told."

" You're the *FBI!*" The waitress appeared with large silver trays that she set down a small table by the petitions linking the two rooms.

Keaton spoke in a hushed voice as he leaned toward Garrison.

" That doesn't mean jackshit. I can't go sticking my nose into something like this without sanction. I have my own realm, my own problems and agenda. My people must approve it!"

" BLT," said the waitress as she set down Garrison's platter.

The table was silent while she went about her work, finally asking if they needed anything else. Keaton shook his head as she told them to enjoy the meal. He leaned toward Garrison again.

" Roy, you ought to thank your lucky stars that you made it. I'm sorry about your brother. But your investigation, all the stuff on the diskette and the CD... it ends today,. Right now."

" No balls."

Keaton's face crunched angrily as he bit into his hamburger and the other agents followed suit. " Okay, what the hell are you and I going to do? Someone has already gotten to your boss. You know that and I know that. And if you go running around out of here, accusing people, you'll be a dead man. You a dead man no matter what you do."

" I can't accept this."

Keaton spoke through a mouth full of hamburger and toasted roll.

" You're going to have to live with it. It's all over. You're life as a reporter for The Dispatch is over."

" Bullshit."

HE COULD DO SOMETHING IF HE WANTED TO. IT WASN'T ENGRAVED IN CONCRETE. HE HAD TO GO RUNNING BACK TO HIS SUPERVISOR ABOUT THIS. HE'S AFRAID LIKE I'M AFRAID. SOMETHING HAS TO MOTIVATE HIM.

" Keaton, what about your country? Don't you give damn about your country?"

" I know enough not to be involved in things that I shouldn't be involved in. I do what I'm told and I stay alive. You should remember that."

There was a long silence. Garrison finally nibbled at the BLT, picking up the pace, stuffing the triangular toasted chunks into his mouth and left the toothpicks on the plate. He turned to the marina. Several boats moved slowly through the harbor. The people walking outside were unaware of the powerful forces thriving in the shadows around their lives.

" We will resettle you somewhere."

Garrison picked at the French fries. Then he smiled and looked up at Keaton. "Get me to a computer."

Keaton made a face as if the meal was not digesting well. He leaned forward again. "For what?"

"Green Haze."

"Roy, this isn't on some company web site page. I told you, the operation is classified. I don't even know what the hell it is."

Garrison sat back in the chair and cupped his hands behind his head. "I want the computer."

"What do you hope to gain by this?"

"My brother is dead and so is that couple up north."

Keaton closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. "You stupid bastard. Even if you find out something... Roy, these guys..." He scratched his nose. "No."

One of his guys tapped him on the shoulder. He nodded and quickly crossed the main room and through the lobby. Garrison stared out to the marina again. He finished his soup and the French fries and waited for Keaton.

GREEN HAZE. SEARCH FOR IT, KEATON. FIND OUT WHAT IT IS.

Garrison saw Keaton's maroon blazer a few minutes later. Keaton nodded at one of his guys and they all stood at the table.

" Roy, we're going to hide you. Change your identity."

Garrison smiled. " Nope. I want the computer."

" That's a stupid move."

Keaton rubbed his eyes. " Here's what I'm going to do." He opened his eyes and looked at Garrison. Then he pointed. " I have done my job and now I'm out of this, brother. Gone. If you lay your ass out there by doing something stupid later, you're on your own."

Garrison stood and grabbed Keaton's wrist. " No, Bruce. Hundreds of people are dead. What is it, just because they aren't Americans it doesn't matter? Is that it? You tell me Prescott makes the virus and the antidote. You tell me it has to do with Defense Intelligence. I think they're laundering money they make off the drug!"

" We don't know that."

" But you damned well suspect it just like I do. Screw it. I've got nothing to lose in my life. I've blown opportunities. I've

dragged my brother to his death because of these bastards. No, I won't rest. You don't want to get involved. I always thought of you as someone with balls, Keaton, but you're just a guy who does what he's told and only goes after the sure thing."

Keaton grabbed his shirt and pulled him up. " I risked my ass to find you, so you wouldn't get killed!"

" They can kill me if I turn my back on this and whether you know it or not, Bruce, you're already screwed. You think this Defense Intelligence is just going to pat you on the back for hiding me. I say get the computer, go after the sons of bitches, and take our chances! You call your people and help me find answers."

24

Garrison sat in front of Keaton's laptop, only a few miles away from the restaurant. An open slider overlooked the sunlit Pacific breakers beyond the beach. Two hours ago he had begun a search for web sites relating to Prescott, but soon found himself boxed in again. On the beach patio Keaton, white phone cradled between his shoulder and ear, sat with his men in lounge chairs. Garrison crossed his arms and leaned back in his wooden chair as Keaton walked inside the house.

" Roy, I just talked to my people. They don't know you're..." He looked at the computer screen. " What the hell are you doing?"

" Looking for Green Haze."

Keaton squinted and put his hand on Garrison's shoulder.

" Do you really think they are going to put a classified operation on a web site?"

" I'll try anything and keep trying anything." He took his hands off the keyboard and looked up at his friend. " What I don't

understand is why someone in your office can't call someone in Defense Intelligence and find out exactly what this operation is."

" Doesn't work that way," said Keaton, turning. " It's classified. My people are looking to us to give them some input. You just keep on playing with the computer, Roy."

Keaton headed for the patio and Garrison looked back at the screen. Something had come up on the search engine. " Bingo, Monsieur Keaton!" He grabbed the chair and clicked on the address.

www.grha.com

A small paragraph about photographs taken eight days ago in St. Augustine Florida appeared before him. Keaton leaned in the doorway. " Bruce, this site is called, Green Haze.

" Come on."

" Look."

GREEN HAZE, A ESTABLISHED TO STORE PHOTO-
GRAPHS TAKEN IN ST. AUGUSTINE, FLORIDA THAT
PROMPTED THE PILLAGING OF A BEACH FRONT HOTEL.

LAW ENFORCEMENT PEOPLE WERE KILLED AND THE
PHOTOGRAPHER AND HIS WIFE WERE FORCED ON THE
RUN.

A post-it message section was the only item on the site. He returned to the first page and re-read the paragraph pertaining to pictures on this web site. Either someone had removed the pictures from the site or nothing had ever been downloaded. But he had the foresight to register it with the search engines.

" The damned thing is empty. Where are the pictures? " asked Garrison.

Keaton was already on the patio and had the phone propped to his ear. Garrison clicked away to empty pages, trying to find the photos, but only found the main page text and the post-it section.

" Damn!" He banged the desk.

This must have been a fluke. Somebody messed up. He grit his teeth and leaned back. He quickly flipped back to the site.

WHERE WERE THOSE DAMNED PICTURES? WHY WAS THIS SITE CALLED GREEN HAZE WHY WOULD THEY LEAVE THAT PARAGRAPH DESCRIBING THE

PHOTOS, YET REMOVE THE PHOTOS? MAYBE THE PICTURES WERE NEVER DOWNLOADED. MAYBE THEY GOT TO THIS GUY BEFORE HE COULD DO IT.

Garrison walked outside and put his hands on his hips. Keaton spoke loudly into the phone and nodded his head in broad motions. " You're kidding me? Is it related? Well, I don't know." He put his hand over the receiver. " Anything more on that site, Roy?"

" Nope."

Keaton spoke into the phone again. " No, that's it. Okay. Really? Where are they now? What? What? That sounds like a set up. How long ago was the friend killed? Yeah. And you're telling me these two people have eluded our people... Well, I think so, too. It reeks of a set up. I'll tell him." Keaton again looked back to Garrison. " Is there an E-mail or-"

" No, a post message type of area."

" Yes, Don, there is an address. Okay. Okay. I will. No, let me stay on this. You can't just bring in other people. Green Haze is out of my league. You know it and I know it. Right." Keaton held out the phone. " I don't want every Tom, Dick, and Harry in on this. It has to be handled gingerly, if they really want to find out

what Green Haze is." He lifted the phone back to his ear. " Right. Now? Okay, I'll get on it now."

" What did he say?"

Keaton set the phone back on the patio table. " This hotel thing in Florida with the couple from Iowa isn't just a minor incident. Come on inside." Garrison followed him back into the house. The web site paragraph was still on the computer screen.

" This Peters thing may be related to what's happened to you, Roy."

" Of course it's related. This guy photographed something he wasn't supposed to photograph." Garrison stroked his chin.

" And Prescott has a plant outside Jacksonville."

Keaton smiled. " I knew I brought you along for something. This guy must have taken pictures. My guess is they were never downloaded. He put in the text but that's as far as he got."

" Or they were taken from the site."

" I don't know. I'm not a damned computer expert. This hotel thing in St. Augustine."

" I saw it on the news."

" People rifling the room, the car. Three local cops were killed. Somehow Peters and his wife got out of the hotel. They

jumped in a truck at a rear loading dock and drove it less than a mile or so to the river. Cops thought they might have drowned in the river. My people were investigating this, but let me tell you there wasn't one guy who thought the Peters killed those cops. Somebody knew exactly what they were doing."

" Agreed, but where is Peters and his wife?"

" It gets better. Local authorities in Paducah, Kentucky found Peters' college friend dead at his house. The Peters were seen fleeing the house in the friend's truck."

" Well, where are they?"

" Gone." Keaton paused and thought for a second. " That Prescott thing is important. I mean, the fact the plant is near St. Augustine. Whatever has been going on there has been hidden very well."

" Do your people believe someone was deliberately infecting Third World populations?"

" We can't peruse that answer this like we want to. We've been told to back off. A lot of stuff is going on behind the scenes here. See, if they're doing what you and I suspect, they've broken the law,

of course. And what about all the countries where people were killed? How will they react? My job right now is this angle."

" We'll nail them, Bruce."

" I can't guarantee that."

" That's bullshit! ~ "

" No, it isn't, Roy. You know as well as I do that some things are handled internally. Things that never make it out."

" My brother is dead! How can they let this sit?"

" I'm not saying they will, buddy." Keaton walked inside and leaned toward the computer screen. " They want us to leave a message for Sam Peters, hoping he'll browse this site."

THIS GUY GOT TRAPPED JUST LIKE ME AND NOW WE'RE GOING TO JUST LET THE THING DROP? NO WAY. I WILL NAIL THESE BASTARDS.

Garrison sat at the keyboard. He clicked on the post-it line. Keaton was silent as they waited and then Garrison began typing in the message section.

I HAVE BROWSED GREEN HAZE AND FOUND IT TO BE OF CRITICAL IMPORTANCE. PLEASE EXPLAIN WHAT YOU MEAN ABOUT

DOWNLOADING THE PHOTOGRAPHS. I HAVE UNCOVERED ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT GREEN HAZE. IT IS CRITICAL THAT I SEE IF THESE PHOTOGRAPHS RELATE TO THE KNOWLEDGE I HAVE OF GREEN HAZE. THEY ARE AFTER ME, TOO. MY GUESS IS THAT YOU ARE SAM OR NINA PETERS.

ON THE RUN

" I was deliberately vague. We retain anonymity if someone else is the originator of this site or monitoring it."

" Perfect. And if Peters browses the site, the ball will be in his court."

" He'll post something and if he has the pictures, we might be able to crack this thing."

Keaton shrugged his shoulders. " Hold on." He opened the patio sliders and grabbed a newspaper on the glass table.

" You want me to get your pipe and slippers, Bruce?"

Keaton grinned but his face was quickly serious as he held up the paper with both hands. On the front page was a colored picture of a man, maybe in his fifties, with combed down gray hair, silver rimmed glasses and intense eyes.

DEPUTY DIRECTOR SHOT DOWN

" What does this mean?"

Keaton looked relieved at that question. " This is what I've been hinting at, Roy. My people have been told something is going on here with this Pangaeian thing and Green Haze. I don't know exactly what. Now you know why you were in deep enough for them to kill you."

Garrison furrowed his brow. " They don't care who they kill, do they?"

" Of course not. Intelligence gathering has no conscience."

Garrison stared at the newspaper. A civil war was ripping apart this African country. Grafton was an important man and his plane was just downed by the current government supported by the United States. They were talking about this incident at the United Nations. He looked up slowly. " This is out of your league, too."

" I'm beginning to think that. We're playing shadow with the devil."

25

Sam lay awake for forty-five minutes and stared into an intricate gray cloud layer above snow covered rolling hills. Spring arrived late in Wisconsin. For three days he had debated to return to his Michigan college but feared, his pursuers would await for such a move. He could not do it without risking death.

He turned from the window and let the drapes fall back. Nina was stirring. The ordeal had worn her down to the point where she was not only demanding to call Marquette but talked openly about going back home. Two nights ago they had gotten in a vicious argument continuing all the way to an outside phone booth. He told her numerous times as they traveled north, first by bus and then hitchhiking, calling home was impossible.

She had become a part of uncontrollable events. He sat on the bed and then crawled under the covers as she looked up. She reached over and they embraced, alone with no hope of returning back home right now.

With cash running out he needed to make a bold move. Griff's business card contained ink smeared numbers for computer web sites. His last hope was Griff may have taken those mailer photos and put them into one of this other computers. It was a long shot but now the only hope.

" There has to be a way out of this. How can we live like this, Sam? I don't want to spend the rest of my life in the Canadian wilderness."

" I know." He turned on the TV set. The news at the top of the hour was five minutes away. " Listen, Nina. I figure we have enough money to last a week, maybe ten days if we stretch it. We have no choice about Canada. We have to get jobs doing something else until we can-"

" I'm so scared, Sam. I don't want to see another news story about how you killed Griff. They can make up anything, twist it to their own ends. "

She gripped him tight but he felt helpless and held her until the news broke on the hour. Then they both sat up as the TV set brightened. A young newsman in a blue pinstriped suit and yellow tie sat at the news desk and tilted his head as the camera zoomed.

" I'm Steve Sanibel and this is CABLE HEADLINES NEWS."

A man's picture flashed behind the news anchor. Something about the man with the wire rim glasses and steel gray hair was familiar. This guy was on the St. John's bridge and now he was on the national news.

" Nina, that's one of the bridge guys!"

" Come on."

" It is!"

The newsman continued. " Deputy Defense Intelligence Director' Craig Grafton's plane has been shot down over the east African country of Pangaea. The rocket attack occurred twelve hours ago over the northern section of that country near Lake Shar. CHN reporter, Barry Summers reports from Aagos, Pangaea."

A moderate sized city appeared and a short black man in an open beige shirt held a microphone in front of a high rise hotel. " Steve, a late report by our sources indicates that the Deputy Director has parachuted from the plane and may be alive on the ground... This shooting down of Director Grafton's plane could not have occurred at a worse time for the battered Umbutu government. Rebels forces are on the move toward the capital city

of Aagos. There have been many rocket attacks throughout the countryside today."

Sam whispered into her ear. " I shot a picture of a Deputy Defense Director. No wonder they went after us." He put his arm around her and looked back at the set.

The screen switched to footage shots of truck conveys and rocket attacks with black smoke drifting upward to the clouds.

" CHN had learned that the attack, according to highly placed U.S. Intelligence sources has come from government anti-aircraft in the Lake Shar area. A spokesman for President Umbutu has denied this report and hoped for the safe return of Deputy Director. Pangaea is an oil rich country that is closely aligned with the United States. Deputy Grafton was here on what government sources say was a routine trip. His swing north in a U.S. supplied F-16 aircraft was an unscheduled recognizance mission to view the situation from the air north of the capital Lake Shar.

Democracy is a new factor in this African country and efforts be rebel forces to undermine President Umbutu are being watched closely by the United States. This is Barry Summers, CHN, Aagos,

Pangaea. For more reaction here is Joan Franz at the White House."

Sam leaned forward as a short woman with dark hair and a red dress held a microphone in front of the White House.

" This is Joan Franz at the White House. From Camp David the President is carefully watching the developing events in Pangaea. CHN has been told that behind the scenes the President is fuming at what he views as a blatant attack on a United States government official. There have been strategy meetings throughout the night and it is not clear at this point just what the Administration response might be. Joan Franz at the White House."

Sam turned on the light and looked into his wife's blue eyes.
" We need to check Griff's other computers. If we can dig out those pictures..."

" We know they got the mailer, Sam. They have the pictures."

He rolled out of bed, glancing at the TV again. " We have to try, Nina. We have to try..."

" You snapped the wrong picture at the wrong time."

26

An early morning phone call brought Pritchard into his office. He had spent all night waiting for word about Craig in Pangaea. A radio transmission from Manville's staging area was pending and the mission moved along exactly as planned. Umbutu was set up splendidly, but that was not his concern. His direct responsibility was nixing any domestic problems in the Green Haze operation.

Charley McCabe was at the front doors with a typed summary from a field agent in Los Angeles. Charley had a self-assured look as if he had just lifted a bulky diamond out of a museum.

Pritchard walked inside and both men started across the lobby together.

" Brief me, Charley."

" John Sabino swears Garrison's old girl friend is lying, Cam. He talked to her for over an hour but she wouldn't tell him anything. But he's convinced Garrison made contact. And there is a definitive report Bruce Keaton is digging for information."

" Bruce Keaton? We don't need the FBI watching us. Look into that, Charley. Get them off this. Have Edgar Mitchell set them straight." The stainless steel elevator doors opened and Pritchard went in ahead of McCabe. If he could track down Garrison, people above would know about it. It would make his promising career even more promising and take off some of the escalating pressure. " Search that San Pedro house. Tell him I want Garrison dead."

" Garrison isn't there," said Charley.

The elevator sunk down. " If I were Garrison and I had this CD or diskette, I would try and get to a computer. Take that approach for one."

" Everything is classified. I question whether Garrison's data would be worth while."

The lower office doors opened and Pritchard moved along the glass enclosed strategy rooms, past men who were working on other problems all night. The monitors and maps glowed bright colors in the darkened area. Pritchard stopped and turned to McCabe. " I want a team assigned to that house. I don't care what you tell the woman, pay her off, tell her World War III is about to begin. Lure Garrison back to that house."

" And if he doesn't come back?"

Pritchard shook his head as he entered his office his office and flipped on the lights. " What do you have on the Peters?"

" Nothing. Gone. The story is running on the news networks. Sam Peters killed his best friend and he is linked to the Florida killings. Cam, somebody will track them down. Besides, we have his pictures..."

Pritchard put his briefcase on his desk. "*Just get rid of them.*" He pushed his TV remote. " What about Craig?"

The TV monitor light was blue across McCabe's face. " Nobody is saying anything. The broadcast will be picked up in Aagos and should hit the media shortly thereafter. If he follows the script he will sing Manville's praises."

" Manville concerns me. Hopefully, this will force the Administration will be forced into a public posture against Umbutu. " If this thing ever breaks open, Craig is finished."

" Charley, if this thing ever breaks open, governments will fall."

27

Grafton arrived by military jeep. The encampment, shielded by dense forest and the mountain slopes, was more extensive than intelligence had previously indicated. Not only was there an elaborate tunnel maze, but barracks were constructed from the timbers and the roofs were capped with the local fauna. Equipment, camouflaged trucks, tanks and armored vehicles were clustered throughout the jungle. What astounded Grafton, as the jeep wound through the camp, was the minimal number of troops. Most wore the green and brown combat uniforms, although he saw a few rogues. He had been told less than a thousand troops were at this camp and the majority of the rebel forces were concentrated toward Aagos. Manville, himself, was flown in by helicopter.

Once up the slopes, the jeep spun and stopped next to a sandbag bunker overlooking Lake Shar's blue sun glazed surface twenty miles away. Grafton stepped out. A chipped yellow painted gasoline powered generator up the top of the bunker hummed

continuously. Black soldiers stood sentry while others pointed their weapons westward at the sandbags as if Umbutu's forces would storm over the horizon at any moment. A contingent of three officers, pistols swaying from their side straps, brought him down a dirt incline, past broken sandbags and to a florescent lit area in the tunnel.

In a dirt wall office Manville was seated behind a wooden desk covered with maps and empty beer cans. When he stood he filled the room. " My prisoner has arrived."

" I am here." Grafton scanned the room for Roland James or anyone connected to Chinese. He tried to shake thoughts of betraying Manville. Nothing like that had ever bothered him before. But now he was fracturing his many loyalties to those counting on him within the agency and was prepared to pitch it all for his own selfish ends. " A pleasure to see you again, Colonel."

As Manville gripped his hand, Grafton studied his face. It was unlikely Manville knew anything about those men down in the jungle. The Colonel motioned Grafton to the adjacent dusty wood chair.

" I'd like to talk about the courier."

" I can report we are prepared for the attack on the oil derricks this evening, Craig."

" Theatrics are an excellent military tactic, Colonel." Manville's dark eyes bulged. " What are the reports coming from the U.S.?"

" Umbutu is being castigated."

" By whom?"

" Uncle Sam. Uncle Sam. From the Administration to the State Department. Even Congress is talking about cutting all aid to his government. An excellent plan, Craig. It is working perfectly just the way you wanted. Providing nothing gets in the way."

Grafton sat on the edge of the desk, doubting that Manville was inferring anything about the Chinese. " When you return to the lines, be prepared to assume power. Umbutu will flee once you take the Presidential Palace."

" Do not think that I don't appreciate all you have done for me and my troops, Craig."

" My job, Colonel."

" We will need your help after we assume power. I want changes. This country needs an air force."

" I have mentioned previously you must formulate a post revolutionary plan."

" I want your assurance now!" He stomped his foot like a noncompliant horse. " And if it is not done quickly, I will assure you that there are countries who will help us."

His performance was lackluster and almost humorous. " Are you threatening me, Colonel?"

" We have our needs!"

Grafton walked up to him and looked up to his deep eyes. " I have the ability to bring you success, Colonel, or scatter you to the wind."

Manville pondered his words. A large crease formed between his wide brow and he gawked at Grafton. " I will be president of this country! I want an air force!"

" Let's get one thing straight here, Colonel. I have provided you with the means for your revolution. Funding was not easily with current Congressional attitudes. I have advised you and given you the most up to date data from our satellites, which I will continue to do. But don't dictate to me." This bastard must have known he meant business now. Grafton did not flinch as he stared

at Manville. " When you get in power, Colonel, you best know who your benefactors are."

" You are just a cog in-"

Grafton stepped back and kicked the door shut with his foot. He whipped out his pistol and buzzed across the dirt floor and thrust the pistol into Manville's neck, forming a wide dimple. " I could let this rip clean through you now. This isn't your country any more. It isn't your oil any more. You want to stay in power you jump when I say jump. You run when I say run. And you don't take a pis unless you check it out with me first." He pushed harder.

" You got that, Colonel?"

He nodded in jerky motions. " I understand."

" Good." Grafton removed the gun and placed it in his strap in one quick motion. " Now you get a damn radio in here and tune it to 1610 megahertz. I'll broadcast the message. Tell the world you have rescued the Deputy Director and stop walking around here like you're God's gift to military history!"

Manville backed to the door, opened it and said nothing as he left. Grafton sat down at his desk, knowing he had Manville and thousands of his men by the balls. He kicked the beer cans and

then checked the drawers for any weapons, finding only a large stash of marijuana and a small plastic bag with cocaine.

" Sergeant!"

The man with the M-14 by the door scurried inside and kept his back upright and his eyes ahead. " Sir."

" Bring these drugs outside and burn them."

" Yes, sir."

" There will be media people all over the place when we take Aagos. You tell those clowns out there if I find drugs on their possession I will personally cut out their tongues."

The sergeant swallowed. " Yes, sir."

Grafton threw the bag at him. The soldier caught the cocaine bag but the larger marijuana bag hit the floor. He scooped up the marijuana and ran out of the bunker. Manville and a private moved through the bunker opening. The private set a large black radio on the desk. Manville turned and gazed at the bags but remained silent.

" Plug it in!"

Manville bent down and connected the set to a long yellow cord running directly up through the dirt and into the generator.

Another soldier pulled in an antenna wire. Soon a whooshing sound echoed around the room as the Colonel twisted the dial.

" My troops will move against the oil derricks when they hear this message."

Grafton sat in his chair. " Good."

" Dismissed private." The young boy saluted both Manville and Grafton, although he appeared confused about the American presence. When he shut the door, Manville cleared his throat. " I may have been a bit too pushy."

Grafton shook his head. " We will run with the plan. No more changes. Have you rehearsed the victory speech we drafted for you? You will deliver it from the balcony of the presidential palace after Umbutu is officially dead. I will be standing with you."

" Yes, sir."

Grafton knew that his next move after that speech, would be to kill Manville and thrust Seville to power. The rest would be easy, setting up exactly what the Chinese wanted as he conned Edgar Mitchell and then got out with an unprecedented twenty-five million dollar fee. Then all the risk and the constant demands on his life would vanish. Double-crossing Manville, which would be

more a pleasure than a regret. But he would now turn his back on his long career, betraying the United States and everything he had stood for.

28

Sam paid the taxi driver and followed Nina to a computer store with back room computer stations. They merged with other customers through the wide glass doors, past security scanners and to the busy service desk. Computers were everywhere, monitors glistening with graphics, and boxes stacked above aisles to the back wall.

Nina stepped up ahead of him as he surveyed the people and checked for anything suspicious. She leaned toward the women behind the counter. " Yes, I called about using computer time."

" Name."

" Henderson."

The woman shuffled some papers and then lifted up a piece of yellow lined paper. " You said you needed Internet access also?"

" Correct."

Sam watched a couple leaving with huge printer and computer boxes atop shopping carts. Then he looked at the young girl behind the counter. " How much for the computer time?"

She rapped a calculator button. " Fifty-two dollars and sixteen cents. Three hours."

" That's kind of steep," said Sam. " How about an hour?"

" I'm only authorized, sir, to a three hour time block."

" Then get your boss. I don't care. We don't need very long."

Nina raised her brows. " This is our last shot to get those pictures, Nina."

A few minutes later a balding manager, shorter than the young woman, marched down the aisles. The girl rolled her eyes when he agreed to charge them only for the time they used. He brought them to a rear room with a few dozen cubicles. Sam looked at Nina as they were assigned a workstation. The manager apologized as they both sat down in the cubical. When he left, Sam pulled out the wrinkled card with Griff's faded ink handwriting.

He slowly maneuvered to the Internet and typed in the first site number off the wrinkled card. This was their last option before leaving for Canada. He leaned forward as if he were at a roulette table when Griff's second site appeared.

" Come on, Griffy. Come on." A designation for photos popped on the screen.

" My God, Sam!"

" Yes..."

He clicked the mouse. The first picture slowly formed from the top of the screen. He squeezed her hand, hope returning like sustenance after a much needed meal. One by one the beach pictures and then city pictures formed on the screen.

They had been online for six minutes when Nina rose from the chair and hugged him. " Pay dirt! Pay dirt!"

The bridge picture was as clear as a print. Sam looked around the workstations but no one seemed to care about his vital piece of information. He successfully enlarged the picture and Craig Grafton, Deputy Director of Defense Intelligence, was indeed standing on the St. John's bridge talking with two other guys. He could not stop smiling at Nina, leaning over his shoulder. " I'd give my right arm to know who those two other guys are."

" Don't ask for things like that."

" Agreed." He clicked the mouse to print and the enlarged picture was soon spitting through the printer. Grafton's image was even more definitive on the paper. Sam held the paper in his hands as if he had just delivered a baby. A single picture of Grafton

would unlikely cause all the ruckus but his association with these other men was significant. " Now, what do we do with it?"

" Find out who the other guys are."

" Piece of cake." Sam put his arm around her and they embraced. " Thank God Griff put the pictures in there."

" It must have been a matter of minutes before they raided his house." He nodded as his throat tightened. Griff did not deserve to get caught in the crossfire. " What about the other pictures?"

" Let's print everything."

It took less than half an hour to print and using the mouse he figured out how to save each photograph on a disk. Nina placed each one of the printed sheets inside a manila folder as he made a second copy of the pictures on another disk.

" What if someone gets to this site?"

" I don't know. I guess it's just a matter of time until they rifle through the rest of Griff's properties. Doesn't matter." He put several downloaded diskettes in his pocket. " We have what we need. We just have to figure out what to do with it."

" Good. At least we have something." She opened up the folder and pulled out the enlarged shot of Grafton on the bridge.

" Come on, let's pay that flaky girl up front."

Sam shut down the computer and the printer. They moved out of the back room. About halfway up the aisle she held his wrist. " Sam, what about this Green Haze thing. I mean while we have the computer access."

" We've got the pictures Nina, let's go."

" It could be knowledge that let's us stay alive. "

He stopped for a moment. They were in the middle of Wisconsin and had time. " You're right."

The girl at the counter stared at them and they returned to the rear room. He booted up the machine, moved back onto the net, and found one of the search engines a few minutes later. Then he punched in the words he had heard in St. Augustine.

The screen button indicated the computer was contacting another page.

" It's www.grha.com, " said Nina. Sam clicked on the site address. Again the computer searched for the site, but when the screen cleared a simple typewritten text appeared.

" My God... Griff. Green Haze, established to store photographs taken in St. Augustine, Florida that prompted the

pillaging of a beachfront hotel. Law enforcement people were killed and the photographer and his wife were forced on the run. "

She looked into his eyes and then down at the bottom of the page. " What's this? ' I have browsed Green Haze and found it to be of critical importance. Please explain what you mean about downloading the photographs. I have uncovered additional information about Green Haze. It is critical that I see these photographs to see if they relate to the knowledge I have of Green Haze. They are after me, too. My guess is that you are Sam or Nina Peters. On the Run.' "

" Do you think it's a trap, Sam? You know, to get us to respond."

Sam stared at the message. " It could be a trap but we have to respond."

" And then they know where we are."

" No." Sam sat up to type as he thought. " How did On The Run know about this site?"

She shook her head. " But apparently he didn't download the pictures from the other site."

" That's right. " Sam's fingers were on the keyboard but he had stopped typing. " If Griff hadn't labeled site the Green Haze designation..."

" He saved our lives. "

" Yup... He knew the trouble we were in and that's why he put this other site here. We have to take the chance, Nina. Thank you old buddy where ever the hell you are."

He tapped the keys.

ON THE RUN,
RECEIVED YOUR MESSAGE. WE HAVE THE
PHOTOS AND WE KNOW THE IDENTITY OF
ONE INDIVIDUAL, HIGHLY PLACED. IF
YOU HAVE INFORMATION AND ARE ON
THE RUN, YOU MUST SHARE IT WITH US.
WE MUST MEET. WHO ARE YOU? WHERE ARE
YOU? AND YOUR GUESS IS CORRECT.

Sam placed the message in the post-it area and looked up at Nina.

" The worst scenario is that they know we're alive. But if this guy is being chased, too, Nina. Maybe he has contacts. Maybe we can share out information. Maybe we can finally get out of this hell. "

29

Keaton, gone for a day and a half, was due back at any time. Garrison sat on the sofa watching the vivid news footage from Pangaea. That situation must have prompted Keaton's people to call him north for briefings. Bright orange flashes lit the skies from the ocean oil wells and black smoke drifted with the air currents out to sea. Major buildings were hit and more footage showed the rebels marching through the streets near Aagos. The country's President was in hiding and Colonel Manville's name was floated as a possible President. Deputy Director Grafton was rescued by the rebels and was then deposited in Aagos. And a special meeting of the United Nations Security Council in New York had convened.

AND HERE YOU ARE, ROY, RIGHT IN THE THICK OF IT. AND SO ARE SAM AND NINA PETERS, WHEREVER THE HELL THEY ARE. AND THEN WHAT HAPPENS TO ME? THEY'LL GET ME. IT'S LIKE KNOWING A MAFIA SECRET. THEY WON'T REST UNTIL THEY GET ME. JUST LIKE THEY GOT RICHARD.

Keaton's car stopped out front and Garrison sprang from the couch. As he walked toward the door, still looking at the TV, the FBI agent swept across the patio, rounded up his people and headed toward the beach. Garrison could hear his voice, but not the words and his hands moved about in wild gestures. Several times he pointed toward the house and once he made eye contact with Garrison in the slider opening.

" Roy." Keaton motioned him forward as the agents dispersed. Garrison moved quickly across the cement and onto the beach sands. The tide broke quickly ahead as Keaton put his hand on Garrison's shoulder. " We're out of here."

" What happened?" Several of the car engines out front started and the sedans pulled away. " What the hell is going on here?"

" Listen, don't ask me anything. Let's get out right now."

Garrison trailed him back into the house. " They're after me, aren't they?" Keaton walked ahead but stopped in front of the TV. " Grafton is back in Aagos."

" Is he?" Keaton stood for a few seconds, stroked his chin and gradually turned. The lines deepened around his gray eyes.

" Damn."

" What?"

" We have to go."

" Did they get the Peters?"

Keaton, his eyes moist, looked up from the set again. " No, I haven't heard that. Let's go."

Garrison said nothing as Keaton shut off the set and then the lights. He locked up the house and they walked into the cooler afternoon air. Garrison was first inside the car and turned toward the white caps and billowing clouds across the Pacific. Keaton started the car and looked into his eyes for the longest time. Now it was a matter of trust and as Keaton spun the tires in the sand, Garrison kept his mouth shut. The beachfront house quickly faded in the rear view mirror as spitting raindrops hit the windshield. Keaton turned on the wipers and kept his eyes on the dirt road ahead. Garrison's vengeance was now supplemented now only by an overwhelming fear of things beyond his control.

30

Edgar Mitchell closed the heavy wooden hotel door. Grafton turned from burning oil wells and the boat crews containing the fires. Mitchell was dressed in khaki jungle garb and his chiseled brown eyes were intense. Grafton shook his smooth hand.

" You're a son of a bitch, you are, Craig."

" Thank you, Edgar, coming from you that is high praise."

" I think the White House is satisfied now and I have people dealing with certain senators. Holding them back from obliterating Manville was harder than I thought. They all like Seville actually."

" Seville has his proponents in this country, too."

" He does."

" Manville cannot be trusted, Edgar. We've said that all along. But he is the rebel leader."

" I understand you feelings, Craig. You don't like the man."

" It goes beyond that. He's incompetent and can hurt us."

" We'll get to that in a minute. What about the loyalist troop movements. I gave you the satellite readouts. Consistent?"

" They've mostly surrendered. A few pockets out by Lake Shar."

He mixed a Martini for Mitchell.

" So, how does it feel at age fifty-two to be blasted out of the sky?"

" That is the last field assignment I will ever have."

" You've earned the respect and admiration of everyone involved, Craig." Grafton handed him the drink and he raised it in the air. " To Craig Grafton. Who has done the impossible."

Grafton clinked his glass. " To the impossible." He again pushed his lips together. " Edgar, it is imperative we talk about Manville."

" You sound like a man with a plan, Craig."

" I am."

" What are you suggesting?"

" Use Manville to obtain the objective and then switch alliance to Seville. He wants power. Read the reports on this man. Educated in Paris. The man had written books on the international situation. I talked to him at his residence before my mission inland."

" With a Mrs. Collins, Margaret Henning. She's been around the circuit a long time. We will be providing background papers on her. Stay away from her."

" I only screwed her once, Edgar."

" She has affiliations around the world and she's playing footsy with the Chinese right now. Screwing her is one thing, getting involved with her is another."

" Understood."

" And I will consider what you are saying about Manville, but it won't happen over night."

" Manville is an obstacle."

" Your first obstacle is going to be the media. What time is the press conference?"

Grafton had hoped Mitchell would take the bait about Seville.

" Eight p.m. Aagos time. We'll spin it before they get a hold of the story on the early morning broadcasts. "

Mitchell sat down the sofa and pulled together some scattered papers over the coffee table. Grafton sat rigidly in a leather-backed chair to the left. He saw accounts of the killing in

Paducah, Kentucky. " Both Garrison and the Peters couple are still at large?"

Mitchell's concentration was broken and his eyes focused.

" I'm not happy about this. Cam Pritchard came up with the idea about framing the Peters for this guy Griffith's murder. It's kept them at bay, but where?"

" They should have been taken out when they arrived at the Griffith's house, Edgar. What kind of nonsense is going on out there?"

Mitchell arose and threw his arms up. " Agreed, that's exactly what it is. This whole thing never should have happened, Craig. You gave the order. It was very simple: Get the Peters' film. Not shoot the hell out of the hotel and kill three cops!"

" I never should have taken the stroll across the bridge, Edgar."

" You can't blame yourself for that. The fact that some guy was snapping pictures is just one of those things. It's the damned panicky way that hotel thing was handled."

" The Peters are not trained professionals. It should be easy to track them down. Especially if we've painted them as Griffith's killers."

" I know. That will be a first priority when I get back. Pritchard is good."

" I know he's good. I recommended him."

" Okay, then we'll solve this Peters thing quickly." Mitchell pointed at the table. " And there's still Garrison."

Grafton moved the papers back and read information about Garrison and the two bombings. " Now I would expect some trouble finding this guy. He's savvy and cagey."

" Street wise. Like a cat. We got him fired and that cut off his means to get this out."

" I think Roy Garrison is just waiting to pounce."

" Maybe." Mitchell thought for a moment. " You'd better get ready for the press conference. I don't want you in a tie and suit coat, Craig. Go casual. Like you just got out of the jungle. It will play better."

Grafton nodded but Garrison concerned him. " What are the standing orders about Garrison?"

" Let's put it this way, if Garrison pounces, we'll skin him alive."

31

Sam leaned against a new Maytag floor model. He and Nina watched a special Pangaea report on a row of thirty-two TV sets along the wall. A reporter s described the African country's current situation from a hotel lobby in the capital city. Microphones were placed on a wooden podium atop a stage with a blue draped background. The reporter, holding his microphone turned as Craig Grafton, dressed in a gray sweatshirt and jeans and not looking any worse for his capture, walked with a number of black men in gold military uniforms and a second contingent of white men in dark suits.

Nina held his arm. " There he is, Sam."

Grafton stood behind the hardened loyalist soldiers. Some commander was extolling Grafton's bravery under fire and his coolness during a tense ordeal. Sam studied Grafton's cool eyes behind the wire rims. His face was smooth and he never flinched.

When Grafton stepped up to the microphone his voice was crisp. " Ladies and gentlemen, I have a brief statement before I answer your questions."

" This guy is very good." Nina put her arm around him as he scanned the store.

" On April twenty-fifth I conferred with President Umbutu, who requested that I would participate in an overall recognizance mission over rebel territory near Lake Shar. I will emphasize that I was fully aware the danger of this type of mission and take full responsibility for it.

At ten-thirty five a.m. Pangaea time, I was flying a Pangaeian government F-16 south of Lake Shar when rocket attacks began. I took immediate action and ejected from the aircraft."

" Did loyalist troops down your plane?" asked a French reporter in the front row.

" It is not my place to comment publicly on this attack. I can only say that I am grateful to rebel forces who under fire rescued me and returned me with no strings attached back to Aagos."

Grafton then looked out over the crowd. Somebody up front called out something, but he could not hear the question and

cupped his left ear. He nodded as the mobile camera zoomed in on the man's greasy black hair.

Grafton repeated the question. " The question is whether anyone in my agency ordered this mission over rebel territory. And I believe that I have answered that question, but let me make it clear: I made the decision here in Aagos to fly that mission purely for recognizance."

" You didn't check back to the United States?"

" No, that was not necessary. Let me also assure you that while I was aware of the risk, I was in no way aware... that I was flying into a situation where the aircraft would be attacked by... Again, I have no public comment on the logistics of this."

Someone asked him about the rebels gaining power soon, but he deferred any talk about State Department and United States policy to other people in the room. He continued talking about rebel bravery and expressed a veiled displeasure at the Umutu regime but spoke highly of a Pangaeian general named Seville.

Sam turned from the set. " There's obviously more to this, Nina."

" Agreed. Or we wouldn't be standing in here in the most isolated store in the United States."

" How much money do you have?"

She reached in her jeans pocket and pulled out a ten dollar bill and three ones. " My life savings."

" I have forty-seven bucks."

She put her arms around him, leaning her long blonde hair into his chest. He held her head and then placed his hands on her shoulders. " Let's give On The Run twenty-four hours. Then some how we get to Canada."

Her moist blue eyes tightened. " We can't survive on this. I want to go home. I want to see Jason again."

Sam slowly shook his head. " We will. Somehow we will."

32

Grafton thanked the press and had just exited the room when he saw Edgar Mitchell standing next a well dressed Roland James. He kept walking as James moved away from Mitchell. Grafton kept a close watch on James' hands and was ready to pull out his Lugar.

" My name is Roland James and I want to tell you I thought you handled those bastards very well, but you've probably angered Umbutu in his bunker."

" He's working with us, Craig. Craig Grafton, Roland James, section M-29, special forces."

Grafton shook his hand and thought about him back in the jungle with the Chinese operatives and on the Toronto balcony. James had many affiliations and allegiances. The trick was determining his current and most active link. Under any other circumstances, Grafton should put James under arrest or killed him, but not now. Fate followed him like a ravenous wolf in the forest.

" The loyalists wanted blood, Mr. James. Blood comes with a price."

" Does."

They were quickly escorted through the hotel's back hallways and to a waiting limo. Grafton dipped his head and sat on the soft leather seat. As the limo slowly pulled away from a few lingering reporters and out the cleared circular hotel drive, Mitchell poured drinks for them.

" The reason I have Roland here, Craig has to do with the Chinese."

" Oh?" Grafton was sure he was double-crossed.

" Yes, you see there is a definite movement afoot, not diplomatically, to undermine the new government."

" James is aware of Green Haze, Craig."

" Okay. Are they against Manville or with him?"

James flashed his chipped tooth when he smiled. " Oh, the Chinese want him out. They want to control the oil with a puppet. We suspect Seville."

" Craig and I have nothing against Seville. And Umbutu knows his government will fall. But under no circumstances are we going

to throw out support of Manville right now. We've come too far on this operation. And there is no need for it."

Grafton raised up his glass. " To Colonel Manville, who is in love with himself."

Mitchell's belly laugh enveloped the limo. James merely smiled as if he were at a social event. " Umbutu will be dead soon, I assure you... I want you and Roland to work this thing out. We need to see just what the Chinese interests are here. Seville should be elevated though and not associated with Umbutu's human rights abuses."

" Agreed." As Grafton faced James, he could not stop thinking about the twenty-five million dollars. He would have to act swiftly and get out of Pangaea if Mitchell was spawning Chinese inquiries. Suspicion, like a balloon instantly inflated, fueled his fears as the limo turned toward an unfamiliar hotel. Unfamiliar places were risky places. He peered out the window and then and then at the beady eyed Mitchell.

Mitchell looked at his watch. " I want you two to hammer this Chinese thing out. Take as long as you want. I'll be back at the Richambeau."

" What do you want out of this, Edgar?" Grafton saw no eye contact between the two men. " I need access to a computer."

James nodded and the limo stopped. " That will be no problem."

" Good." The hotel doorman opened the limo. Grafton again studied Mitchell's pupils and looked for any incremental muscular movement in his face indicating prevarication. He did not think he was being setup as he shook Mitchell's hand and stepped out of the car.

James led him to the revolving door. " I'm on the fifty-second floor."

Grafton had no regrets about committing to the money. He moved through the rotating door, knowing his time with the agency was over. The grind would end and he would place himself on the remote Aegean Island of Contaba and never be found.

Once they crossed the lobby, James spoke to him. " We are very close."

Grafton said nothing until they reached an old creaky elevator. " Who the hell are you?"

" Not your concern."

Grafton turned and grabbed his lapels. " Screw you."

James' face possessed a certain smug appearance. " Listen, your ass is on the line here."

" I want this thing done quickly. Time will expose it."

If James double-crossed him with the money, or he was being set up, he had enough to sink Edgar Mitchell. Running Green Haze against administration policy was allowing Mitchell as a private citizen to override elected officials and pursue a game plan that suited his agency policy.

Grafton waited for James to stop his charade and begin talking about the money and his real intentions. Grafton released him and a deadly silence pervaded the elevator. On the twenty-fifth floor the unsteady car slowed and shuddered to a quick stop. He followed James to the darkened stairs, up one flight and onto the roof. Grafton readied his gun.

High above Aagos, the salty wind blew James' brown hair back and he squinted. An easy way out of this Chinese thing was to either shoot James or push him off the building and blame it all on the offer itself. Then he might be free of any commitment to the Chinese.

" Where is the up-front money?"

" I don't have it."

" I won't be used like this."

" No, Chun is arranging all your requests."

" Twenty-five total."

" Correct."

" Don't toy with me, James. I want the up-front money and Swiss account numbers."

" Chun wants you to assassinate Manville."

" Umbutu isn' t even officially dead yet. "

" I tell you, Chun wants you to kill Manville. "

Grafton shook his head. " Me? Dumb move. No, that will not be done."

" You'll get the money."

" I'll take care of Manville, but not personally."

" I think that's what they mean."

" Listen, you tell this Chinese bastard I want the account numbers. And the up front money in cash."

" Chun is working on it."

" Maybe you think I'm not going check your every movement, James. People are in place and if anything happens to me, they'll hang you and your accomplices by your balls."

James' down turned mouth exposed his little yellow teeth as he looked over the city. " You're bluffing."

" Try me... If I go down, you're all dead men. And you tell that to Chun. I *will* have people that will track him down. I'll have the son of a bitch killed. Is that clear?"

For close to a minute James stood with no expression as if every nerve to his face was severed. " I will relay the information."

" Relay this: Money by courier to room 16, Richambeau. Tomorrow night at eight p.m. The deal is off if there is no cash."

James spoke softly. " Two-?"

" There will be two million in my hands. The remaining twenty-three will be in the Swiss accounts. You tell Chun I will take care of Manville."

" Then it's up to Chun."

" Very simple."

" What if they won't go along with that."

With an cocky smile he shifted weight from foot to foot. Grafton spun and moved just a few inches from his face. " Here's what you're going to do for me, Mr. James. You're going to lay this whole thing out. Names and places so I can double check it. I want to know who I'm dealing with and I want you to know who *you're* dealing with." He quickly removed his gun and pushed it into James' neck. Then he pulled a small hand gun from under James' sweater. " This isn't going to be messed up, is it James?"

His eyes flared open. " Everything I've said is true."

" Good." He set James' gun back in his palm. " Eight p.m. tomorrow night."

33

Sam needed to check Griff's E-mail. He and Nina trudged out of the windy rain and back into the computer store. Once safely in the back room, he set the St. Augustine pictures safely on the cubicle table and looked up at a pensive Nina. She put her hand on his shoulder as he accessed Griff's fourth site. They would again begin their journey north to Canada today if nothing was on the computer.

He logged on and his old message flashed onto the white screen. Then he scrolled forward and looked up at Nina. " Look!"

The message was dated that morning. Just two hours ago.

MAY 6: 6:35 A.M.

IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT WE JOIN FORCES.
YOU HAVE THE PHOTOS AND I HAVE INFO ON GREEN
HAZE. LINKING THE TWO SOURCES MIGHT EXTRICATE
YOU FROM YOUR PREDICAMENT WITH GRIFFITH'S
MURDER. THIS IS A HIGHLY CLASSIFIED GOVERNMENT
OPERATION FROM WHAT I CAN GATHER. WITHOUT THE
PHOTOS I CANNOT GO FORWARD. TELL ME WHERE

I CAN MEET YOU AND I WILL BE THERE WITH ALL
THE INFORMATION I POSSESS.

ROY GARRISON, L.A. DISPATCH

Sam smiled and began typing.

MAY 6: 9:22 A.M.

GARRISON:

He looked up as she squeezed his hand. " Sam, this might be a setup."

" We have no choice other than linking up with this guy. We'll cover ourselves."

" Suppose, he's one of those people trying to kill us? Then what?"

He shook his head. " What do we do, Nina? You tell me. There is no more money. We have to eat. We can't go back home. We might make it Canada, I don't know. We'd just better pray to God that this guy is on the level."

" What are you going to say?"

" Get his phone number."

She shook her head. " Then we call and they know where we're calling from. And if he calls us, they'll find out."

" You keep saying they." Sam looked back at the computer.
" I am going to assume that Roy Garrison is a man of his word. I am going to get his number."

Sam typed a very simple message and he spoke it out loud.
" May sixth. Nine twenty-six a.m. Garrison: get your phone number to me."

He turned to Nina. The words entered the computer from some unknown location and Sam kept his fingers on the keyboard.
" He's on line. The quick messaging system."

THAT WILL NOT BE NECESSARY, SAM.
LINKED IN WITH YOUR SITE. LISTEN.
IF YOU NEED TO TALK WITH ME DIRECTLY,
ANSWER NOW.

Sam continued.

WHAT IS THIS HIGHLY CLASSIFIED
OPERATION?

THE INFO THAT I HAVE RELATES TO

OUTBREAKS OF VED THAT MAY HAVE BEEN
ACTUATED BY THE US MILITARY. SAM, I
THINK YOU MAY HAVE TAKEN PICTURES OF
SOMEONE IN THAT OPERATION.

AGREED. THE MAN IS CRAIG GRAFTON, DEPUTY DIRECTOR
OF DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE, WHO WAS SHOT DOWN IN
PANGAEA.

RIGHT. RIGHT. GOOD WORK. SOME HOW GRAFTON IS
LINKED WITH THE ANTIDOTE TO THE VED. Green
Haze IS THE COVER NAME. CAN YOU DOWNLOAD THE PHOTOS?

NO. I WANT YOU AND YOUR INFORMATION HERE, ROY.

Nothing happened on the computer. Nina leaned over his
shoulder.

" Sam, type something else."

" He's mulling it over. Look what he wrote, Nina. It looks like
they're infecting people with this VED. We have to let him look at

the photos. Maybe he knows who the other guys are. Then we can go forward with this... somehow."

SAM, YOU HAVE A DEAL. YOU TELL ME WHERE
I HAVE TO BE AND WHEN. I'LL BE THERE WITH
MY CD AND DISKETTE.

"Wow!" Sam pushed the chair back. He held her shoulders.
"This has to be unanimous, Nina."

She nodded, but was still thinking. Her tense blue eyes bounced from Sam to the screen. Then she focused on him. "If we don't do it, Sam... we won't survive this anyway."

"That's the way I feel about it."

"Okay."

He kissed her forehead and smiled. The he spun around to the keyboard.

PUBLIC LIBRARY, RACINE, WISCONSIN

I CAN BE THERE AT 3:00 P.M. TODAY. I WILL

BE WEARING AN ANAHEIM ANGELS BASEBALL CAP. ANYTHING
ELSE?

BE CAREFUL, ROY

34

Grafton shut off the laptop and pulled the plug. He looked at the traitor's reflection in the bathroom mirror. His two million dollars would now be safely deposited in a German bank and later transferred to a Hong Kong Securities firm under another identity. Land would soon be purchased by proxy. These people were serious about gaining the upper hand in Pangaeian politics. They were just like the Americans, thirsting not only for the oil, but the raw power resulting from controlling that oil.

Three rockets hit the Aagos business district that afternoon, Umbutu was held up in a bunker near the Presidential palace and kept repeating how he did not order the F-16 attack. American public opinion had swung against full military involvement as Mitchell convinced everyone that the United States could cut a new deal with the rebels. Behind the scenes an elite force was flying in from Western Europe and Umbutu would be dead in twenty-four hours.

The military situation was relayed to him earlier. His sources told him Pangaeian troops were pushed back to a point thirty-five kilometers from Aagos. He stared at his own image again, eyes bright and alive and face unlined. Keeping his nerve throughout this operation was not something he worried about. The Americans suspected nothing. Like Umbutu they trusted him. Especially Edgar Mitchell, who was already running around Administration policy as well as convincing the Administration to take out Umbutu.

Grafton's own objective was to slip away alone by land once Manville was dead and Seville installed as the new Pangaeian ruler. Still, he trusted no one. The Chinese might very well try to kill him and recover the money. Any remaining government operatives would want him dead for selling out but he could at least cover himself by exposing Mitchell's treasonous activities with the rebels.

It was seven-fifty p.m. James' ultimate credibility still bothered him. He went over to the bar and took out some aged whiskey. As he was dropping ice cubes into the glass, his satellite phone rang. He unscrewed the amber bottle and poured the liquid

into the crystal glass. Then he walked across the room and picked up small black plastic unit. " Grafton."

" Craig, this is Cam Pritchard."

" Cam."

" Craig, we have unconfirmed reports that the FBI, specifically Bruce Keaton is involved in the Garrison thing."

Grafton waited a few seconds. Garrison and the Peters did not mean as much any more. He scratched his shoulder. " What do they say?"

" Keaton's superiors want to know what we're doing with Green Haze."

" Well, that's just too bad. Close them down on that. Get them the hell out of the Garrison and the Peters case."

" Exactly what I did. Something's wrong because Keaton is missing."

Holding the phone against his ear Grafton paced the room.

" I see three possibilities. One, he's dead. Or the FBI is playing games with us. Or he's defied the FBI."

" I don't think even they know where he is now. He figured this thing out and was shut down by his own people. He and Garrison are old friends."

" What's his motive?"

" We put the word out to some of our contacts within his agency. There was strong evidence that Keaton had found Garrison. By eliminating Keaton we might eliminate Garrison."

" Good reasoning. We need to put this whole thing to bed."

" I have no excuses. Every cop around the country is aware of the Peters-Griffith connection. It's been on the national news. And with Garrison... I just don't know. Your end is closing down..."

" This thing is folding up fast. Manville will be power soon."

" Good or bad?"

Grafton squinted. Pritchard no reason to ask this question.

" Depends on your point of view. "

" Yes, Craig it does."

With a knock at the hall door Grafton's head jutted to the right. But he was thinking whether Pritchard knew about the Chinese. " I have to go."

" Company?"

That was another unwarranted question. " No."

" I will brief you tomorrow, Craig. What time is good?"

" Eleven a.m."

He cut the transmission, pulled out his Lugar, checked the clip and walked to the door. Two short Chinese men, only around five six, stood with blank expressions until they saw his gun. They turned in unison and waved a taller Chinese man in a blue business suit and carrying a briefcase, into the hall. Grafton recognized him from surveillance pictures as a Chun associate.

He spoke perfect English. " May I come in, Mr. Grafton?"

" Do."

He walked ahead of the others and they shut the hallway door. " I am here on behalf of Mr. Chun. I have what you want." He set the briefcase under a wood shaded incandescent bulb above the table and popped the brass locks.

Grafton quickly counted the stacks of thousand dollar bills.

" Good."

" Chun wants you to kill Manville tonight."

" I don't take my orders from Mr. Chun."

" You work for us now. We will discuss what you will and won't do, Mr. Grafton."

" You will discuss nothing." Grafton thumbed through the bills and closed the case. " Tell Chun he will wait until the rebels control Aagos. I will take care of Manville and then get Seville where he needs to be. The rest of the money will be deposited now. Chun will be brought in at that time."

" Chun will not just deposit the money on your say so. I have my orders and you will do as we say or the money goes back."

" You tell Chun it will be done my way."

" Chun does not like being dictated to."

" Then Chun has a problem, doesn't he?"

Grafton saw him moving for his gun, but shot first. The man's white shirt blew up in blood, his eyes and mouth opened as he fell back over the chair. Grafton fired two shots at the door and then stepped to the side and opened it. One of the guards was down and the other fired. Grafton pushed his lips together and slowly popped the trigger and the other the guard grabbed his stomach and fell to the hallway rug.

He turned slowly and casually stuck another clip in his Lugar. Then he closed the briefcase, secured the locks and walked into the corridor. They still needed him but respected him and he had the two million. He placed a call to hotel security. They could clean up the mess.

He stepped through an open window and onto a rusted fire escape. The outside air was stagnant and quiet as he crawled down the metal rungs into a darkened alley along the hotel. He quickly hopped onto his moped, headed down the alley to a brightly lit boulevard and moved along with the heavy traffic downtown. He turned into the Hotel Montebam parking garage. He secured the moped and carried the briefcase into the stairwell.

In the lobby he walked to phone booths outside the bar and dialed Roland James. The line rang loudly for at least half a minute. There was a click and a British accent. " Hello."

" I don't like being pressured, James. You tell your people that. You have three dead couriers at the Richambeau because they like to play with guns."

" Dead? You're telling me they're dead?"

" You tell: Chun no more nonsense."

" Are you crazy?"

" Maybe, but you tell him if this happens again, he's a dead man."

Grafton set down the phone quickly but stopped thinking about Chun. Cam Pritchard's Chinese hints were potentially the most threatening. Once Edgar Mitchell understood the deal he would order people to follow Grafton and gather information on Chun and the Chinese. He grasped the briefcase. Through his connections the money would be electronically deposited in Germany and then hidden in Singapore. He could easily slip out of Pangaea right now, but the remaining twenty-three million would give him the security and ease he demanded for the rest of his life.

35

Garrison shook his head and finished the cigarette. Keaton was more fidgety than he had been during the last forty-eight hours. The ruddy agent's eyes moved around like an animated children's doll as Garrison drove out of the airport

" Bruce, you're making me nervous."

Keaton turned and peered out the van window's mini-blinds again. " You should be nervous."

Garrison ground the cigarette into a metal ashtray. Keaton had cautioned him the computer chat message from Peters might be something out there to lure them all into a trap, but Garrison was certain he had contacted the man who had snapped pictures of Craig Grafton.

" Peters is probably as suspicious of us."

Keaton grinned. " He should be."

Garrison rolled his eyes and as they neared the main city. Keaton's role had changed but he would not talk about it. His agents had vanished at the beach house and he was not making

phone calls. It was almost as if he was abandoned by his own people.

* * *

Garrison left Keaton in the van across from the library. He studied the intersection and the library entrances. When the street was clear, he crossed inside the pedestrian walk's thick white painted lines toward the tall brick building ahead. The old worn faced gray fortress tower clock chimed three times as he stepped onto the curb.

Peters nor anyone else was visible. He climbed the library's wooden steps, clutched the brass rail and pulled open the door. Behind the central main desk was a study area below an upper mezzanine. Long chained, crystalline lamps hung from a water stained plaster ceiling. He adjusted his Angel's cap as if he were giving a sign to a base runner and moved toward the study area. A few people were seated along glossy wood tables. He paralleled a lengthy bookcase and pretended to take out a book. After turning a few pages he sat at the table.

WHERE THE HELL ARE THEY? THIS THING IS TOO IMPORTANT FOR BULLSHIT. NOTHING UPSTAIRS IN THE STACKS AND FIVE PEOPLE AT THE STUDY TABLES. COME ON, PETERS, WE'RE TALKING ABOUT BEING TRACKED BY PROFESSIONALS. WE COULD ALL GET KILLED.

" Good morning, Roy."

Garrison jumped and turned. A thin woman with stunning blonde hair and bright blue eyes smiled. Garrison's face tightened.

" Can I help you?"

She leaned forward and whispered. " Are you Roy Garrison?"

" Who wants to know?"

" A man in the mystery section upstairs." She pulled back the chair across a worn section of wood floor. Then she sat down. Someone would have already grabbed him if this was a setup.

" My husband is waiting for you. I'll watch the door."

" Are you Mrs. Peters?"

She nodded as she spoke. " Nina... We need your help, Roy."

" Okay."

Garrison checked the front himself before heading up the rear staircase. Nina looked up from the study tables. Then he started down the stacks. He was never very good at locating the

book numbers. Each book aisle passed like a camera shutter snapping the scene.

" Roy." Garrison spun around. Across the mezzanine was a thin man with a dark beard. He wore a gray sweatshirt and was carrying a legal sized manila folder. He extended his hand and had a mellow academic voice. " I feel like the second piece of a puzzle."

" You are." He pulled Peters along the stacks. They sat at a slate table in front of a wide arched window overlooking the van, securely parked on the street, but he could not yet tell Sam about Keaton.

Sam said nothing, but opened his folder at the same time Garrison took the CD and floppy from his pockets. A vivid shot of Craig Grafton standing with three men on a bridge was spread with other pictures over the open folder.

" Damn..."

" You got that right."

" You were in the wrong place at the wrong time," said Garrison.

" We saw what happened to the Deputy Defense Intelligence Director, Grafton in Africa. " Sam waved to his wife at the study table. " They won't rest until my wife and I are dead."

Garrison nodded as he thought about Richard's car enveloped in the fireball. " I lost my brother because of these bastards."

" My friend is dead. Cops are dead." His faced tightened. " My wife and I somehow evaded them."

Garrison nodded as he pushed back the other pictures. " I like to think someone is watching over me, other than the government... and you."

Garrison handed Sam pages he had printed off the PC and floppy. Sam ran his fingers along the page as he read. Through the old wood framed window Keaton stood in the crosswalk outside. For a moment Garrison had the urge to grab Sam and run but cooperating with Keaton was the only link to survival.

" My God, how can they do this? Is this Defense unit responsible for spreading this VED?"

" Yeah, looks that way. What about the other men in that picture, do you know who they are?"

Sam kept reading and shook his head. " No idea."

" Listen, I have contacts who can work on identifying them."

" We can figure this out without contacts. It's just too risky."

" No, no we can't. I've been on the run, on the verge of being killed a dozen times!"

He set down the folder and checked his wife again. Then he shot to his feet. " Where the hell is Nina?" Sam stuffed the folder under his arm and bolted down the stairs. He had already entered first floor when Keaton walked out slowly with Nina.

" You're a liar!" yelled Sam.

" He has a gun," said his wife.

Keaton stepped between them. " We are here to help you."

" You bastard, Garrison," said Sam, holding his wife's hand.

Keaton talked softly as if he were some kind of psychiatric counselor. " We are not going to turn you over to anyone, Sam. You'll be safe with us."

" I don't believe you."

" Listen, whether you believe me or not is irrelevant."

She held his arm. " Sam, if they were the ones after us, we'd be dead."

" Do you think it's fair to lure us here after what we've been through?" asked Sam.

Garrison stepped up to him. " I've been through the same thing, damn it. If I told you Keaton was with me, you never would have agreed to meet me. Not only that, what the hell can you or I do with our information? Keaton can help us."

" Listen to him, Sam," said Nina.

Sam pushed his lips together and alternated glances between Garrison and Keaton. " Okay."

He handed the folder to Keaton, who opened it and quickly perused the contents but pulled out the bridge photo. He looked at Sam and then at Garrison. " This is very interesting."

" I see Grafton, but can you find out who the other guys are, Bruce?"

" I'll try."

Keaton motioned them all out front. They marched through the library with only a fleeting look from the women behind the desk. They were whisked across the busy street and into the van. Once inside he turned to Sam. " Listen, I am going to try and find the identities of other guys in that picture."

" Do you think it's this Defense Intelligence?"

Keaton looked at Garrison briefly before he spoke. " I know that's where Grafton's realm is. I know there is something afoot called Green Haze. "

" Those people in the hotel room mentioned Green Haze!" said Nina.

" What is Green Haze?" asked Sam.

Keaton paused. " We'll get to that later."

Sam leaned against the window as Garrison drove the van from the library. Nina whispered something in Sam's ear and he nodded, half closing his eyes.

" We have people at home not knowing whether we're alive or dead."

Keaton pinched the bridge of his nose. " If we allow you or even pass word about you, we all risk being killed."

Sam leaned forward. " You wouldn't at least call?" His wife whispered something again.

" I can't do that," said Keaton, picking up the van phone.

" This is very risky. Very risky. We're going to fly out of here to a safe location. We may be unraveling a classified national security operation."

" Good," said Sam.

" Not good." Keaton listened. " Let me make this clear again. My job is to gather information. And I will attempt to help you people lead normal lives again. That's it. My purpose is not revenge or to tear down covert operations. I'm sorry what's happened to both of you and your friend, Griffith. Roy lost his brother. Let's take this step by step. Trust me, my contacts and hopefully my experience... Deal?"

Sam looked at Nina and then out the van window.

" Listen to what he says," said Garrison.

Keaton held his phone as the line connected, but his other fist was clenched as he spoke. " I have a picture of Craig Grafton on a St. Augustine bridge with two other men... What? Come on, what did you tell them?" He waited, moving the receiver closer to his ear. " No, I have them all. Once I get to the plane, I'll transmit the photo. I don't care what you have to do, Tom, you get the damned

identities on these people with Grafton. Right... Is the apartment set up? Yup.. Yup. I'll call. Yup."

" What happened?" asked Garrison.

Keaton looked at the Peters again. " Sam, do we have a deal?"

" Yeah, we have a deal. Just get us out of this."

"I'll do my best..." He turned to Garrison. " Roy, several people from the Defense Intelligence Agency have been to the DOJ. "

" What is the DOJ? " asked Sam.

"Department of Justice. They've met with the Attorney General. I'm sure they're wondering where the hell I am and what I'm doing. A domestic coordinator named Cameron Pritchard and his counterpart, Charley McCabe. I know McCabe but I don't know Pritchard."

" They're scared because of what's happening in Pangaea," said Garrison.

" Yes, they are."

" Rebels are advancing to the capital. We saw it on the hotel TV," said Nina.

" Grafton is aware you people are at large," said Keaton.

" What will he do?" asked Sam.

Keaton stared out the window. Garrison also awaited his reply. " Grafton will do... whatever he has to do."

36

Seville set up his headquarters on what was becoming the front line, fifteen miles outside of Aagos on ridges facing east toward the plains. Grafton was driven out by jeep after Edgar Mitchell left for Washington. From Aagos he began a campaign to boost Seville's standing with the rebels. The most important aspect was exploiting agency information against Umbutu, blaming him for the excesses and the civilian killings. Early that morning Grafton reached Manville by radio and proposed a deal Chun had suggested through emissaries after the hotel killings. Seville would allow the rebels to take Aagos and depose Umbutu. In return Manville would improve the general's image and allow him in the new government.

The general was not only in favor of the plan, but claimed to have suggested the plan to Chun. As Grafton walked with Seville along the hills, explosions racked the city. Reports had put rebel forces along the sea as well as across the plains. Originally Umbutu had Seville throw everything forward, hoping to crush the

main force, but Seville had deliberately left his northern flank open and the oil wells, some still burning, undefended. Rumors abounded about Umbutu preparing to leave for a safer location over the border. Grafton knew the rumors were inaccurate since his own operatives were moving to kill the President at this very moment. Manville would take the capital and then himself deposed.

He brought Seville up a small hastily constructed wood tower allowing a view of the shelling back in the city. It was possible some of Manville's guerrilla bands were already within city boundaries.

Seville smiled. " It doesn't look good."

" What doesn't look good for Umbutu looks good for you," said Grafton.

" Exactly."

" You tell Chun I want to meet him personally when Manville takes Aagos. Let's say within twelve hours from now."

" I will gladly arrange that meeting." He faced Grafton. " Whose side are you on?"

" My own."

* * *

Events moved quickly. Word of Umbutu's death in a huge palace explosion came at mid afternoon. Aagos was occupied by six p.m. and Manville addressed the country from a barracks around eight in the evening. Mrs. Collins called later and wanted to see Grafton. When she hung up he received word from Roland James by phone about Chun arriving at the refinery fourteen kilometers south of the city. No assurances existed in this game and Grafton added three additional ammunition clips to his belt as well as a second gun tucked in the same strap. He left the hotel via the stairwell, emerging in the basement sixty seconds later. In the parking garage shadows, he moved along the wall to the moped. He walked it across the garage, away from the ticket booth and physically lifted it up the stairwell leading to the side street. He cracked open the door and peered out outside.

The adjacent main street was wild in celebration even at this hour. Convey truck troops fired rounds into the night air as they moved along with honking buses and cars. A man eating at tiny cafe kept looking at the garage opening and aroused his suspicion.

Chun would not double cross him at this point even though he did not need Grafton to kill Manville and push Seville into power. Grafton would be allowed to live and consummate the deal because of his contacts. Recognition as well as assistance would be necessary after the Seville regime came into being. The guy across the street might not work for Chun, but Grafton suspected Cam Pritchard was shadowing him, which meant possibly Edgar Mitchell was aware of the Chinese connection.

Manville might have caught wind of the plot, but turning back was now impossible. Grafton knew that almost from the minute the woman jogger passed him back in Virginia. The deed was more difficult as he slowly gave his consent. He hoisted the moped into the street and walked it down the sidewalk to an alley extending a few blocks onto another street. He straddled the seat, started the little engine and skidded into traffic.

Immediately, he checked the side mirror. He had a temporary respite in the traffic flow. It was imperative he pressure Chun for the rest of the money. He would make initial contacts on Seville's behest once the General was firmly in power.

He turned toward the highway along the ocean, trying to reason through his solo operation, but given the lack of contacts and information he usually had at his disposal, he could only guess how much this caper had leaked. He believed Collins was working alone but thought Cam Pritchard had found something. Cam may have talked to Edgar Mitchell. Grafton buzzed along, alternatively checking the mirror, as he thought about Chun and his connection to the Chinese. He could size up the man once he met with him, but he could not gauge, as more celebration gunfire broke out, whether he had outlived his usefulness to his new benefactors.

* * *

The expansive white cylinder oil tanks, illuminated by strings of green and yellow lights were arrayed like children's building blocks behind a double chain linked fence strewn with barbed wire. Inside, the storage tanks oil reserves worth billions were spared any attack. Grafton shut off the moped near several metal sheds and headed to the front gate on foot. His hand was firmly grasped

around the gun inside his dark jacket as he approached the well-lit guard post.

Five rebel soldiers were out front and hundreds behind the fence. More soldiers inside spotted Grafton and a green jeep within a small contingent of machine gun totting men pulled from behind one of the tanks. He was instructed to get inside and they crossed the grounds toward a behemoth black and white tanker docked near one of the rear tanks. The upper decks were brightened by spotlights. More soldiers stood guard above.

The jeep skidded to stop on a wooden dock. He followed the soldiers up a suspended rough surfaced stairway swinging in the air toward an opening in the hull. Grafton steadied himself on the ropes and followed the men inside the hull. They jammed into a florescent-lit service elevator. The door closed and they rumbled unsteadily upward for five minutes.

The door slid open. Grafton recognized Chun's pale, deep-set face. He stood in military fatigues and conferred with three Pangaeon soldiers. He had an inappropriate fixed smile. " Mr. Grafton, we were growing concerned. I would like you, for your own security, to stay with the military or risk death."

" From whom?"

" Possibly Manville. Possibly your own people. We are not sure." Chun raised his brows and lit a cigarette. The man had balls lighting a match on the top of an oil tanker. He lifted the pack to Grafton. Grafton shook his head. " May I call you, Craig?"

" I want to know why your boy went for his gun back at the Richambeau."

" I don't know." Chun smiled again and appeared unmoved about the dead men. Grafton also sensed the killings gained him respect with Chun. " I need you, Grafton. I am going to need you for a long time after this is over. If I were going to have you killed I would not bring a suitcase full of money to you. It may have been an innocent move at the hotel. But that is past. I have your money in the German accounts. You are doing an excellent job convincing Manville's people that Seville is not responsible for Umbutu's abuses. Very good."

" Who is Mrs. Collins?"

" Someone who wants your money."

" I see... Take her out."

" Is she a threat to you?"

" I'm not so sure Collins is in it just for the money. And it's because I'm not sure I want her taken out."

" Okay." Chun inhaled the cigarette and put it out on the deck. " What about Manville?"

" I'm meeting with him all this week. I suggest we allow time to resurrect Seville's image. But it's your call," said Grafton.

" Be prepared. When I get the word, you'll get the word. Our recommendations mean nothing."

" I know. What about the accounts? I want those numbers and I don't want any hassles afterwards."

Chun smiled and lit another cigarette. " Interesting."

" It will get very interesting, Mr. Chun if I don't have those numbers. I think I've made it clear I will not go down alone."

" As I said, the remainder of the money is presently in the accounts. I want Seville in power before you get the numbers."

" No." Grafton took one step closer to him. Chun's face was flat. " As you say, this is getting interesting. I will do what I have said."

" I will send the numbers to you."

" No."

This time Chun raised his thin brows. " I don't have that number at my fingertips, Mr. Grafton."

" Get them."

He inhaled and kept his lips half open as he exhaled and thought. Then he nodded his head, showing a slight anger in his eyes. " I will be back in fifteen minutes."

He took two steps toward the elevator and Grafton grabbed his arm and smiled. " Chun, maybe you don't understand." He pulled back his leather coat so Chun could see the guns.

" No, Mr. Grafton, I understand. They told me about you and who you know. I understand." He called one of the soldiers and a few minutes later a portable phone was brought on the deck. Chun placed a call quickly, but waited sometime for it to connect. Both men sat down at an inner table. Ten minutes later Chun spoke with someone named Poltchek. He wrote the numbers on his match book cover and handed it to Grafton. Then he hung up.

" I will verify this with my contacts in London. If these accounts aren't valid, Chun, and I'll know that real soon, and I'll kill you."

Chun seemed unconcerned and reiterated the accounts were valid. Grafton placed the call to London and was connected quickly. But verifying the account would take a little time. He sat back, crossed his arms and waited. All the while he watched Chun. Either this guy was very good or he was not worried. It was a showdown of brutal stares lasting on and off for forty-five minutes.

The phone rang and his London contact confirmed the validity of the accounts and the amount of twenty-three million dollars. He turned to Chun. " It's done."

" And you, Mr. Grafton will do our bidding with the United States. How do they say in the Constitution? So help me God?"

Grafton set down the phone. The money was his. He just had to do what they wanted. " So, help me God."

37

Garrison did not know exactly why Keaton brought them back east. A plain clothes contingent met them at a small New Jersey airport and drove a wide cube truck directly to a fifth floor New York City apartment. The St. Augustine photos were transmitted on some type of machine Garrison did not understand and Keaton spoke continuously on the bedroom phone.

Their attention was on the news reports from the square black wall monitor. Rebel forces now controlled Pangaea and a new president was sworn in. Keaton learned an extraordinary amount of information during the flight east. Grafton, still in Pangaea, probably in Aagos according to sources, had not directly issued the orders resulting in Richard's death and the death of Sam's old friend. But he may have sanctioned his subordinates to take the action. Those subordinates now suspected Keaton had Garrison and the Peters in custody.

Sam spoke as he looked at the set. "What the hell are they worrying about Pangaea anyway?"

" Oil," said Garrison. He watched the commentators bantering and speculating about the small country's future. " They'll show the oil fields again. Power and money, Sam. And we got in the way."

Sam nodded. Nina leaned forward, thinking before she turned to Garrison. " There has to be a connection to what you said about the VED, Roy."

" That's been driving me nuts for two and a half weeks. I guess you could use VED in battle."

" No reports of that," said Sam.

" Nope." An old tape of smoke rising from a rocket attack on a housing complex outside Aagos appeared on the TV. Ambulances pushed through troop-guarded roads, but the microwave transmission faltered, producing a series of disjointed lines across the screen, before switching back to the studio.

" Maybe VED is the ultimate weapon here if they were pushed against the wall."

Sam shook his head and Garrison heard what he thought was a disgusted laugh. " So, this President who controlled the oil fields is dead?"

Garrison nodded as the live feed came back on the screen. It was a much quieter, normal city day in Aagos. " From what I've read Umbutu was raking in the extra cash on tariffs. But the oil flows and it's charged out down the line."

Garrison turned as Keaton emerged from the bedroom. " I'm having those people on the bridge with Grafton checked out and may have something soon."

" Once this is breaks open, Bruce. Do we let it out?"

" Listen, we can't let this out."

" Real nifty," said Garrison. " What are we supposed to do?"

Keaton sat on the sofa's edge. " Well, I look at it two ways. We have the bold way and we have the smart way. We may be faced into the bold way, I don't know."

Sam leaned back and crossed his legs on the coffee table.

" What's the smart way?"

" A new life, a new identity."

" I want the high risk," said Garrison. He walked over and stood before his friend. " Tell me."

" We blackmail Grafton."

Sam moved his hands like windshield wipers. " That's stupid. We're just regular people."

" I don't think we have enough to blackmail him, do we?" asked Garrison, intrigued. Keaton shrugged his shoulders, but did not answer. " Bruce, do your people know you have us?"

" Roy, if I were you I would just trust what I'm saying and leave it at that."

* * *

Around five o'clock some food was brought in and set on the center round table. Garrison pinched French fries and a roast beef sandwich out of the bag as Keaton appeared at the rear room doorway. " I have something."

" On rye or wheat?" asked Garrison.

Keaton smiled. " One of the guys in the picture." Garrison let the wrapped sandwich fall to the table and he stood with the Peters. They all scrambled as if they were playing musical chairs. Keaton looked Garrison in the eye. " It shouldn't come as any surprise."

" Come on, Bruce, what the hell have you got?"

" The curly blonde haired man is William Schultz."

" Who is William Schultz?" asked Sam.

Keaton squinted. " CEO, Prescott Pharmaceuticals."

" The drug." Garrison peered at the photo. " Of course."

" The Campbells were on the right track, Roy. They knew the antidote to the VED."

" But not who made it... I should have got on that."

" Maybe." One of his men handed him a thick printout. " The antidote drug is important. Very important and I think we're onto something here. But that's not what's interesting. Prescott is one of those shadow companies. A dummy corporation if you will."

" Who set it up?"

" My information is that it's used by a number of agencies, including Defense Intelligence."

" Now, that's significant," said Sam. " They make the drug to combat the VED."

" And they grow the VED."

Garrison erupted. " Then they are the ones who were responsible for transporting the vials?"

" Correct. From their Bakersfield plant."

" Then they called in the military to clean it up?"

Keaton shrugged his shoulders. " That is likely but not proven. What concerns me are those outbreaks you tracked, Roy. When they infected the populace, they had stores of the drug ready to go."

" Why?" asked Nina.

" Money. They made millions on those outbreaks."

Garrison's anger grew. He thought about Richard again as well as the people who had died in the outbreaks. " I knew it. People dead for money!"

" It's looking that way."

" Can you tie Grafton into this?" asked Garrison.

Keaton pressed his lips together and shook his head. " Hell no, Grafton would never allow himself to be tied into this. No way. Any connection to his agency would be only speculation."

" Damn it!" Garrison banged his fist on the table, shaking the French fries and Sam's soup. " Who do these sons of bitches think they are? Just infect innocent people with a deadly plague and then let the profits roll in. Unbelievable."

" Those profits were probably laundered through a number of people... We have to face the possibility, and I know you don't want to hear it, people, but we may not be able to decipher this."

" Bullshit!"

" Roy, these people aren't stupid. They don't lay out scenarios so you can figure them out."

" Everybody makes mistakes. Grafton was close to the Prescott Plant. Walking on that bridge was a mistake. The overturned van was a mistake. If we don't have definitive facts then we just have to speculate."

" Roy, you don't understand the realm I'm operating in here."

REALM, MY ARSE. WE'RE TALKING ABOUT THESE BASTARDS FUNDING A DEATH MACHINE FOR PROFIT!

" I will bet money, Bruce, as soon as you have something concrete they'll pull you off this." Keaton said nothing and returned to the phone. Garrison called across the room. " Then what happens to us?"

Sam crossed his arms. " That's a damned good point. What does happen to us if they do taken him off this?"

Garrison was on the verge of grilling him but knew it would do no good. Grafton, like his agency, had covered himself and had virtually no accountability.

38

Manville assumed power immediately after Umbutu's murder but was officially sworn into office on Presidential mansion's southern portico three days later. Grafton did not attend despite the pressure from Manville. He preferred his hotel room, away from Seville. Updated reports, telexed to his computer, verified Chun's long established links to the Chinese government, specifically Lao Hua, a high ranking economic minister. What concerned Grafton the most was Hua's attachments to Incremental Oil, a small Indonesian company. Grafton was now not sure whether he was dealing with the Chinese at all, but, with two million in hand and the twenty-three million safely in the German accounts, it was of little consequence.

Being tucked away on the isolated Aegean Sea island of Galopos would come soon enough. The land was already purchased by proxy, using established identities that could not be traced. Escape from Pangaea would be on a private freighter bringing him to Italy. Train passage would take him north to

Switzerland where he would electronically transfer the account money into sixteen separate accounts around the globe. He would cross the border by train again, drive along the Italian shore and sail by fishing boat. Four days later in the early morning hours as near Galopos, he would take a small dingy ashore and begin his new life as Constantine Areanes.

To satisfy Chun and gain control of the accounts, Manville had to die and Seville ascend to power. The problem was properly finessing Manville's death, while at the same time keeping Edgar Mitchell at bay. Chun needed Grafton to assure United States recognition of the Seville regime. With Roland James as an emissary, Grafton was able to fashion an understanding. What happened after Seville became President was Chun's problem and it was agreed nothing more was required of Grafton.

The French style gold and white phone rang. Grafton crossed the room and swept the receiver to his ear. " Grafton."

" Craig, Cam Pritchard."

" Cam... Tell me you have good news."

" I think we're onto something, Craig. We are almost certain the Peters linked up with Garrison and Bruce Keaton two days ago.

We're about to get information from New York. I think we have them. Keaton has been making too many inquiries through his contacts."

" Excellent. Get them out of the way, Cam."

" What about Bruce Keaton?"

" Bruce knows the rules. He's a liability now and I'm sure he knows that. Call me when you've stabilized the situation."

" I will... Craig."

" What is it, Cam?"

" Lake Shar is blue in the summer time."

Grafton held the phone tightly. " Yes, it is. Are you the only one who thinks so?"

" Presently."

" Let's hope the waters always remain calm and blue."

" Craig, if you go out on the Lake and... it's really none of my business to tell you about sailing, go out with the men. I really don't think the woman should invade that domain."

" Really?" asked Grafton.

" Sailing is a man's sport. With a man you can give definite orders and you know where he stands. A woman is too busy taking in the incremental sights along the shore."

" I will be taking a vacation. Lake Shar is a busy place in the summer time, Cam."

" Vacations are enticing. Other people get envious," said Pritchard.

" Isn't envy a mortal sin?"

" I guess that depends. Listen, enough travel talk. I'll call you when we wrap up the operation. It's night here, so I'll say good night, Craig."

" Good night, Cam."

Collins had to die. He turned on the TV set. All channels carried the ceremony at the palace and now showed troops marching by a reviewing stand. Grafton scanned the crowd. Collins sat near to Seville and nameless dignitaries. She wore a stunning red velvet dress and matching hat as if she were first lady of the land. Beneath her elegant exterior was a clever and potential deadly woman. Her demeanor at Seville's residence and sleeping with Grafton was a ploy. Once they had both Umbutu and Manville

dead, she would do what Incremental told her. As the instrument of Grafton's death she could divert the Swiss money to other sources.

He could maintain the status quo by keeping the two million and forgetting the Swiss accounts, complicating the real estate transaction. It would also force him to find other income as the years went on in obscurity and would prove difficult. Yet, if he went gunning for Collins, he would reveal his hand to Incremental Oil.

Cam Pritchard, even if he knew all the details, might be drawn in. The fact he talked to Grafton in vague terms about the plot and pointed the finger at Collin's connections to Incremental Oil, signaled strongly no one else in the agency knew about it. He might want something in return.

Grafton pushed his forehead into his closed fist and closed his eyes. He was tempted to leave the country right now. Everything had to be neatly balanced but the game was now too complicated. He had done this kind of thing for twenty-four years. It was merely a matter of reasoning it through, knowing the proper decision and implementing his course.

39

Garrison was skunking Sam Peters at Monopoly. After one hour and fifty-five minutes he had red hotels on every major property past Atlantic Ave. Sam had a laughable house assortment on St. Charles, States and Virginia as well as all the railroads. Garrison gloated across the kitchen table. Sam lifted the dice into his hand, but Nina stopped him. Even she thought the contest was over.

Garrison waved his brightly colored bankroll in front of Sam's face.

" Don't bother, Sam."

Sam teeth protruded from his beard.

" Garrison, if you think I'm just going to give up and hand the board over to you..."

" That's exactly what I want you to do."

Sam held the dice in his hand as if he was going to throw them. His hesitation upset Garrison all the more. As far as he was concerned the game was over.

" You have to get a two in order to land on the damned railroad. You get a three or a five and you're dead. You haven't got two grand to pay me for Boardwalk."

Sam grinned again and rolled the dice as Keaton came in the front door. Garrison was livid when Sam rolled a six and advanced to Go."

" Two hundred, Roy."

" You lucked out. You did. Bruce, he lucked out."

Keaton looked tired and tried to smile. " Roy, can I talk to you for a second?"

" Sure." He counted out the two yellow hundred dollar bills to Sam and pointed at him as he looked at Nina. " He lucked out."

" Sam likes to squeak by."

Garrison rose and walked over to Keaton. " What's up, Bruce?"

" I met with my old friend..."

" I thought you'd bring him in. What are we chopped liver?"

Keaton did not laugh. " He doesn't want to see you. This is very serious now. Grafton's people know we're in New York."

" Have your people get us out of here."

" I'm surprised you haven't figured it out. Maybe you don't want to figure it out."

" Figure out what, Bruce?"

" When we left the beach house... My people... they were coming."

All expression drained from Garrison's face. " You're kidding me."

" I wish I was. There is a massive hunt on for all of us. If we're going to pressure Grafton, we sure as hell better do it now. My friend will have a jet at an airport well outside the city within the hour. We're out of here now."

" No argument." Garrison's face shriveled and he shook his head.

" Why did... You didn't have to save my tail?"

" I like you. "

" Try again. "

" We were and still are marked... liabilities. Our only hope right now is to somehow get to Grafton and blackmail him. But we're dealing with a very sophisticated individual."

" Everybody's vulnerable, Bruce. Even Grafton."

* * *

Keaton hurried outside to the car. Garrison left the unfinished Monopoly game on the table. He pointed at Sam. " Don't worry, Sam. I'll give you another chance once we get on then plane."

" I need another chance. What a wipe out."

Nina walked quickly from the bedroom. " I'm ready."

" Let's go."

Garrison opened the hallway door. But he heard some commotion below. A clear voice man called out. " Upstairs!"

Garrison pushed them back inside the apartment. " Shit!"

" What happened?" yelled Nina.

Garrison closed the door. " Someone's in the building."

She put her hands to her mouth. " Oh, my God!"

He popped open the window and looked down into the side street. A rusted metal ladder jutted from the corner of the

building. He quickly motioned them out of the room. " Down here!"

" What about Keaton?" yelled Sam. He and Nina followed Garrison to the next window.

" Never mind Keaton." He pushed up the window. " You first, Sam."

Sam crawled outside and Garrison quickly helped Nina onto the ladder. He was about to put his foot through the opening when he heard people bounding up the hall. Somebody kicked the front door. It was too late to escape now. He shut the window to protect the Peters, dove behind the sofa and slid across the rug.

The door crashed against the wall. Garrison watched new white sneakers and jeans move by the sofa into the bedroom. He hoped Sam and Nina were not thrown into the crossfire, but where was Keaton?

" I don't see them!" yelled the guy in the apartment.

" They can't be far," said another voice from the hall.

When they were back in the hall, Garrison moved on his belly toward the window. He peered over the casing. Four sedans and more men were in the square ahead, but he did not see Sam and

Nina nor Keaton. He stood and ran toward the hall. It was a gamble going down these stairs.

From the staircase window more unmarked cars were parked across the street and one man ran around with a short wave radio in his hand. Several hundred yards down the road Keaton's yellow station wagon was partially hidden in a donut shop parking lot. Maybe he had already picked up Sam and Nina. Garrison moved softly down the steps, but feared someone would spring out at him at anytime.

His fingertips traced the thin wood wallboards as he tiptoed by the second floor's open door. Someone came up the stairs and he heard the walkie-talkie. He darted into the vacant apartment, but needed to get outside and run to the donut shop.

Garrison ran along the apartment's front windows. They had the cordoned off the street, but Keaton's car was still next to the donut shop. Going down the side ladder was impossible from this apartment. Without thinking he pushed up the window and leaped through the air. He crunched the top of a parked van, slid down the windshield and hood and scraped his hands against the tar.

Recovering, he sprinted down the sidewalk and his hands stung. More gunfire sent him into a headfirst dive off the sidewalk, and he rolled toward the building. Bricks chipped apart above him as he scrambled into a jeweler's shop.

The old man behind the counter ran to the door. " I heard shooting."

" Get me out front! Now!"

" This way... I don't want to die!"

Light shone through a door at the end of a dim corridor. The other street was visible as he raced forward, pulled open the door and looked to his right. He was a hundred yards from the stakeout. Squeezing outside and ducking down, he rushed along the building toward the donut shop. But the yellow station wagon was gone.

" Damn!"

Delay was deadly and barreled toward the gas station. Garrison quickly moved inside to survey the situation, but he saw a phone on the wall near the garage. A mechanic popped off lug nuts with a compression hose. He frantically punched in Keaton's

phone number. The line rang and connected, but Keaton did not answer. " I'm in the gas station."

He slammed down the receiver. Some of the employees looked back toward the apartment. He moved past the counter where people were signing their gas slips and stepped outside. Across the street Keaton's car slowly pulled out of a school entrance near a playground.

He waited until Keaton turned into the gas station. Then he casually walked outside. Back toward the apartment cars blocked the road now and two men had guns pointed at the jewelry store owner. Garrison opened the wagon door.

" Where are Sam and Nina?"

Keaton drove past the other car at the pumps and slowly left the station.

" I thought they were with you!"

Keaton drove like an old lady, very gradually moving away from the station and the apartment block. Then he accelerated slowly.

Garrison looked through the dirty rear window. " Bruce, you can't leave them back there!"

" What the hell are we going to do?"

" Go back there!"

" We go back and we're dead." The car moved quickly through traffic.

" *Bruce!*"

Keaton said nothing as Garrison pleaded.

IS THIS WHAT THEY TEACH YOU AT COP SCHOOL, BRUCE? SAVE YOUR OWN ASS? LEAVE SAM AND NINA OUT THERE FOR TARGET PRACTICE...

Keaton ran the first red light and banked a left, skirting the oncoming traffic. Garrison fearfully looked in the mirror as they edged toward the freeway. Keaton passed a slow moving truck and then shot up the ramp.

Garrison leaned forward in the seat. " They didn't deserve to be killed."

" You don't know that."

" Cut the bullshit. And how the hell are we ever going to fly out? They have radar! They have military surveillance!"

" We'll get out." He pushed the station wagon engine hard enough to shake the car. " Listen, Roy... the other guy in the picture."

" I don't give God damn about then other guy. What is it with you people? All part of the job is it?"

" He's Ronald Tillman. He's associated with what you might call a criminal element."

Garrison clenched his fist and stared at the city buildings flying by his window. " So what?"

" Tillman is in high finance. People who can send money whizzing around the globe and nobody knows about it. The money from the drug company was going to the rebels in Pangaea. Millions around Congress and the Administration. This is a major operation and if it gets out there will be implications worldwide. That's why they hung me out to dry."

" Like you did Sam and Nina?"

" Shut up, Roy! What should I have done? Tell me... you've got all the answers!"

Garrison shook his head and closed his eyes. An odd silence lingered as they headed north in the warmer May air. Trees

blossomed green and a sweet fragrance blew off the river. But his thoughts were consumed with Sam and Nina. It was not Keaton's fault.

" I'm sorry."

Before Keaton could speak, the car lurched and the engine whined.

" We gut problems!"

Two sedans wove through the traffic behind the station wagon. " I thought we beat them. "

" So did I. " Keaton swerved, the wagon's tires screeching as he bumped a slow moving compact and then careened down the off ramp. When he reached the street below he flew past the stop sign, cut through the side traffic as he accelerated. Horns blew and cars spread apart like sand in a windstorm as he skidded up the southbound ramp.

Somehow they moved south, back toward the city. He veered into the fast lane at eighty miles an hour. Garrison clutched the front seat, half closing his eyes as the New York City skyline approached again and he wondered if they would get away.

Keaton left the highway, slowed and merged with the street traffic a few moments later. Along the river, he pulled next to a black Oldsmobile parked along the street and stopped abruptly. Garrison trailed Keaton out of the station wagon to the black sedan.

Keaton had the keys on his ring and opened the doors. The Oldsmobile had tinted windows and air conditioning. His friend casually put on some classical music and coolly started back to the highway. Garrison closed his eyes and leaned back in the seat. When they were out of the city, Keaton nudged him. " Listen to what I'm going to tell you." The bright sun hit his eyes.

" Everything I know is now typed up on a new web site, along with the bridge photos. It's not a registered domain name. V-3970-A95. "

" It doesn't sound like a regular address. "

" Nobody can find it on the search engines. You have to know those numbers and letters. All in caps. Listen, people I know will release that information on my say so or if I am killed. The whole Prescott Pharmaceuticals thing will come out. Payments laundered through the banks to the Pangaeian rebels. We are working on

another angle. There is some kind of Chinese influence in this thing and we don't know exactly what."

" So, if they get us or you..."

Keaton pulled a card from his pocket. The phone numbers of his contacts from around the country were written in red ink. " I'm going to arrange it so my people will not release anything until they hear from us."

" Gives us the edge."

" Maybe, if we aren't shot first. After that chase in the station wagon, I'm having concerns." He looked ahead, checked a glove compartment map. Then he looked up. " Roy, I made the best decision I could. I didn't want to leave them back there."

" I know."

HE'S SMARTER THAN I GAVE HIM CREDIT FOR. THE BUGGER HAD THE BACK UP CAR. HE KNOWS HOW TO MAKE THE RIGHT MOVES OR YOU'D BE DEAD BACK THERE ON THE SIDEWALK, ROY. AND HE'S GOT THE POSION PILL ON THE WEB SITE. EITHER GRAFTON YIELDS OR IT ALL BREAKS OPEN. GOOD MAN, BRUCE KEATON.

* * *

Less than an hour later Keaton left the highway and traveled onto a state road. The rural airport consisted of a rounded green hangar and several concrete runways with no terminal tower. At the far end of the field was the sleek blue and white jet capable of getting them out of the country quickly.

Keaton left the car near a maintenance garage and was out first. Garrison marched behind him to a pay phone inside the hangar. Keaton placed a call lasting less than a minute, as if he were changing a will, let somebody know Garrison was aware of the web site number. When he hung up the phone Keaton gave him a wink, a half smile and headed toward the counter. Garrison gazed across the runway toward the jet.

HOW THE HELL IS THIS HOT SHOT PILOT GOING TO LEAVE THE U.S. WITHOUT LIGHTING UP EVERY AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER SCREEN ON THE EAST COAST? AND WHAT ABOUT THE DAMNED MILITARY RADAR?

" Let's go," said Keaton, putting some papers in his pocket.

They went through the glass doors and started across the concrete. Three hundred yards away the jet's side hatch opened and a ramp extended out the to cement. Two guys in bright

colored jogging suits and automatic weapons stood in the shadows behind the open door.

Garrison looked at Keaton. " Your guys, I hope."

Keaton nodded and motioned him up the stairs. He moved inside and thought of Sam and Nina as he stared at the metal machine gun barrels. The extensive cabin had an overhead TV monitor, counter and about ten seats. Keaton seated him next to the window. Two pilots up front threw switches as the engines roared.

" Relax... Or try to. We'll be in the air for some time. Once we get over the ocean, we'll eat."

The outside hatch was secured with great alacrity and the two men with the automatic weapons positioned themselves next to the outside windows.

SENTRY DUTY. HOW THE HELL ARE YOU GOING TO PULL THIS OFF, KEATON? YOU HAD A COZY JOB AND COULD HAVE CRUISED INTO RETIREMENT. THERE'S SOMETHING ELSE, BRUCE BUDDY.

He buckled his seat belt as the jet immediately moved forward. Keaton looked out the window once and then casually took out his legal pad as if he were on a simple business trip.

Amidst a barrage of radio signals from the cabin the jet was at the end a long runway five minutes later. Garrison was thrown back against the seat as they shot forward, the jet reaching a high velocity very quickly, and they angled up into the blue sky. Keaton must called in old favors to divert this flight to Pangaea.

" Bruce, how does one just drop in on Pangaea? There must be world wide intelligence resources would probably be after us."

Keaton shook his head from the forward seat, facing the pilots as he spoke. " We're supposed to be flying to the Canary Islands. And the plane eventually will. After we land off shore from Pangaea."

Garrison stared at Keaton's dry sandy hair, knowing that the agent had gotten himself boxed in. Outside the window the blue ocean expanse moved like a continuous conveyer below them. Garrison exhaled slowly and thought about Sam and Nina. It might be possible for them to survive, but not for long. Somehow he felt responsible or maybe he could have prevented what happened.

Events and the mounting Pangaeian pressure was quickly overshadowing the loss. As a cynical middle-aged reporter he doubted whether an individual like Craig Grafton, no matter how much they had on him, would willingly be blackmailed.

40

He awoke to the low hum of the mighty jet engines high above the Atlantic. A brightly colored cable news satellite signal illuminated the darkness. Keaton, his tie loosened and his blazer draped across one of the empty seats, leaned on the counter under the monitor.

" Roy, Manville, the rebel leader. He's dead. "

Garrison looked at the news report and then back at Keaton.

" Where does that leave our Mr. Grafton?"

" Unknown." Keaton turned toward a live shot, interrupted by a faltering microwave transmission. Two correspondents were stationed in a hotel window overlooking quiet candle lit streets below.

" How convenient," said Garrison, studying the screen. " I don't understand, they funded the rebels to victory. Why would they kill Manville?"

" Something else is obviously afoot." Keaton stood upright. " I still have every intention of blackmailing Grafton."

Garrison leaned forward in the seat. " Bruce, while I admire your cunning... I keep thinking... Can we really compete with Grafton?"

" I don't know. Remember is on that unregistered web site, including everything you had on Prescott. I have let it be known through my contacts that everything will be released if I am killed. I check in at this number every seventy-two hours." He handed one of three cards to Garrison. It was a San Francisco number along with the web site numbers and letters.

" Should I memorize this?"

" Exactly. Yes, you are my back up. If anything happens to me, you have to check in. I don't want Grafton's people to trace the number and kill my contacts. But once Grafton is aware that we have the pictures, that we have the background of the operation, I'm betting he won't kill us. He can't kill us because everything will come out. Not only will that ruin him, but it will expose a major scandal. Let's hope I'm right."

Garrison smiled. " I hope you *are* right."

The reporters in Aagos tried to link into the government run radio station. General Seville was about to address the nation.

Back in the United States, someone produced a graphic on the screen, a picture of Seville in his green military fatigues, superimposed over a colorful Pangaea map.

" Incredible how these things work," said Keaton.

" You mean the facade?"

" Yeah, what really happens behind the scenes. Like ghost writers."

The reporter, clutching the microphone and his earpiece simultaneously, spoke to his colleague. " I believe I am listening to General Seville, formerly chief general and strategist for the late President Umbutu, who is now broadcasting to the nation, announcing..." He continued to listen to his earpiece.

" ... announcing that he is firmly in control of the nation's capital and the countryside. He has confirmed that incredibly the new President, Manville is dead. The Umbutu regime, of course has been accused of numerous human rights abuses but the General has managed to stay clear of this record and is liked both by his countrymen and the United States."

Garrison furrowed his brow. " Why would the rebels take in a guy so closely linked with Umbutu?"

" They need stability and Seville offers that." Keaton tapped his fingers on the counter. " Grafton must be in on this. Nothing happens here without his say-so."

" I don't understand this."

" You don't have to." Keaton yawned. " It's late. Let's get some shuteye."

" No complaint from me."

* * *

The plane banked in the morning sun. A small island, maybe fifteen miles long and half as wide with a single concrete runway, was set alone in the blue-green ocean, away from the fuzzy mainland to the east. Keaton was with the pilot as they wafted downward and glided slowly toward the island runway. Garrison did not share Keaton's confidence. How could Grafton and his people allow a web site to hold them hostage? Yet, he acknowledged the possibility of containing the scandal being within the agency; around Congress and the Administration. Maybe Keaton could hold Grafton at bay.

" Where are we, Bruce?"

" Buckle up, Roy. We're off the coast of Pangaea." Keaton moved to his seat as the aircraft continued the gradual descent.

" I keep thinking of the Peters little baby, Jason. I'd like to put a gun to this guy Grafton's head."

Keaton nodded. " I agree, but you have to think it through. Thinking it through is the only way. "

The jet moved as smoothly as if it were on a track linked to the concrete runway ahead. Garrison stared out the window as the mainland sunk away and the ground lifted up to meet the plane. A faded olive van exited the two story silver terminal as the jet converged on the runway. The engines roared as they moved past the woods and the distant terminal, and taxied down at the far end. Garrison knew he was off the coast of Africa, near the heart of the Green Haze operation, set up by Grafton and the others. So much had happened since he decided to follow up on Mrs. Campbell's lead. He thought of the Campbells, Richard, and Sam and Nina Peters, and all the VED victims of this operation.

" Welcome to Pangaea." Keaton, standing, looked rested despite his wrinkled shirt. " Outside temperature is eighty-one, the skies are clear. Another day, another president."

The van stopped ahead as the jet rolled back.

" Craig Grafton and his merry men take over a sovereign country," said Garrison. " All funded by your friendly VED outbreaks around the globe."

Garrison nodded as Keaton said something to the pilots and then turned to Garrison. " Who the hell would believe it?" Keaton walked stiffly and ground his teeth.

" What if Grafton doesn't capitulate?"

Keaton turned with his hand on the hatchway lever. " He has no damned choice. If he doesn't fold, Roy, we're all dead. He won't waste any time. You wanna go back and run for the rest of your natural life?"

Garrison crossed the jet cabin with his hands in his pants pockets. He stared into Keaton's solid eyes. " Nope."

Keaton nodded and popped open the stairway. The warm, humid air flowed into the cabin. As Garrison's eyes adjusted to the bright sun outside Keaton scurried down the stairs. A tall man

with straight sandy brown hair and green combat fatigues listened carefully as Keaton became animated. He nodded as the man uttered a few sentences. Then he turned and trotted back up the hatchway stairs.

" One of our tour guides?" asked Garrison.

" This guy was a apart of Green Haze, the Pangaea take over."

"I have to reiterate that we're not talking about amateurs here who are just going to throw up their hands because you have a web site."

" There's more, Roy."

" What do you mean? "

" The British guy outside wants money. He claims he has more on Grafton. Personal stuff, but he wants a piece of the action. If he does have personal stuff, we maybe able to put that on the site, also. "

" Personal stuff? Grafton will kill us..."

" I am counting on him being more reasonable than that."

" I sure as hell hope you're right."

* * *

The acne scared British guy smiled at Garrison. He had a chipped front tooth and called himself Nate. Garrison impulsively sized him up as an opportunist and phony. As the van raced across the runway Nate pontificated about the struggle in Pangaea as if he had personally led the troops. They were driven to cottages a few hundred yards from the terminal. Several black men ran out as the van stopped.

" Manville is dead!" one of them shouted.

" We know that," said Keaton as he leaped from the van.

" General Seville has just announced he will lead the country."

The British soldier did not appear rattled. " Seville was Umbutu's general. Well liked. I told you there was more. Come with me." He led them inside the third cottage with the red aluminum roof, shut the door, but stood vigilant near the window. " Listen, having Seville in place is very beneficial to Grafton. Grafton has sold out. Sold out big time. It involves huge amounts of money."

" Do you have proof of this?" asked Garrison.

Nate stared at him for a second, his lips barely parted, and then he turned to Keaton. " All I want is a portion of what Grafton is getting."

Keaton nodded. " Agreed. Agreed. What the hell is going on?"

Nate looked out the window again and then waved them over. " Grafton made a deal with the bloody Chinese. You must know now, the importance of the oil off shore. Umbutu was charging everyone high tariffs and reaping in the profits. That is why they overthrew him. No big surprise there. The surprise is the Chinese wanted in on the oil action. Seville is their man. Grafton either had Manville killed or did it himself after he set up Manville to embrace Seville. So, Seville has the dead Manville's blessing."

" How much money is involved here?" asked Keaton.

" Twenty-five mil."

Garrison looked at Keaton. " Million? To Grafton?"

" That's squat. This oil is worth billions," said Nate.

" How much do you want?"

" Fifteen."

Keaton walked within inches of his face. " I get you a hundred thousand if you keep your mouth shut."

" I'll take it," said Nate and he checked the window again. " Here's what we have to do. A small turbo prop will fly us to the mainland, but far enough from Aagos. I have arranged transportation back to the capital. I will contact Grafton before that time."

" Who else knows Grafton's arrangement?" asked Garrison.

" The Chinese of course." He shook his head. " But that's it. No American knows this... that I'm aware of. It's scope is very limited."

" We have to worry about the Chinese double crossing Grafton,"
said Keaton.

" Oh, no. They need Grafton to smooth this over with the U.S. That's the deal. Once the U.S. approves... Grafton will disappear, believe me. We have to move quickly."

TWENTY-FIVE MILLION DOLLARS. IF YOU'RE GONNA SELL OUT, YOU MIGHT AS WELL DO IT BIG. THIS GUY WILL BE LONG GONE AND MAY NOT CARE ABOUT THE SCANDAL BEING EXPOSED. OR EVEN HIS OWN ESPIONAGE ACTIVITIES.

Garrison hit Keaton's arm. " Bruce, if you've got twenty-five mil and your agency's activities are going to come out, why care about what we might expose?"

" Good point."

Nate spoke in a hushed voice. " Timing is everything and old Grafton is mighty cagey...."

Keaton thought for a few seconds, rubbing his thumb along his lower lip.

" I need to get to Grafton as soon as we reach Aagos and make him call off his pit bulls back home."

" Don't be naive," said Garrison. " He'll tell us anything to pacify us and then we're dead."

" No, I think we've got him. I have to get this Chinese stuff on the web site."

About two hundred yards from the hanger a dirty white propeller driven plane buzzed down the runway. It looked similar to a city commuter plane seem in any United States airport. The propellers hung down from the maroon trimmed wings and Garrison counted twelve windows. As the plane rolled closer two pilots were visible inside the cockpit.

Nate turned toward them, his smile now far removed and he spoke more like an instructor at a military academy. " The flight will take thirty-five minutes. But don't have any illusions. We are dealing with a number of variables here. You have Grafton himself, top notch and daring. You have the Chinese who are not in the habit of taking prisoners. You have Seville, the old Manville alliances. Umbutu's people. And Defense Intelligence. And other interests?"

" What other interests? asked Keaton.

" Woman named Marva Collins. I don't know what her angle is. But watch out for her. All told, this is very tricky."

Nate produced a phony chuckle and headed outside. Garrison followed him and Keaton into the hot sun. " I don't see us ever making it back home, Bruce."

" Will you stop, Roy? If we're going to be killed, we're going to be killed. I won't die listening to you tell me how bad things are."

Garrison pretended to zip his mouth. The plane stopped less than a hundred feet from the cottage. They marched with Nate across the grass and up a narrow aluminum ramp. The plane's interior was dusty and crammed with narrow aisle seats. Nate

went up with the pilots as Garrison bucked his belt and turned toward the scratched plastic window.

GRAFTON NOT ONLY HAD THE BALLS TO GO AROUND CONGRESS AND THE PRESIDENT, BUT WAS NOW SUBVERTING HIS OWN AGENCY'S MISSION AND ALIGNING HIMSELF WITH THE CHINESE. AND KEATON WAS GOING TO TAKE THIS GUY ON?

After a rough takeoff through shifting air currents, the plane was airborne a few minutes later and traveled at a much lower altitude than the jet. Ripples formed long squiggle patterns across the silver blue ocean below. Ahead, as the engines vibrated throughout the cabin, the Pangaeian landscape, so distant from home, appeared below the spinning propellers. It was not even a matter of getting his life back. He wanted to make Grafton pay for Richard's death and all the other atrocities.

41

By late afternoon they rumbled down an overgrown dirt jungle road in a 1967 silver Chrysler. The gas tank gauge was stuck on empty, but they were assured by Nate the tank was filled, and the capital city less than two hours away. Hotel accommodations were reserved away from the city. Back at the mainland landing strip, Nate, calling himself Roland James, spoke directly with Grafton about unrelated matters and requested a meeting, which was promptly rejected. Garrison wondered whether Grafton suspected anything or was tipped off. Nate opted not to mention the web site, but instead merely said he would call Grafton the next day. Keaton agreed with the strategy because it did not allow Grafton any defensive time. They all concurred the web site threat must be immediate.

Grafton occupied Garrison's thoughts as they passed through a dense thicket along the dirt road. He focused on the photograph and Grafton's gray hair and wire rim glasses atop the St. John's River bridge. Just killing Grafton would soothe his soul, but

accomplish nothing. Grafton's people would still chase him and Keaton. As the shadows grew deep and a poverty-laden town sprung up in the wilderness, he realized they had to persevere, but they would need phenomenal luck.

* * *

A quick volley of shots shook the half asleep Garrison and he sat up quickly. Ahead, five or six soldiers blocked the road. Again, they fired shots into the sky.

" Who are these clowns?" asked Keaton.

Nate slowed the car and leaned toward the driver's side window.

" Umbutu loyalists. Let me handle this."

The soldiers surrounded the car and stuck their gun barrels through the open windows. One of them shouted something inaudible. Garrison thought they were drunk. Nate positioned his head over the barrel so it stuck into his chest.

" Do you know who the hell I am? "

The soldier looked perplexed. " No."

Nate threw his credentials out the window, the man bent over and grasped the small packet in his hand. He nodded his head and showed the documents to the other men. Then he handed the papers back to Nate. His voice deepened and spoke in broken English. " Tell me, Mr. James. Why you riding round the back waters?" He leaned over. " With Americans? Why?"

" These people are loyal to General Seville and have been checking the villages for problems."

He thrust the gun forward and Nate winced. " What problems?"

" You listen to me, you son of a bitch. I slowed here because you were blocking the road. You can kill us and have every American in this country and the arriving troops will be after your ass. Get your guns out of the car and go!"

The guns were still thrust into the back seat windows. One word from this guy and his men would commence firing. Someone shouted out an order and the guns were retracted simultaneously. The soldier nearest Nate waved him through. Nate raised the dust as he accelerated down the isolated road. Garrison looked out the rear window as the soldiers fired into the sky again.

Nate squinted in the rear view mirror. " No balls. The guy has no balls."

" That's okay," said Garrison as he turned away from the back window.

Keaton, his arm resting on the passenger side open window looked up at Nate. " You damned lucky, *Mr. James.*"

Nate kept driving, took a turn through a village and onto a paved road. They moved faster now, crossing a green girder bridge over a fast moving, muddy river. On the far side was a highway cutting through the forested hills. Nate left the main road and traveled up a bridge embankment to a wider road. He moved the car quickly up a long red clay hill. Skyscrapers, less than fifteen miles away, popped over the crest and a expansive, sloping plain spread across the sun lit ocean to the west. A few oil platforms blazed off shore and a black cloud dissipated downwind. Surrounding the road were dilapidated houses, tents and huts extending down to the newer city buildings.

" Across the bay you can see the culprit." Nate pointed to the oil wells standing like trophies silhouetted against the hazy vermilion sky. " Without the oil there would be no revolution. No

ying for power. They're all like wild dogs around the raw meat. No difference. You, me, all of them."

More cars passed them now, a few military vehicles, and some trucks. A large refinery with huge white tanks now shaded the orange sunset farther down along the shore. Black and red tankers lay anchored off shore.

Near the inner city, where the highway bent away from the sea, Nate moved onto the tightly packed streets. People were dressed in brightly colored but soiled and worn garb and the cars were vintage. Nate edged around the traffic and toward one of the taller buildings. He slowed at a parking garage ahead and pulled onto the sidewalk.

" You enter through the garage." He took out a bright chrome room key stamped 605. " Head right up to the room and stay there. Give me fifteen minutes."

Keaton nodded and looked Garrison in the eye. Then he opened the door and stepped onto the busy sidewalk. Garrison followed and almost immediately, Nate pulled away and blended into the traffic.

" Can we trust him, Bruce?"

Keaton smiled, not even answering the question. They started down the sidewalk and headed directly for the parking garage entrance. Loud buses spewed forth heavy exhaust and combined with the older cars, lacking mufflers, produced an ear deafening racket. Garrison glanced forward, catching a glimpse of the silver Chrysler far ahead in the traffic jam. Then he looked directly up the hotel facade toward the darkening sky. Grafton was somewhere in this city, aware of Nate's presence in Aagos, but hopefully unaware that Garrison and Keaton were with him.

Half a mile away light burst across the street traffic.

IT'S A BOMB. A BOMB! NATE'S GONE. THEY BOMBED THE CAR!

As Keaton turned, Garrison grabbed his arm. " They blew up the car, Bruce!"

Keaton clamped his teeth together as he spoke. " Inside. Inside, Roy."

Garrison leaped through the concrete doorway. A bright orange glow within the distant traffic sent people scattering and opaque smoke leaked up the street canyon. Keaton pulled him into

a stairwell. They ran up the urine-laden stairs and stumbled into the lobby.

A woman with long blonde hair watched them move forward. The bomb blast confusion was just beginning to impact the lobby as people ran to phones and the front desk. But Keaton led Garrison up the hotel stairs. They climbed six floors and entered a white painted corridor with a green flowery rug. Keaton scanned the room numbers and motioned him left. Near the end window, he stopped and thrust the key into the adjacent room door.

* * *

Fire truck hoses shot powerful water bursts skyward and smoke spread thick along the street. Once again he had escaped death. Had the soldiers or someone hired by Craig Grafton placed something under the car?

" Roy." Keaton waved him away from the window.

" Who do you think did it?"

He shook his head. " We need to find Grafton quickly." Keaton checked the door lock and swung the chain. He then lifted the phone.

" Our luck is running out, Bruce. We're going to have to kill him."

" Easier said than done," said Keaton.

Back at the window ambulances and military vehicles pushed through the congested East African city. Keaton tried to call the American Embassy and covered the receiver. " If we kill Grafton, and I question whether we have the means to do that, we still have to deal with the situation."

Garrison leaned against the window. " Look what he just did!"

" I understand that, Roy." Keaton pinched his brow and closed his eyes. His mind, programmed from years of training and field experience clicked flawlessly

" No.. We have to put Grafton in a position where he protects us against his own agency. Where they can't do anything because we have the goods on him. We need him alive."

" I say just kill him."

" Nothing would give me greater pleasure than knocking off the bastard. You know that."

" And you know what he did to my brother."

Keaton uncovered the receiver. " Craig Grafton, please. You tell Mr. Grafton that Bruce Keaton and Roy Garrison are still alive and have information for Mr. Grafton." Keaton listened and then waited. " He knows who we are."

" What did they say?"

" They're trying to track him down, but want to know who the hell I am."

Garrison repeated the web site designation in his mind and then he checked the number. He looked at his watch. There was still a forty-eight hour window before they had to call Keaton's contacts and assure them they were still alive.

" No, I won't tell *you* where I am," said Keaton. " I will call back in fifteen minutes. Have Grafton connected."

He lowered the phone.

" Grafton doesn't have to do anything. We can't compete with this guy. I think the whole thing-"

Keaton was still holding the receiver on the phone. " Roy, you're in a world that doesn't work like the real world. It's a semantic world. Grafton could not have known we had the web site info. He wouldn't have placed the bomb. But Grafton did know we were in that car."

" Unbelievable."

Garrison turned back to the street scene below. He wanted to kill Grafton himself and even if it meant blowing apart the checkmated scenario they were setting up. " We're sitting ducks for Grafton."

" Roy, knock it off... His only option is the status quo."

* * *

Keaton made one long distance call to the United States and in fifteen seconds summarized Keaton's dealings with the Chinese. Then they waited in hotel room 605. About half an hour later the phone's distinctive doorbell ring echoed throughout the room. Garrison lay sprawled across the bed as Keaton leaped to his feet

and again grabbed the receiver. The embassy people told him Grafton was standing by on another line.

" Bruce, this is Craig Grafton."

Keaton's stomach jolted. " Craig, I think you know why I'm here."

" I understand a good portion of it."

" Not all of it, Craig. Make sure this line is free."

" It is," said Grafton, but Keaton did not believe him.

" For your protection."

A pause lasted for at least five seconds. Grafton must have been sorting it through his mind. " Call me at 167-4950-003."

The line went dead and Keaton called the front desk immediately. He requested they dial Grafton's number. His heart pounded when the line rang.

" What do you know, Bruce?"

" I have Garrison with me."

" Interesting."

" Craig, this is very simple. I have people back in the U.S. who are expecting a check-in call from one of us every seventy-two hours. If they don't get that call, information on a confidential web

site will be released to three sources: A Congressional oversight committee, a well placed National Security aide in the Administration, and the media will be blitzed."

His voice displayed no emotion. " What do you have?"

" Pictures on the bridge in St. Augustine. Those pictures show you conferring with Bill Schultz from Prescott Pharmaceuticals Warren Tillman from Overseas Financial. We know about Green Haze and the VED outbreaks. And what you guys did to raise money for the rebels here in Pangaea."

" Specify."

" I thought I did. You brought the VED around the world. We have it all documented, Craig. The money was laundered for many purposes, primary being this war effort."

For a few seconds he said nothing. " What do you want? Where can we meet?"

" We don't need to meet. You can tell us right now. We -"

" The oil refineries south of the city in an hour."

" No, there is no need to meet."

" What do you want? Money?"

" We know about the Chinese, Craig."

This time the silence lasted much longer. " You're bluffing."

" It's all on the site, Craig. Twenty-five million dollars to kill Manville and put Seville in place." The line hissed and crackled during the next pause. " You remain here and facilitate the Chinese interests, allowing them to gain a sphere of influence over the oil industry."

" Damn you!"

" You can't kill us Craig and you have to deal with us."

Keaton heard shuffling and outside traffic. Grafton was moving about, again he heard horns blowing and engines whining.

" Three hours. The refineries. Check with the guard shack." The line clicked.

" Grafton, wait! Grafton!" Keaton banged the phone. " Grafton!"

" What did he say?" yelled Garrison.

Keaton slowly set down the receiver. " He wants us out at the refineries in three hours."

" Setup," said Garrison. " Why three hours? He's trying to find us. It has to be a setup. You told him what we have."

" Damn... I don't trust him. He's very clever." Keaton pursed his lips, walked to the window and stared outside.

" We have to go out there, Bruce."

" I know. I'm trying to think... if I were Grafton. I keep coming back to the fact that he *can't* kill us, Roy. If he kills us the info comes out. We have him, yet... What do you think?"

Garrison moved closer to his friend. " Maybe."

Keaton nodded, but he looked troubled in the outside light.

" This guy isn't just a superb player, he's above the game."

42

It was an older taxi with cold vinyl seats. Garrison needed a cigarette. The taxi blended into traffic. All remnants of the car bombing was cleared and the cavalcade of vehicles resumed its erratic flow. Garrison's clenched fist supported his half shaven face, his eyes stung and his heart periodically thumped in anticipation. He kept telling himself the dead were only revived with justice. As the taxi's exhaust filled the car, he constantly pictured the omnipotent Craig Grafton.

" He'll find a way around the site."

Keaton shook his head. " Won't happen. It's not registered anywhere."

Garrison peered at the oil well's flames spewing into the night sky and reflecting across the dark water. The taxi picked up speed south of the city and the tension in his bones demanded now confronting Grafton. Even death was preferable to living in perpetual anticipation. He leaned back in the seat, closed his eyes and clamped his jaw.

He would never forget even the smallest detail if he managed to survive the night. The rumble of the taxi's diesel engine and the little black driver with luminous white eyes and a nametag marked:

Ablol Kuzal

Third Boulevard

Aagos.

In the darkness ahead along the boulevard, the headlights shone on stragglers moving along the grass, a few bicyclists, and rogue soldiers. A tanker, as high as a ten story building and as long as a stadium, was outlined in green and red lights and docked not too far from dozens of mammoth white storage tanks.

More troops were placed behind sandbags, rifles pointing outward as reminder of the instability. Near the refinery a long chain link fence, topped with several layers of barbed wire, extended along the road. Garrison studied brighter halogen lights

along the tank's spiraling white ladders. Long industrial tubing and pipelines reached into the darkness and more complex twisted piping, silver coated, formed a industrial mosaic. Power existed inside those pipes, a lustful aggrandizement rivaling any mine ever staked or any strategically placed land spit. It was what they fought for and part of everyone who coveted it.

Keaton leaned forward and pointed. " There's the checkpoint."

The driver, his English broken, looked in the mirror. His bright teeth moved with every accentuated word. " Do you need transportation back?"

Keaton shook his head and grinned. He glanced at Garrison and then back to the mirror. " No, I'm sure... that will be taken care of."

The driver nodded and the dash panel's green blinker flashed and produced a hollow repeating sound as he pulled to his right. They whipped by dozens of rifle toting soldiers, some peered at the taxi, while others nonchalantly talked in the night. The taxi brakes squealed and they came to a slow stop at the fortified

checkpoint. The men around this area were much more alert and attuned to security.

They opened the taxi doors before Keaton could pay the driver. A little black man in camouflaged clothes and a netted olive metal helmet thrust his M-16 through the open taxi door. Both Keaton and the driver were pulled from the car. Garrison looked into the soldier's dark eyes.

" Out."

He nodded and followed the gun barrel outside. Several more soldiers pushed him abruptly against the taxi and spread his legs. Now they had his wrists pinned. He thought he heard one of them hit either Keaton or the driver.

The little soldier had his wallet and was checking his California license. " Roy Garrison. California, U.S.A."

" Correct."

Garrison looked past the checkpoint and over the grid fence to the white tanks outlined against the blackness. His heart pattered like an out of control windup toy. Ahead, out of the darkness a short white man with neatly trimmed brown hair walked briskly through the gate, but his eyes were trained on

Garrison. He waved his hand through the air. " I'll take them!"

The soldier turned, somewhat befuddled, but he recognized the man, came to attention, and looked straight ahead. Garrison looked over his shoulder. The other soldiers were also at attention. " An American, Roy-"

" I know who they are. Mr. Keaton, if you will come around the car." The American grabbed Garrison's wallet and threw it to him. " Come with me."

Keaton appeared to his right. They followed the American past more soldiers at attention, through the gate and marched into the dimly lit area inside the refinery. Once they were about fifty yards from the main gate, the American stopped and faced them.

" I know about the web site. I know about Grafton selling out to the Chinese."

" Who are you?" asked Keaton.

" That is not important. I want the web site designation and the telephone numbers of your check in contacts."

" Do you always make it a habit of listening to phone conversations?" asked Keaton.

" Irrelevant. I will get the information whether I have to make one way or another."

" Where is Grafton?" asked Garrison.

" The designation... Now."

Keaton squinted and shook his head as he scanned the tanks.
" We have nothing to say to you. And if you heard my conversation with Grafton, you know what will happen if either Roy or myself does not check in."

He looked at Keaton for several seconds and then at Garrison. Reading his thoughts proved impossible until he slid out a large handgun and placed it to Keaton's temple. Then he marched them both back toward the tanks. " The web site, Garrison or your old friend dies. You want that on your mind?"

" Don't listen to him, Roy. Think about Sam and Nina. Think about Richard."

The American's eyes reflected a growing impatience. " Yes, think about them. Your brother need not have been killed if you had minded your own business, Roy."

Garrison could feel his own anger surging as they neared the tanks.

" Who are you?"

" You want to spend the rest of your life wondering whether you could have saved Keaton's life? The web site, Roy."

" Don't do it, Roy. You have the advantage. You know you do. Forget about me."

The American was befuddled by Garrison's indecision. Before he spoke again, a clear loud voice cut the night air from above.

" Put down the gun, Cam."

The American gazed up to the catwalk. " I am the only one who knows, Craig!"

Garrison looked up and to his left. Grafton's combed down gray hair was visible behind a long catwalk railing more than a hundred feet above them. There was a quick pop, Garrison turned as a louder rifle crack echoed around the tanks. Keaton was face down on the dirt and the American spread over his legs. His hair was now a mush of knotted strands, brain matter and blood. Garrison moved toward the handgun.

Grafton's spoke clearly again. " Leave it alone, Roy... You won't need it."

Garrison, numbed by death and carnage, bent over, squatted and touched Keaton's brown blazer. " Oh, Bruce... Bruce." He held his friend's shoulder and began to cry. Then he turned, wiped his eyes and, still squatting, looked up toward the figure in the catwalk's cold blue light. " Is this what it's all about, Grafton? Anyone in the way gets killed?"

" It's reality, Roy."

Garrison stood. " There will be justice!"

" Justice is a bi-product. Sometimes it's there, sometimes it gets in the way."

" You're full of platitudes, aren't you?"

Garrison walked across the asphalt and toward the metal grid stairway. He climbed deliberately, each step against the metal producing a low pitched, popping vibration. His hand grasped the cold metal railing and rose quickly above the refinery. The rig flames were clear in the bay at this elevation and he could smell

burning the oil more distinctly. It stuck in his sinus cavity like an incurable disease.

He reached the upper level. Grafton, rifle to his side, stood motionless about fifty feet down the catwalk. Garrison inched his way toward this powerful man who had formulated and executed the takeover of this country.

Grafton had a voice that accentuated every syllable. " There was no need for Keaton to die. Cam was one of my people. He made an unfortunate choice. I had arranged for both of you to be flown back to the United States." Garrison took one step at a time, slowly moving closer. " I will do the same for you, Roy. Your job is securely back in place. Everything will be the same." Garrison stopped about ten feet from Grafton. He looked at the weapon. Grafton hurled the rifle over the railing " I have demonstrated my good intentions."

On the catwalk above a woman with long blonde hair appeared in a black jump suit. Garrison recognized her as the woman standing in the hotel lobby and she had an automatic weapon pointing downward. " Drop the gun, Craig."

Grafton smiled. " You're getting nothing out of this, Marva."

" Not me, Hua and Incremental."

" You have nothing to gain," said Grafton.

" If I did nothing I would have nothing. If I kill you, I still have nothing."

" How much does he want?"

" All of it," she said.

Grafton looked at Garrison. " It's not for me to say. Mr. Garrison now has the upper hand. He calls the shots."

She walked a few feet ahead and looked down at Garrison.

" If you cooperate, Mr. Garrison, I'll let you live."

Garrison raised the gun and fired. Her gun bounced over the tinny catwalk and she snapped to the rail. Grafton unloaded his weapon, riddling the jumpsuit with bullets and her body flew in midair by Garrison. Her blonde hair spread out like a parachute as she hit the ground with a distinctive smack.

Grafton's gun smoked as he looked up, but Garrison never broke his stare. " You're not flying me to the United States, Grafton. All of you. You all have your plans and your logistics with no regard for the cost." Grafton's wire rimmed glasses reflected the refinery lights. For a moment Garrison saw the bridge photo

blow up clearly in his thoughts. He next drifted to his last breakfast Richard and he pictured Sam Peters losing at Monopoly as his wife laughed heartily in the background. And he saw a younger Bruce Keaton walking down an L.A. street fifteen years ago. " Sooner or later, despite all your carefully laid plans, all your circumventing of the rules and your almighty attitudes... there is a price to be paid."

Epilogue

The island estate was crowded with cars. David had groomed the main house grounds. He had worked on the island for fourteen years and was hesitant about changing estates. A month ago he had been hired to tend the Areanas estate and had transformed the grounds into a botanical show place.

" David, everything is perfect."

His wife's short auburn hair bounced up and down as they walked from the caretaker's house. " We worked our asses off, didn't we, Cassie?."

" True."

They reached the rear verandahs. Several servants ushered them inside, got them drinks and brought them to the long food table below the ice sculptures.

" I feel out of place here, David. I almost wished we were not invited."

" I'm sure Mr. Areanas doesn't even know we're here, Cassie."

An older man with cropped gray hair, casually dressed in light clothing walked around the table. "How's the food?"

"A lot of it," answered David.

"Frankly, I'd be happy with hamburgers and chips."

David smiled. At least they had someone to talk to amidst the wealth and power. "My sentiments exactly. Maybe some beer."

The man smiled. He was well tanned and rested. "Now, you're talking, David."

"You know me?"

"Not directly." He bit into one of the spinach slices, made a face and then set it back in the napkin. "That is pretty bad."

"Do you work here?" asked David.

"I guess you could say that." He turned to his right as a woman with long gray hair, maybe about his age and a blonde man in his twenties moved along the table. "Ah, my wife."

"So, you live here on the island?" asked Cassie.

"I do."

"David and Cassie. This is my wife, Loretta and Jason." David shook hands and turned to older man. "I think you and your wife have done a fantastic job with the grounds."

" We haven't formally met," said David.

The man smiled and extended his hand. " Constantine
Areanas. A pleasure to meet you."